



# Thailand

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## Best Regional Specialities

- » Kài yâang (p715)
- » Southern-style curries (p750)
- » Kà-nôm jeen nám ngée-o (p698)

## Best Places for Cultural Connections

- » Meditation Retreats (p689)
- » Elephant Study Centre (p717)
- » Kham Pia Homestay (p723)
- » Salak Kok Kayak Station (p729)

## Why Go?

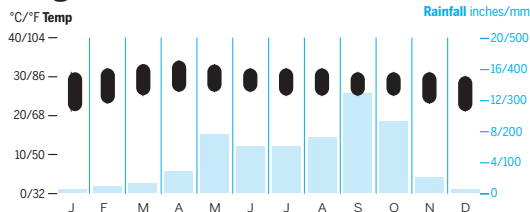
Lustrous Thailand radiates a hospitality that makes it one of the most accessibly exotic destinations on earth. Its natural landscape is part of the allure: the blonde beaches are lapped at by cerulean seas, while the northern mountains cascade into the misty horizon. In between are emerald-coloured rice fields and busy, prosperous cities. It is a bountiful land where the markets are piled high with pyramids of colourful fruits and the *rôt khên* (vendor cart) is an integral piece of a city's infrastructure.

The new millennium has brought Thailand into a new era of prosperity. Bangkok reigns as an Asian superstar, and once rustic islands are now international package resorts. It is easy and cheap to hop around by plane and domestic tourists are just as likely to hit the tourist trail as foreigners.

You'll suffer few travelling hardships and be rewarded with fodder for the mind and spirit, from fiery curries to meditating Buddhas.

## When to Go

### Bangkok



**Nov–Feb** Cool and dry season; peak tourist season is December to January.

**Mar–Jun** Hot season is hot but a good shoulder season for the beaches.

**Jul–Oct** Rainy season begins with a drizzle and ends with a downpour.

## Don't Miss

Seeing the early morning alms route – when barefoot, orange-robed monks walk the streets collecting food from the faithful – is one of the great highlights (made easy when suffering from jet-lag) in Thailand. The silent procession transforms Thailand's otherwise deafening cities into calm, meditative spaces.

### ITINERARIES

#### One Week

Get tussled about by Bangkok's chaos, then cruise up to Sukhothai to tour the quiet old ruins. Continue north to Chiang Mai, an easy, breezy cultural city. Climb up the mountain range to Pai for mountain scenery and bluesy late-nighters.

#### Two Weeks

From Bangkok, head south to the Samui islands (Ko Samui, Ko Pha-Ngan, Ko Tao) to become a certified beachaholic and diver. Then hop the peninsula to the Andaman beaches of Krabi/Railay, Ko Phi-Phi, Ko Lanta and Trang Islands.

## Essential Food

- » **kài phật bai kà-phrao kài** – fiery stir-fry of chopped chicken, chillies, garlic and fresh basil.
- » **khào phật** – fried rice, you never knew it could be so good; garnish it with ground chillies, sugar, fish sauce and a squirt of lime.
- » **phật phrik thai krà-thiam kài/mỗ** – stir-fried chicken or pork with black pepper and garlic.
- » **phật thai** – Thailand's oh-so-famous dish of rice noodles fried with egg and prawns garnished with bean sprouts, peanuts and chillies; eaten with chopsticks.
- » **phật phàk khanáa** – stir-fried Chinese greens, often fried with a meat (upon request), served over rice; simple but delicious.

### AT A GLANCE

- » **Currency** Baht (B)
- » **Language** Thai
- » **Money** ATMs widespread; 150B fee on foreign accounts
- » **Visas** 30-day free visa for air arrivals; 15-day free visa for land arrivals; pre-arrange 30-day tourist visas
- » **Mobile phones** Pre-pay SIMs from 150B

### Fast Facts

- » **Area** 513,000 sq km
- » **Capital** Bangkok
- » **Country code** 266
- » **Emergency** 191

### Exchange Rates

Australia	A\$1	32B
Canada	C\$1	31B
China	Y10	49B
Euro zone	€1	41B
Japan	¥100	37B
New Zealand	NZ\$1	25B
Russia	Ruble10	10B
UK	£1	49B
US	US\$1	31B

### Set Your Budget

- » **Basic room** US\$6–25
- » **Market meals** US\$1–2
- » **Beer** US\$1.30–2.50

### Entering the Country

- » **International flights**  
Arrive at Suvarnabhumi Airport, Bangkok.
- » **Popular border crossings**  
Poipet–Aranya Prathet (Cambodia); Huay Xai–Chiang Khong (Laos); Ko Lipe–Langkawi (Malaysia)

## Thailand Highlights

- 1 Joining the urban orbit in **Bangkok** (p648), a rowdy metropolis that never sleeps, always eats and knows how to party
- 2 Ogling the perfect beach paradise proportions of **Ko Phi-Phi** (p764)
- 3 Soaking up the cool and cultured vibe in **Chiang Mai** (p684)
- 4 Learning to swim the ocean deep in **Ko Tao** (p744)
- 5 Partying like a day-glo rock-star on **Ko Pha-Ngan** (p738)
- 6 Peddling around the ruined capital of **Sukhothai** (p680)
- 7 Going wild in **Khao Yai National Park** (p716)
- 8 Trekking to the hill-tribe villages around **Chiang Rai** (p696)



**9** Adoring a mini-Angkor at **Phnom Rung Historical Park** (p717)

**10** Tracing the contours of the Mekong River in **Nong Khai** (p722)



# BANGKOK

POP 7.7 MILLION

Bored in Bangkok? You've got to be kidding. This high-energy city loves neon and noise, chaos and concrete, fashion and the future. But look beyond the modern gadgets and you'll find an old-fashioned village napping in the shade of a narrow *soi* (lane). It's an urban connoisseur's dream: a city where the past, present and future are jammed into a humid pressure cooker.

You'll probably pass through Bangkok multiple times en route to someplace else as most planes, trains and buses eventually lead to the Big Mango. You'll be confused and challenged when you first arrive, relieved and pampered when you return, and slightly sentimental when you depart for the last time.

Bangkok can be roughly divided into two parts: the old and new city. The older parts of town stretch east from the banks of the Mae Nam Chao Phraya (Chao Phraya River) to the main railway line, which terminates at Hualamphong station. Sandwiched between is the main sightseeing district of Ko Ratanakosin, the backpacker ghetto in Banglamphu and bustling Chinatown. This section of town is less urban, relatively speaking, with temples claiming the highest strata of skyline.

East of the railway line is the new city, which is mind-blowingly modern. Skyscrapers, shopping centres, traffic jams, slick elevated trams and mammoth construction sites. The Siam Square area defines the shopping mall corridor. Th Sukhumvit is a busy international residential and commercial centre where the rich and famous (as well as the average and ho-hum) live in terraced condo towers. South of these districts is Th Silom, considered to be Bangkok's financial district. This new part of town is fused together mostly by the fast and efficient Skytrain and less so by the underground Metro.

## Sights

The country's most historic and holy sites are found in Ko Ratanakosin, the former royal district. To soak up Bangkok's urban atmosphere, wander around the commercial chaos of Chinatown. And to escape the heat and congestion, explore the Mae Nam Chao Phraya.

### KO RATANAKOSIN AREA

With its royal and religious affiliations, this area hosts many Thai Buddhist pilgrims as well as foreign sightseers. The temples with



## THÀNỒN & SOI

Throughout this chapter, *Thànon* (meaning 'street') is abbreviated as 'Th'. A *soi* is a small street or lane that runs off a larger street. The address of a site located on a *soi* will be written as 48/3-5 Soi 1, Th Sukhumvit, meaning off Th Sukhumvit on Soi 1.

royal connections enforce a strict dress code – clothes should cover to the elbows and knees and foreigners should not wear open-toed shoes. Behave respectfully and remove shoes when instructed. Do your touring early in the morning to avoid the heat and the crowds. And ignore anyone who says that the sight is closed.

### Wat Phra Kaew

TEMPLE

(Map p654; admission 350B; ☎8.30am-3.30pm; bus 503,508, river ferry Tha Chang) Also known as the Temple of the Emerald Buddha, this famous temple is an architectural wonder of gleaming, gilded *chedi* (stupas), polished orange and green roof tiles, mosaic-encrusted pillars and rich marble pediments. The revered Emerald Buddha, one of Thailand's most famous Buddha images, resides in the temple complex's main chapel. Actually made of jasper, the Emerald Buddha endured an epic journey from northern Thailand, where it was hidden inside a layer of stucco, to its present home. In between it was seized by Lao forces but was later recaptured by the Thais.

Murals of the *Ramakian* (the Thai version of the Indian epic Ramayana) line the inside walls of the temple compound. Originally painted during the reign of Rama I (1782-1809), the murals illustrate the epic in its entirety, beginning at the north gate and moving clockwise around the compound.

The admission fee for Wat Phra Kaew also includes entry to the adjacent Grand Palace as well as Vimanmek Teak Mansion (p653), near the Dusit Zoo.

### Grand Palace

HISTORIC SITE

Within the same grounds as Wat Phra Kaew is the Grand Palace, the former royal residence. The intrigue and rituals that occurred within the walls of this once-cloistered community are not evident today but a fictionalised version is told in the trilogy *Four Reigns* by Kukrit Pramoj. The book follows the life of Ploi, who grew up within the confines of the Grand Palace. Today the palace is used

for certain ceremonial occasions, such as Coronation Day; the royal family's Bangkok residence has long since moved elsewhere (presently they reside at Chitlada Palace in the northern part of the city). The exteriors of the four Grand Palace buildings are worth a swift perusal for their royal bombast, but their interiors are usually closed to the public.

### Wat Pho

TEMPLE

(Map p654; Wat Phra Chetuphon; Th Sanamchai; admission 50B; ☉8am-9pm; bus 508, 512, river ferry Tha Tien) Wat Pho sweeps the awards for superlatives: it's the oldest and largest temple in Bangkok, dating from the 16th century; it houses the country's largest reclining Buddha; and it has the biggest collection of Buddha images in the country. The *big* attraction of course is the biggest Buddha, a stunning reclining image measuring 46m long and 15m high; the pose illustrates the passing of Buddha into final nirvana. The figure is modelled out of plaster around a brick core and finished in gold leaf. Mother-of-pearl inlay ornaments the eyes and feet, and the feet display 108 different auspicious *lāksānā* (characteristics of a Buddha).

Wat Pho is also the national headquarters for the teaching and preservation of traditional Thai medicine, including Thai massage. The temple's famous massage school has massage pavilions within the temple grounds as well as air-con facilities within the training school (see p691).

### Museum of Siam

MUSEUM

(Map p654; www.museumsiam.com; Th Maha Rat; admission 300B; ☉10am-6pm Tue-Sun; bus 32, 524, river ferry Tha Tien) This fun museum employs a variety of media to explore the origins and culture of the Thai people. Housed in a Rama III-era palace, the exhibits are superinteractive, well balanced and entertaining. Highlights include the informative and engaging narrated videos in each exhibition room, and an interactive Ayuthaya-era battle game.

### National Museum

MUSEUM

(Map p654; 4 Th Na Phra That; admission 200B; ☉9am-3.30pm Wed-Sun; bus 32, 123, 503, river ferry Tha Chang) This museum is reportedly the largest in Southeast Asia and offers an overview of Thai art and culture, a useful stepping stone to exploring the ancient capitals of Ayuthaya and Sukhothai. The history wing boasts modern curatorial aesthetics with a succinct chronology of prehistoric, Sukhothai-, Ayuthaya- and Bangkok-era events. But the labelling in the art wing, which contains a

must-see overview of Buddhist iconography, isn't exactly illuminating so try one of the free **guided tours** (☉9.30am Wed & Thu).

### Wat Arun

TEMPLE

(Map p654; Th Arun Amarin; admission 50B; ☉8.30am-4.30pm; cross-river ferry from Tha Tien) Named after the Indian god of dawn (Aruna), Wat Arun looms large on the Thonburi side of the Mae Nam Chao Phraya, looking as if it were carved from granite. Closer inspection reveals a mosaic of porcelain tiles covering the imposing 82m Khmer-style *praang* (spire). The tiles were left behind by Chinese merchant ships no longer needing them as ballast. After the fall of Ayuthaya, King Taksin ceremoniously clinched control of the country here on the site of a local shrine (formerly known as Wat Jaeng) and established a royal palace and a temple to house the Emerald Buddha.

### CHINATOWN & PHAHURAT

Cramped and crowded Chinatown is a beehive of commercial activity. The main thoroughfare is lined with gleaming gold shops, towering neon signs bearing Chinese characters and bisected by serpentine lanes with shopfronts spilling out onto the footpath. The neighbourhood's energy is at once exhilarating and exhausting. Th Yaowarat is fun to explore at night when it is lit up like a Christmas tree and filled with food vendors.

### Talat Mai

MARKET

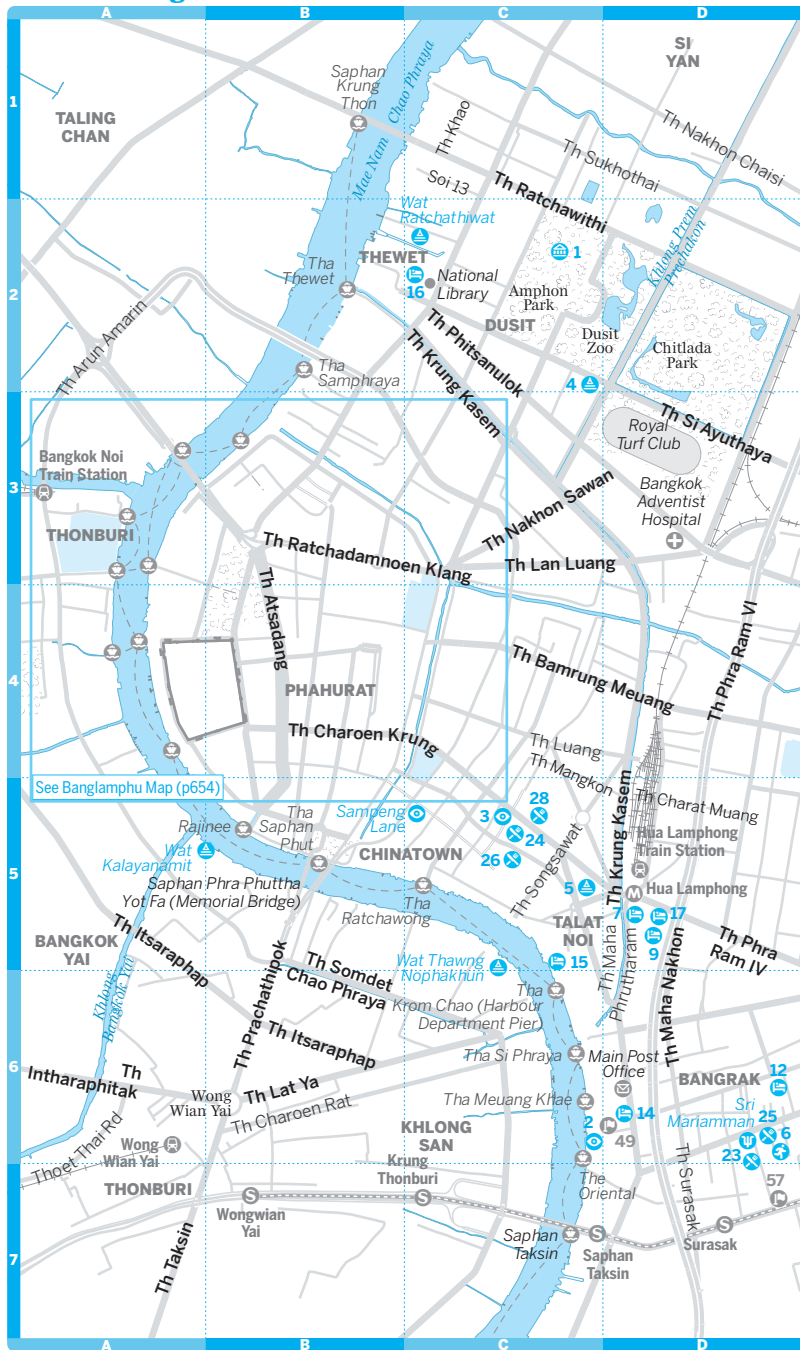
(Map p650; Soi 16/Trok Itsaranuphap, Th Yaowarat; bus 73, 159, 507, MRT Hua Lamphong, river ferry Tha Ratchawong) Talat Mai is a nearly three-block-long market selling exotic food stuffs and Chinese Buddhist religious paraphernalia.

### Wat Traimit

TEMPLE

(Map p650; cnr Th Yaowarat & Th Charoen Krung; admission 40B; ☉8am-5pm Tue-Sun; MRT Hua Lamphong, river ferry Tha Ratchawong) Wat Traimit shelters a 3m-tall, 5.5-tonne solid-gold Buddha image – an impressive sight, even in the land of a million Buddhas. Like many treasured Buddhas, this figure was once covered in stucco, a common measure to deter looters during periods of unrest. Donations and a constant flow of tourists have proven profitable, and the statue is now housed in a brand-new four-storey marble structure. The 2nd floor of the building is home to the **Phra Buddha Maha Suwanna Patimakorn Exhibition** (admission 100B; ☉8am-5pm Tue-Sun), which has exhibits on how the statue was made,

## Central Bangkok







## Central Bangkok

### 📍 Sights

- 1 Dusit Palace Park..... C2
- 2 Oriental Hotel..... C6
- 3 Talat Mai ..... C5
- 4 Wat Benchamabophit ..... C2
- 5 Wat Traimit ..... C5

### 🍽️ Activities, Courses & Tours

- 6 Silom Thai Cooking School..... D6

### 🛏️ Sleeping

- 7 @Hua Lamphong ..... D5
- 8 Atlanta..... G5
- 9 Baan Hualampong..... D5
- 10 Bed Bangkok ..... G4
- 11 HQ Hostel..... E6
- 12 Lub\*d..... D6
- 13 Nana Chart..... H5
- 14 New Road Guesthouse..... D6
- 15 River View Guest House..... C5
- 16 Shanti Lodge ..... C2
- 17 Siam Classic ..... D5
- 18 Soi 1 Guesthouse ..... G4
- Sri Ayuttaya Guest House ..... (see 16)
- 19 Suk 11..... G5
- 20 YHA Downtown Bangkok..... E6

### 🍴 Eating

- 21 Bharani..... H5
- 22 Bo.lan..... H6
- 23 Chennai Kitchen..... D6
- 24 Khrua Phornlamai..... C5
- 25 Krua Aroy-Aroy ..... D6
- 26 Mangkorn Khao..... C5
- 27 Nasir Al-Masri..... G5
- 28 Nay Mong..... C5
- 29 Soi 10 Food Centres ..... E6
- 30 Somtam Convent..... E6
- 31 Thonglee ..... H6

### 🍷 Drinking

- 32 Balcony Bar..... E6
- 33 Cheap Charlie's..... G5
- 34 Molly Malone's ..... E6
- Patpong ..... (see 41)
- 35 Saxophone Pub & Restaurant ..... F3
- Telephone Bar ..... (see 32)
- 36 Wong's Place..... F7

### 🎪 Entertainment

- 37 Aksra Theatre ..... F3
- 38 Glow ..... H5
- 39 Lumpini Boxing Stadium..... F6

### 🛍️ Shopping

- 40 Asia Books..... G5
- 41 Patpong Night Market ..... E6

### 🏢 Information

- 42 Australian Embassy ..... F6
- 43 Bangkok Christian Hospital..... E6
- 44 BNH ..... E6
- 45 Bumrungrad Hospital..... G4
- 46 Canadian Embassy ..... F6
- 47 Danish Embassy ..... F6
- 48 French Consulate..... F6
- 49 French Embassy..... D6
- 50 German Embassy..... F6
- 51 Indian Embassy ..... H5
- 52 Indian Visa Application Centre..... H5
- 53 Irish Embassy ..... F6
- 54 Israeli Embassy..... H5
- 55 Japanese Embassy ..... F6
- 56 Malaysian Embassy ..... F6
- 57 Myanmar Embassy ..... D7
- 58 Philippines Embassy..... H6
- 59 Russia Embassy ..... E6
- 60 Singapore Embassy..... E7
- 61 Spanish Embassy..... G6
- 62 TAT Main Office..... G4

discovered and came to arrive at its current home, while the 3rd floor is home to the **Yaowarat Chinatown Heritage Center** (admission 100B; ☎8am-5pm Tue-Sun), a small but engaging museum with multimedia exhibits on the history of Bangkok's Chinatown and its residents.

### RIVERSIDE

Once upon a time, Bangkok was called the 'Venice of the East'. The mighty Mae Nam Chao Phraya (Chao Phraya River) was the superhighway leading from the Gulf of Thai-

land to the interior of the country. All life centred on the river and its related canal networks and Thais considered themselves *jào nàam* (water lords).

Times have changed, but you can observe remnants of urban river life – slow barges being pulled by determined tug boats, kids splashing around the river banks, majestic Wat Arun rising in the distance – by boarding a Chao Phraya River Express boat at any riverside *tâh* (pier). The river ferry is also one of the more pleasant commuting options in Bangkok. Women should take care



## OUT-SMARTING THE SCAMS

Commit these classic rip-offs to memory and join us in our ongoing crusade to outsmart Bangkok's crafty scam artists.

- » **Closed today** Ignore any 'friendly' local who tells you that an attraction is closed for a Buddhist holiday or for cleaning. These are set-ups for trips to a bogus gem sale or shopping.
- » **Túk-túk rides for 10B** Say goodbye to your day's itinerary if you climb aboard this ubiquitous scam. These 'tours' bypass the sights and instead cruise to the overpriced tailor and gem shops that pay commissions.
- » **Flat-fare taxi ride** Flatly refuse any driver who quotes a flat fare, which will usually be three times more than the meter rate. Head out to the street and flag down a cab. If the driver 'forgets' to turn on the meter, just say, 'Meter, kha/khap'.
- » **Long-distance tourist buses** Buy your long-distance bus tickets from the government-run bus stations instead of tourist-centre agents selling private tourist bus tickets. Sometimes agents will inflate their commission fees or charge for VIP service but deliver cut-rate vehicles. Readers have consistently reported thefts from personal bags and stowed luggage from private buses.
- » **Bus-boat combination tickets** A popular way for getting to the islands is to buy one of these combo tickets; just double check that you've got both a bus and boat ticket as you'll be left on dry land without proof of payment for the second leg of the journey. Also buy from a reputable company.
- » **Friendly strangers** Be wary of smartly dressed locals who approach you asking where you're from and where you're going. Their opening gambit is usually followed with: 'Ah, my son/daughter is studying at university in (your city)'. This sort of behaviour is out of character for Thais and is usually a prelude for the notorious gem scam.
- » **Unset Gems** Bangkok is no place to be an amateur gem trader. Never accept an invitation to visit a gem shop and refuse to purchase unset stones that can supposedly be resold in your home country.

not to accidentally bump into a monk and should not sit next to them or stand in the same area of the boat. For more information about the river ferry, see p785.

You can also charter a longtail boat to explore Khlong Bangkok Noi and other scenic canals in Thonburi. Longtail boats can be arranged from any river pier, including Tha Chang. Just remember to negotiate a price before departure.

### Oriental Hotel

HISTORIC SITE

(Map p650; ☎0 2659 9000; 48 Soi Oriental/Soi 38, Th Charoen Krung; river ferry Tha Oriental or Tha Sathon) Foreign traders established their Bangkok outposts along the river during the heyday of the shipping era. Two Dutch sea captains built the majestic Oriental Hotel, an attraction in its own right. Somerset Maugham and Joseph Conrad were among the Oriental's famous guests. You can toast those literary giants in the hotel's Author Wing cafe or the riverside bar; dress smartly, though.

## OTHER AREAS

### Dusit Palace Park

MUSEUM

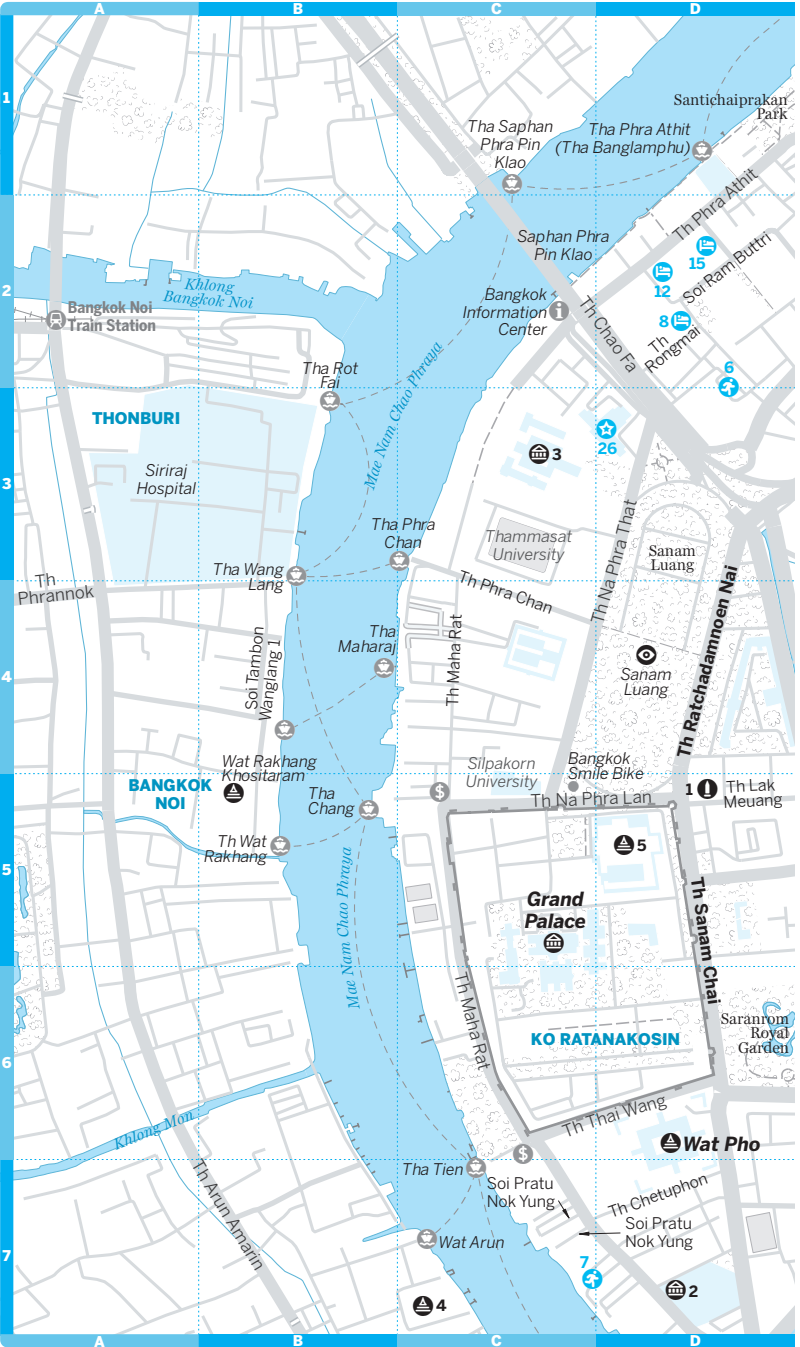
(Map p650; ☎0 2628 6300; admission 100B, free with Grand Palace ticket; ☀9.30am-4pm; bus 70, 510) Dusit Palace Park is an atmospheric example of Thailand's flirtation with the Victorian period. In the early 20th century King Chulalongkorn (Rama V) returned from his European tour with exotic ideas for establishing a new and modern royal residence. He moved the royal family to this leafy compound and set up house in the **Vimanmek Teak Mansion**, reputedly the world's largest golden teak building. Compulsory tours of the interior by poorly proficient English-speaking guides are given and visitors must dress modestly (cover to the elbows and the ankles). Other ornate buildings decorate the compound and contain small craft and art museums supported by the royal family.

### Jim Thompson's House

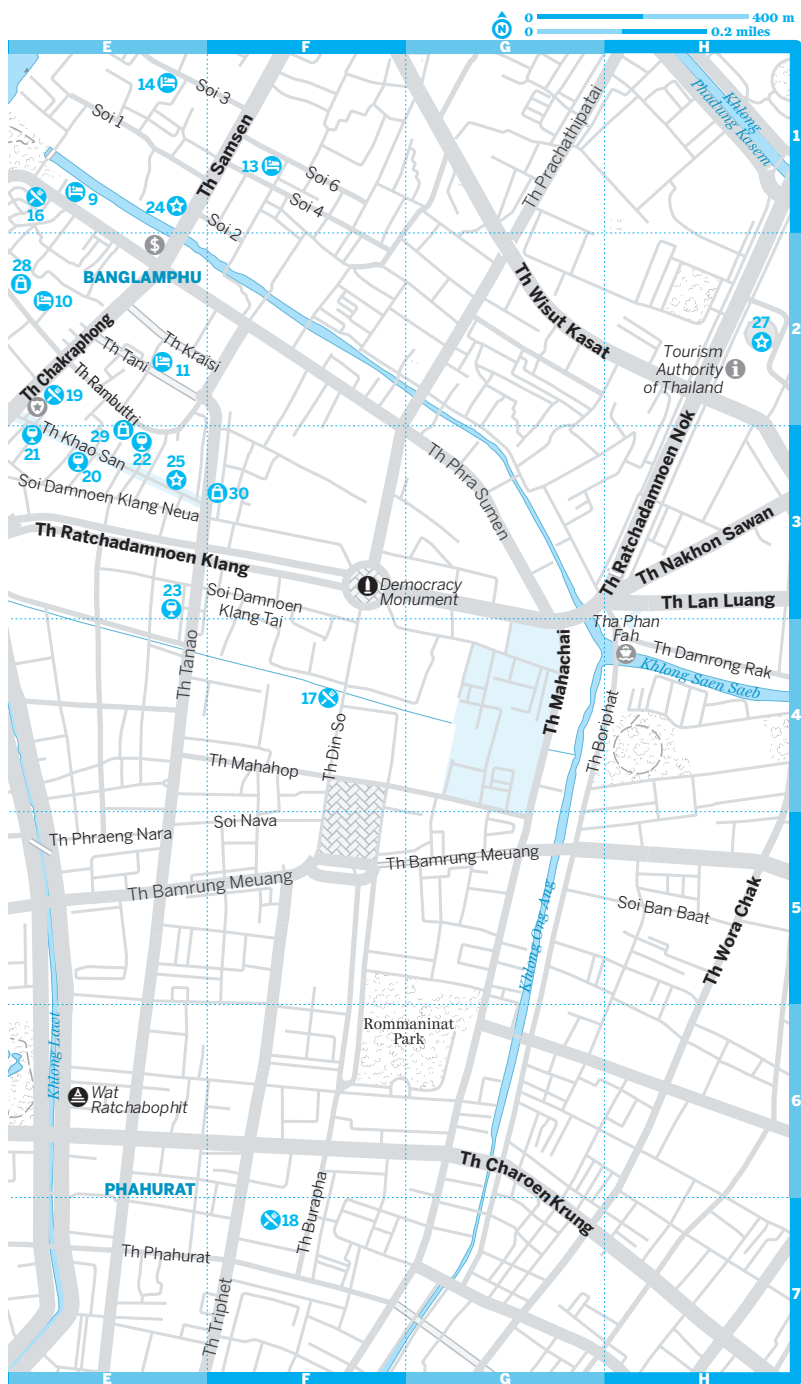
MUSEUM

(Map p660; www.jimthompsonhouse.com; 6 Soi Kasem San 2; admission 100B; ☀9am-5pm, compulsory tours in English & French every 20min;

# Banglamphu



THAILAND BANGKOK



## Banglamphu

### 📍 Top Sights

Grand Palace.....	C5
Wat Pho.....	D6

### 📍 Sights

1 Lak Meuang Shrine.....	D5
2 Museum of Siam.....	D7
3 National Museum.....	C3
4 Wat Arun.....	C7
5 Wat Phra Kaew.....	D5

### 📍 Activities, Courses & Tours

6 Sor Vorapin Gym.....	D2
7 Wat Pho Thai Massage School.....	C7

### 📍 Sleeping

8 Baan Sabai.....	D2
9 Fortville Guesthouse.....	E1
10 Lamphu House.....	E2
11 NapPark Hostel.....	E2
12 New Merry V Guest House.....	D2
13 Rajata Hotel.....	F1
14 Sam Sen Sam.....	E1
15 Wild Orchid Villa.....	D2

### 📍 Eating

16 Ann's Sweet.....	E1
17 Arawy.....	F4
18 Old Siam Plaza.....	F7
19 Shoshana.....	E2

### 📍 Drinking

20 Center Khao San.....	E3
21 Hippie de Bar.....	E3
22 Molly Bar.....	E3
23 Taksura.....	E3

### 📍 Entertainment

24 Ad Here the 13th.....	E1
25 Brick Bar.....	E3
26 National Theatre.....	D3
27 Ratchadamnoen Stadium.....	H2

### 📍 Shopping

28 Book Lover.....	E2
29 Saraban.....	E3
30 Shaman Bookstore.....	F3

BTS National Stadium, klong taxi Tha Hua Chang)  
A beautifully maintained example of traditional Thai architecture, this house was the residence of American entrepreneur Jim Thompson, who successfully promoted Thai silk to Western markets. Atmospherically sited on a small canal, his house was built from salvaged components of traditional Thai houses and contains a fine collection of Thai art and furnishings.

### Erawan Shrine

SHRINE

(San Phra Phrom; Map p660; cnr Th Ratchadamri & Th Ploenchit; ☀6am-11pm; BTS Chit Lom) Outside the Grand Hyatt Erawan hotel, this shrine is dedicated to the four-headed deity Brahma (Phra Phrom), the Hindu god of creation. The faithful bustle in and out due to the fact that the shrine is famous for answering prayers and bestowing good fortune. If a wish is granted, the favour is repaid by hiring musicians and dancers to perform in front of the shrine.



### Courses

Bangkok offers courses that teach cooking, massage and *moo-ay tai* (also spelt *muay thai*).

### Silom Thai Cooking School

COOKING

(Map p650; ☎08 4726 5669; www.bangkokthai cooking.com; 68 Soi 13/Trok Vaithi, Th Silom; lessons 1000B; ☀9.30am-1pm & 1.40-6pm; BTS Chong Nonsi) Although the facilities are basic, Silom crams in a visit to a local market and instruction of six dishes into 3½ hours.

### Helping Hands

COOKING

(☎08 4901 8717; www.cookingwithpoo.com; 1000B) This popular cookery course was started by a native of Khlong Toey's slums and is held in her neighbourhood. Courses, which must be booked in advance, span four dishes and include a visit to Khlong Toey Market and transport to and from Emporium Shopping Centre.

### Wat Pho Thai Massage School

MESSAGE

(Map p654; ☎0 2622 3550; www.watpomassage.com; 392/25-28 Soi Phen Phat; tuition from 5000B; ☀8am-6pm; bus 508, 512, river ferry Tha Tien) Affiliated with nearby Wat Pho, this respected massage school offers courses in both general Thai massage and foot massage.

### Sor Vorapin Gym

MUAY THAI (THAI BOXING)

(Map p654; ☎0 2282 3551; www.thaiboxings.com; 13 Th Kasab, Th Chakraphong; tuition per day/month 500/9000B; bus 2, 15, 44, 511, river ferry Tha Phra

Athit) Specialises in training foreign students of both genders. The gym is sweating distance from Th Khao San, but more serious training is held outside the city.

## Tours

**ABC Amazing Bangkok Cyclists** BICYCLE TOUR  
(☎ 0 2665 6364; www.realasia.net; 10/5-7 Soi 26, Th Sukhumvit; tours from 1000B; ☺ daily tours depart at 8am, 10am or 1pm; BTS Phrom Phong) Discover the rural aspects of the city on a cycling tour.

**Grasshopper Adventures** BICYCLE TOURS  
(☎ 0 2280 0832; www.grasshopperadventures.com; 57 Th Ratchadamnoen Klang; tours from 750B; ☺ 8.30am-6.30pm Mon-Fri; bus 2, 15, 44, 511, klongrak taxi Phan Fah) This lauded outfit runs a variety of unique bicycle tours in and around Bangkok, including a night tour and a tour of the city's green zones.

## Festivals & Events

**Chinese New Year** CULTURAL  
(February/March) Thai-Chinese celebrate the lunar new year with a week of house-cleaning, lion dances and fireworks. Festivities centre on Chinatown.

**Songkran** CULTURAL/RELIGIOUS  
(mid April) Bangkok's celebration of the Thai New Year has morphed into water warfare centred around Th Khao San. Prepare to be soaked.

**Royal Ploughing Ceremony** CULTURAL/RELIGIOUS  
(early May) The Crown Prince commences rice-planting season with a royal-religious ceremony at Sanam Luang.

**Queen's Birthday** CULTURAL  
(12 August) The queen's birthday is recognised as the national Mother's Day and celebrated in Bangkok with festivities centred around Th Ratchadamnoen and the Grand Palace.

**Vegetarian Festival** FOOD  
(September/October) This 10-day Chinese-Buddhist festival strives for religious perfection by consuming meatless meals. Look for yellow-flagged vegetarian vendors in Chinatown.

**King Chulalongkorn Day** CULTURAL  
(23 October) Rama V is honoured on the anniversary of his death in front of his statue in Dusit.

**Loi Krathong** CULTURAL  
(early November) The Mae Nam Chao Phraya receives huge devotional crowds who float small lotus-shaped boats throughout this river-honouring festival.

**King's Birthday** CULTURAL  
(5 December) Locals celebrate their monarch's birthday with parades and festivities on the royal avenue of Th Ratchadamnoen.

## Sleeping

Because the city has legendary traffic jams, narrow your search first by the geographic area that best suits your needs. If you're in the city for a layover, stay as close to your next mode of transport as possible.

## TH KHAO SAN, BANGLAMPHU & THEWET

If you're returning to 'civilisation' and need traveller amenities, then the backpacker ghetto of Th Khao San and surrounding

## HIGH CULTURE, LOW COST

Thai classical dance is typically promoted among package tourists as a dinner theatre experience but baht-minded travellers can see performances in free, or nearly free, venues.

» **Lak Meuang Shrine** (Map p654; cnr Th Ratchadamnoen Nai & Th Lak Meuang), near Wat Phra Kaew, showcases shrine dances commissioned to perform for the guardian spirits by merit-makers whose wishes were granted.

» **Erawan Shrine** (p656), next to Grand Hyatt Erawan hotel, also features shrine dancers.

» **Dusit Palace Park** (p653) hosts daily classical dance performances at 10am and 2pm.

» **National Theatre** (Map p654; 2 Th Rachini; tickets 60-100B; river ferry Tha Chang) hosts traditional dance performances on the first and second Sundays of the month and on the first Friday of the month, while Thai musical performances are held on the third Friday of the month.

## MINIATURE WONDERS

The industrial town of Samut Prakan is an unlikely place for the open-air architectural museum of the **Ancient City** (Meuang Boran; ☎0 2709 1644; www.ancientcity.com; 296/1 Th Sukhumvit; admission 300B; ☀8am-5pm), a unique intersection of entertainment, artistry and curatorship. One hundred scaled-down models of Thailand's famous architectural monuments were re-created in an attempt to preserve traditional craftsmanship skills and create beautiful things to look at. The museum is 12km south of Samut Prakan (also known as Pak Nam). From Bangkok take air-con bus 511 from the eastern side of Th Sukhumvit to Samut Prakan's bus station. From there board minibus 36 (25B), which will pass the entrance of the Ancient City.

Banglamphu is cheap and convenient. The area is packed with guesthouses and hotels. Most of the cheapies have been replaced with more upscale options but you can still hunt for a few holdouts on Th Khao San and the nearby *soi*. Quieter and more charming enclaves are on Th Ram Buttri and on the numbered *soi* off Th Samsen. Th Si Ayuthaya, in Thewet, the district north of Banglamphu near the National Library, is a pleasant backpacker enclave, particularly popular with families and the over-30 crowd. It is a lovely leafy area, but during the rainy season it can be prone to flooding.

### NapPark Hostel

HOSTEL \$  
(Map p654; ☎0 2282 2324; www.nappark.com; 8 Th Tani; dm 550-750B; river ferry Tha Tien; 🏠📶🚶) This exceedingly well-done hostel features dorm rooms of various sizes, the smallest and most expensive of which boasts six pod-like beds outfitted with power points, mini-TV, reading lamp and wi-fi. Daily cultural-based activities, including bike trips and volunteer opportunities, ensure that you may not actually get the chance to plug in.

### Fortville Guesthouse

GUESTHOUSE \$  
(Map p654; ☎0 2282 3932; www.fortvilleguesthouse.com; 9 Th Phra Sumen; r 650-970B; bus 32, 33, 64, 82, river ferry Tha Phra Athit; 🏠📶🚶) The design concept of this unique new hotel is a bit hard to pin down: is it a fort, a castle or a modern masterpiece? Regardless, rooms are stylishly minimal, and the more expensive include perks such as fridge, balcony and free wi-fi.

### Baan Sabai

GUESTHOUSE \$  
(Map p654; ☎0 2629 1599; baansabai@hotmail.com; 12 Soi Rongmai; r 190-600B; bus 53, 516, river ferry Tha Phra Athit; 🏠📶) Truly living up to its name (Comfortable House), this rambling old building holds dozens of plain but comfy rooms at a variety of prices. There's a palpable old-school atmosphere here, particularly

at the inviting open-air restaurant/bar area downstairs.

### Wild Orchid Villa

GUESTHOUSE \$  
(Map p654; ☎0 2629 4378; www.wildorchidvilla.com; 8 Soi Chana Songkhram; r 280-1800B; bus 32, 33, 64, 82, river ferry Tha Phra Athit; 🏠📶🚶) The cheapies here are some of the tiniest we've seen anywhere, but all rooms are clean and neat, and come in a bright, friendly package. This place is exceedingly popular, so it's best to book ahead.

### TOP CHOICE Lamphu House

GUESTHOUSE \$  
(Map p654; ☎0 2629 5861; www.lamphuhouse.com; 75-77 Soi Ram Buttri; r 200-950B; river ferry Tha Phra Athit; 🏠📶🚶) Tucked off Soi Ram Buttri, you'll forget how close to Th Khao San you are in this quiet, homey budget hotel. Rooms are simple but clean, with the cheapies cooled by fan and sharing bathrooms.

### Sam Sen Sam

GUESTHOUSE \$  
(Map p654; ☎0 2628 7067; www.samsensam.com; 48 Soi 3, Th Samsen; r 590-2400B; river ferry Tha Phra Athit; 🏠📶🚶) One of the homiest places around, this bright, refurbished villa gets good reports about its friendly service and quiet location.

### Rajata Hotel

HOTEL \$  
(Map p654; ☎0 2628 8084; www.rajatahotel.com; 46 Soi 6, Th Samsen; r 650-850B; bus 53, 516, river ferry Tha Phra Athit; 🏠📶🚶) This old-fashioned hotel is a plain but comfortable choice for those who want to be near but not close to Th Khao San.

### New Merry V Guest House

GUESTHOUSE \$  
(Map p654; ☎0 2280 3315; newmerry@gmail.com; 18-20 Th Phra Athit; r 150-700B; bus 32, 33, 64, 82, river ferry Tha Phra Athit; 🏠📶) The cheap rooms here are as bare as they come, but are spotless and have ample natural light.

**Sri Ayuttaya Guest House** GUESTHOUSE \$  
(Map p650; ☎0 2282 5942; 23/11 Th Si Ayuthaya, Thewet; r 400-1000B; bus 32, 516, river ferry Tha Thewet; 🍷🍷🍷) Nice design, low-key location; some rooms share bathrooms.

**Shanti Lodge** GUESTHOUSE \$  
(Map p650; ☎0 2281 2497; 37 Th Si Ayuthaya; dm 250B, r 400-1950B; bus 32, 516, river ferry Tha Thewet; 🍷🍷🍷) The maven of Thewet; walls are bamboo-thin in the cheap rooms, but there's a huge variety of accommodation so check out a few before making a decision.

## HUALAMPHONG & CHINATOWN

Hotels near the Hualamphong train station are cheap but not especially interesting and the traffic along Th Phra Ram IV has to be heard to be believed. The surrounding neighbourhood of Chinatown makes for interesting walks but is not especially geared for tourists.

**Baan Hualamphong** GUESTHOUSE \$  
(Map p650; ☎0 2639 8054; www.baanhualamphong.com; 336/20-21 Trok Chalong Krung; dm/r incl breakfast 250/290-800B; MRT Hua Lamphong; 🍷🍷🍷) Repeat visitors rave about the homey setting and warm, personal service at this guesthouse. Located a short walk from Hualamphong train station, kitchen and laundry facilities are also available, and there are lots of chill-out areas and computers.

**Siam Classic** HOSTEL \$  
(Map p650; ☎0 2639 6363; www.siamclassic-hostel.com; 336/10 Trok Chalong Krung; r 450-1400B; MRT Hua Lamphong, river ferry Tha Ratchawong; 🍷🍷🍷) Good budget option near the train station.

**@Hua Lamphong** GUESTHOUSE \$  
(Map p650; ☎0 2639 1925; www.at-hualamphong.com; 326/1 Th Phra Ram IV; dm 200, r 690-1000B; MRT Hua Lamphong, river ferry Tha Ratchawong; 🍷🍷🍷) Another budget chic choice near the train station.

## SIAM SQUARE

If you need to be centrally located, then opt for Siam Square, which is on both BTS (Skytrain) lines. Accommodation in Siam Square is more expensive than Banglamphu but you'll save in cab fare. Unofficially known as the 'secret soi', San Kasem San 1 has a low-key personality and traveller-friendly facilities. You can also bypass rush hour traffic between here and Th Khao San by hopping on the *klorng* taxi at Tha Ratchathewi.

**TOP CHOICE** **Lub\*d** HOSTEL \$  
(Map p660; ☎0 2634 7999; www.lubd.com; Th Pha Ram I; dm/r 550/1350-1800B; BTS National Stadium; 🍷🍷🍷) The title is a play on the Thai word *lâp dee*, meaning 'sleep well'; but the fun atmosphere at this backpacker hostel might make you stay up all night. There are 24 dorms (including ladies-only dorms), each with only four beds, and a few private rooms with and without bathrooms. If this one's full, there's another **branch** (Map p650; ☎0 2634 7999; www.lubd.com; 4 Th Decho; dm/r 400/1050-1400B; BTS Chong Nonsi; 🍷🍷🍷) just south of Th Silom.

**A-One Inn** GUESTHOUSE \$  
(Map p660; ☎0 2215 3029; www.aoneinn.com; 25/13-15 Soi Kasem San 1; s/d/tr 600/750/950B; BTS National Stadium, klorng taxi to Tha Ratchathewi; 🍷🍷🍷) The rooms here are tight and simple, but the wealth of backpacker amenities (computers, luggage storage, free ice and water) makes up for this.

**Wendy House** GUESTHOUSE \$\$  
(Map p660; ☎0 2214 1149; www.wendyguesthouse.com; 36/2 Soi Kasem San 1; r incl breakfast 900-1200B; BTS National Stadium, klorng taxi to Tha Ratchathewi; 🍷🍷🍷) The rooms here are small and basic, but well stocked (TV, fridge) for this price range.

**Bed & Breakfast Inn** GUESTHOUSE \$  
(Map p660; ☎0 2215 3004; Soi Kasem San 1; r incl breakfast 500-700B; BTS National Stadium, klorng taxi to Tha Ratchathewi; 🍷🍷) This maze-like guesthouse has standard but comfortable rooms.

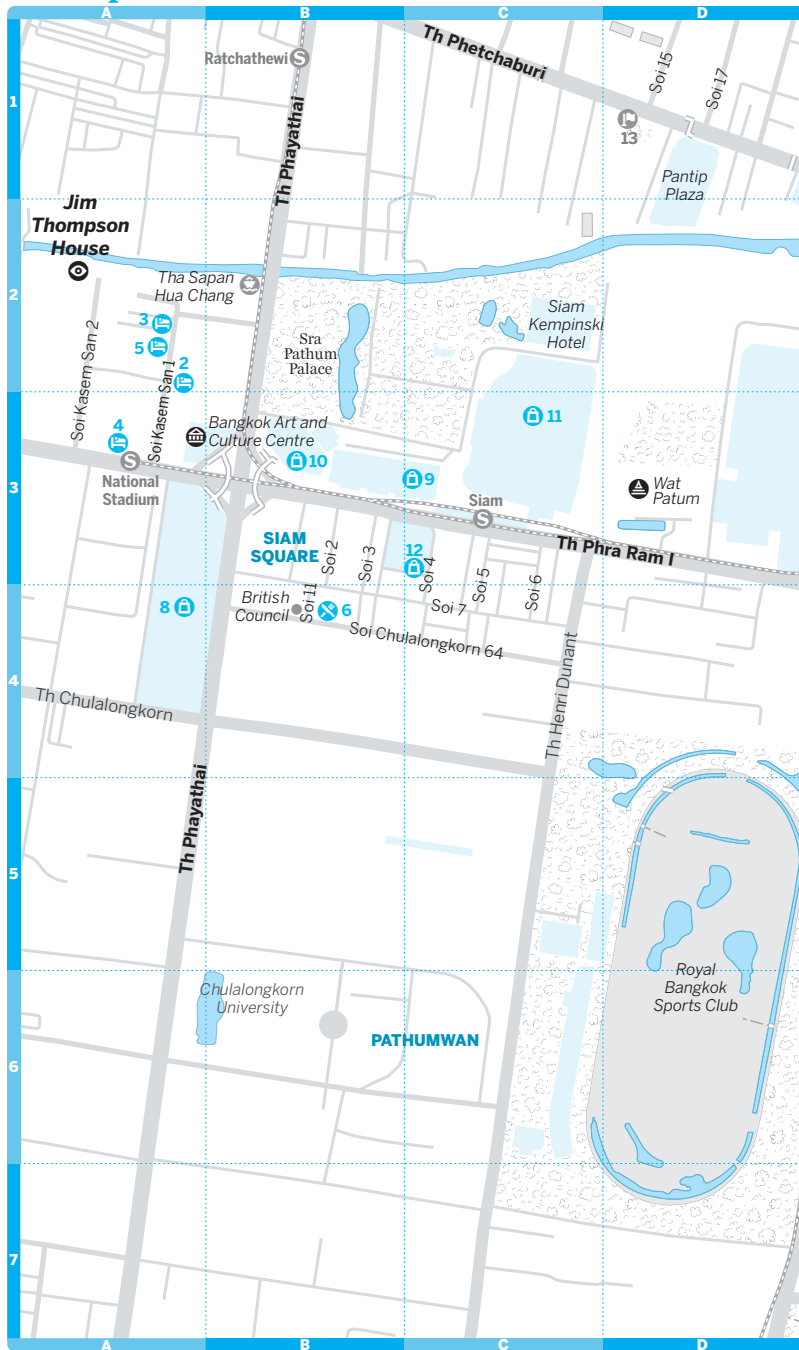
## SUKHUMVIT

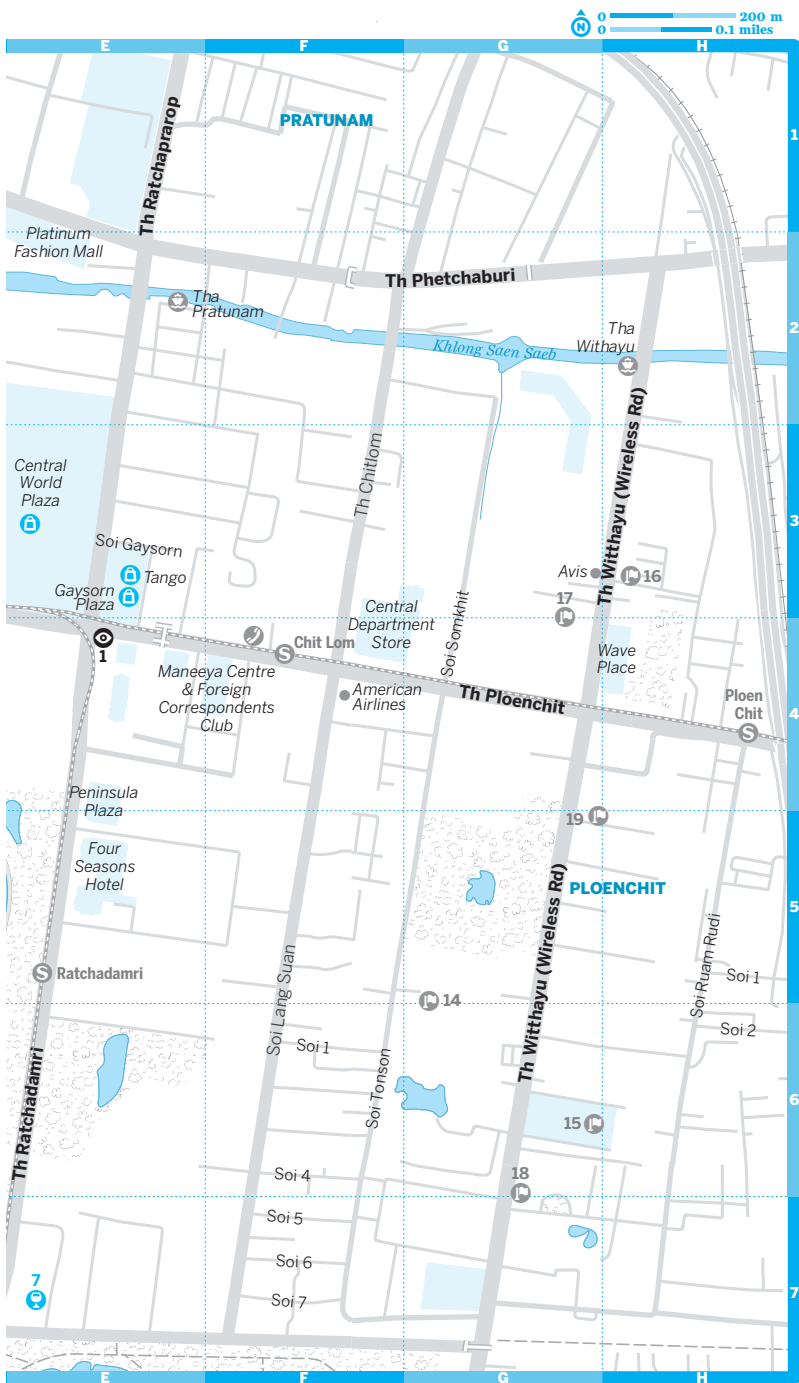
The closest option to the airport is Th Sukhumvit, a high-end neighbourhood. It is also near the Eastern (Ekamai) bus station and on the BTS and MRT (underground metro) lines; the MRT links to the Hualamphong train station. Be warned that the lower numbered *sois* attract sex tourists visiting the nearby go-go bars.

**Suk 11** GUESTHOUSE \$  
(Map p650; ☎0 2253 5927; www.suk11.com; 1/33 Soi 11, Th Sukhumvit; s/d/tr incl breakfast 535-695/749-963/963-1284B; BTS Nana; 🍷🍷🍷) Extremely well run and equally popular, this guesthouse is an oasis of woods and greenery in an urban jungle. The cheaper rooms have shared bathrooms, and although they've somehow managed to stuff nearly 100 rooms in, you'll still need to book at least two weeks ahead.



## Siam Square &amp; Pratunam





## Siam Square & Pratunam

### Top Sights

Jim Thompson House .....A2

### Sights

1 Erawan Shrine .....E4

### Sleeping

2 A-One Inn .....A2

3 Bed & Breakfast Inn .....A2

4 Lub\*d .....A3

5 Wendy House .....A2

### Eating

MBK Food Court .....(see 8)

6 New Light Coffee House .....B4

### Drinking

7 Brown Sugar .....E7

### Shopping

Asia Books .....(see 10)

Kinokuniya .....(see 11)

8 MBK .....A4

9 Siam Center .....C3

10 Siam Discovery Center .....B3

11 Siam Paragon .....C3

12 Siam Square .....C3

### Information

13 Indonesian Embassy .....D1

14 Netherlands Embassy .....G5

15 New Zealand Embassy .....G6

16 Swiss Embassy .....H3

17 UK Embassy .....G3

18 US Embassy .....G6

19 Vietnamese Embassy .....G5

## HI-Sukhumvit

HOSTEL \$

(Map p650; ☎ 2391 9338; www.hisukhumvit.com; 23 Soi 38, Th Sukhumvit; dm/s/d/tr incl breakfast 320/650/900-1300/1200-1500B; BTS Thong Lo; 📍📍📍) Located in a quiet residential street a brief walk from the BTS, this friendly hostel excels with its neat dorms and accompanying immense bathrooms.

## Atlanta

HOTEL \$

(Map p650; ☎ 0 2252 1650; 78 Soi Phasak/2, Th Sukhumvit; r/ste incl breakfast 535-650/1820B; BTS Phloen Chit; 📍📍📍) Defiantly antiquated and equally frumpy, this crumbling gem has changed very little since its construction in 1952. The vintage lobby stands in contrast to the simple rooms, but the inviting pool (allegedly the country's first hotel pool) and delightful restaurant are incentive enough.

## Bed Bangkok

HOSTEL \$

(Map p650; ☎ 0 2655 7604; www.bedbangkok.com; 11/20 Soi 1, Th Sukhumvit; dm/r incl breakfast 390/800-1200B; BTS Asok, MRT Sukhumvit; 📍📍📍) This brand new hostel manages to maintain a homey feel despite the industrial design theme. The friendly service makes up for the rather hard dorm beds.

## Nana Chart

HOSTEL \$

(Map p650; ☎ 0 2259 6908; www.thailandhostel.com; cnr Soi 25 & Th Sukhumvit; dm/r incl breakfast 390-550/1200-1800B; BTS Asok, MRT Sukhumvit; 📍📍📍) This tidy backpacker hostel packs in 68 plain but more-than-adequate budget rooms, as well as some of the better dorms around with ensuite bathrooms.

## Soi 1 Guesthouse

HOSTEL \$

(Map p650; ☎ 0 2655 0604; www.soiguesthouse.com; 220/7 Soi 1, Th Sukhumvit; dm 400B; BTS Phloen Chit; 📍📍📍) This slightly aged backpacker haven has four cluttered dorm rooms and a chummy communal area with pool table, TV and computers.

## SILOM

The financial district around Th Silom has a handful of budget hostels, though the neighbourhood is mainly for bigger budgets. The bonus is that the MRT links with the Hualamphong train station.

## HQ Hostel

HOSTEL \$

(Map p650; ☎ 0 2233 1598; www.hqhostel.com; 5/3-4 Soi 3, Th Silom; dm/r 380-599/1300-1700B; BTS Sala Daeng, MRT Si Lom; 📍📍📍) This new hostel combines basic but stylish rooms and dorms with inviting communal areas, smack dab in the middle of Bangkok's financial district.

## River View Guest House

HOTEL \$

(Map p650; ☎ 0 2234 5429; www.riverviewbkk.com; 768 Soi Phanurangsi, Th Songwat; r 350-1500B; river ferry Tha Krom Chao Tha; 📍📍) After 20 years, this budget staple is finally receiving a much-needed renovation. The rooms are now spacious and modern, although the halls and exterior are stuck in a rather gritty time warp. To get there, heading north on Th Charoen Krung from Th Si Phraya, take a left onto Th Songwat (before the Chinatown Arch), then the second left onto Soi Phanurangsi. You'll start to see signs at this point.

## New Road Guesthouse

HOSTEL \$

(Map p650; ☎ 0 2630 9371; www.newroadguesthouse.com; 1216/1 Th Charoen Krung; dm fan/air-con 160/250B, r 900-2500B; river ferry Tha Si Phraya; 📍📍📍) For those on tight budgets,

the clean fan dorms are among the cheapest accommodation in all of Bangkok.

**YHA Downtown Bangkok** HOSTEL \$  
(Map p650; ☎ 0 2266 4443; 395/4 Th Silom; dm/r 299/699-1129B; BTS Chong Nonsi; 🍷@🍷) Another tidy and conveniently located backpacker hostel.

## Eating

No matter where you go in Bangkok, food is never far away. Surfing the street stalls is the cheapest and tastiest culinary pursuit, but don't neglect the city's mall food courts that combine the variety of an outdoor market without the noise and heat.

Bangkok also offers an international menu thanks to its many immigrant communities. Chinatown is naturally good for Chinese food; Middle Eastern fare can be found in Little Arabia, off Th Sukhumvit; Indian hangs out near the Hindu temple on Th Silom; and Western cuisine dominates Th Sukhumvit.

Do note that food vendors do not set up on Mondays, ostensibly for citywide street cleaning.

### TH KHAO SAN & BANGLAMPHU

Th Khao San is lined with restaurants, but the prices tend to be higher and the quality incredibly inauthentic. Serial snackers can survive by venturing off Khao San and into the *soi* around Th Samsen or the old district of Phra Nakhon.

**Ann's Sweet** BAKERY \$  
(Map p654; 138 Th Phra Athit; mains 75-150B; ☺lunch & dinner; bus 32, 33, 64, 82, river ferry

Tha Phra Athit; 🍷) Ann, a native of Bangkok and a graduate of the Cordon Bleu cooking program, makes some of the most authentic Western-style cakes you'll find anywhere in town.

### **TOP CHOICE** Araway

VEGETARIAN \$  
(Map p654; 152 Th Din So; dishes 20-40B; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner; bus 15, klong taxi Tha Phan Fah; 🍷) A Thai greasy spoon, Araway's idea of decor is old boxes piled up beside a TV set. But the pre-made point-and-eat dishes are delicious and authentic. The restaurant was inspired by ex-Bangkok governor Chamlong Srimuang's strict vegetarianism. The roman-script sign reads 'Alloy'; it's opposite the Municipal Hall.

**Shoshana** ISRAELI \$\$  
(Map p654; 88 Th Chakraphong; mains 90-220B; ☺lunch & dinner; bus 32, 516, river ferry Tha Phra Athit; 🍷) Although prices have gone up slightly since it began back in 1982, Shoshana still puts together a cheap and tasty Israeli meal. Feel safe ordering anything deep-fried and don't miss the eggplant dip.

### HUALAMPHONG & CHINATOWN

**Old Siam Plaza** THAI \$  
(Map p650; ground fl, Old Siam Plaza, cnr Th Phahurat & Th Triphet; mains 15-50B; ☺9am-6.30pm; river ferry Tha Saphan Phut) Sugar junkies, be sure to include this stop on your Bangkok eating itinerary. The ground floor of this shopping centre is a candyland of traditional Thai sweets and snacks, most made right before your eyes.

## SLEEPING NEAR THE AIRPORT

If you're still in transit and don't want to bed in central Bangkok, there are more and more options on the eastern outskirts of town within striking distance of the Survarnabhumi International Airport.

- » **Refill Now!** (☎ 0 2713 2044; www.refillnow.co.th; 191 Soi Pridi Bhanom Yong 42, Soi 71, Th Sukhumvit, Phra Khanong; dm/s/d 480/928/1215B; BTS Phra Khanong & access by taxi; 🍷@🍷) The closest, cheapest option near the airport, this hip hostel blends the Habitat catalogue with the '60s chic of a Kubrick movie, making you a dorm convert.
- » **Grand Inn Come Hotel** (☎ 0 2738 8189-99; www.grandincome-hotel.com; 99 Moo 6, Th Kingkaew, Bangpli; r incl breakfast from 1800B; 🍷@🍷) Solid midranger 10km from the airport, with airport shuttle and 'lively' karaoke bar.
- » **All Seasons Bangkok Huamark** (☎ 0 2308 7888; 5 Soi 15, Th Ramkhamhaeng; r 1366-2195B; 🍷@🍷) Less than 20km from the airport, this midranger has 268 rooms to choose from.
- » **Novotel Suvarnabhumi Airport Hotel** (☎ 0 2131 1111; www.novotel.com; r incl breakfast from 7146B; 🍷@🍷) With 600-plus luxurious rooms in the airport compound.

## SOY, OH JOY!

During the Annual Vegetarian Festival in September/October, Bangkok's Chinatown becomes a virtual orgy of nonmeat cuisine. The festivities centre on Chinatown's main street, Th Yaowarat, but food shops and stalls all over the city post yellow flags to announce their meat-free status.

Standard Thai dishes, like *dôm yam* and *gaang kĕe-o wăhn*, are transformed into vegetarian versions, while festival specific Hokkien-style yellow noodles are stir-fried with meaty mushrooms and big chunks of vegetables. Don't cut those long noodles as they represent good luck.

### Mangkorn Khao

(Map p650; cnr Th Yaowarat & Th Yaowaphanit; dishes 30B; ☺7-11pm; bus 73, MRT Hualamphong) This streetside stall is a lauded vendor of *bâ-mèe* (Chinese-style wheat noodles) served with handmade wontons in a subtle broth. Note that there is no roman-script sign.

THAI \$

### Khrua Phornlamai

(Map p650; Th Plaeng Nam; dishes 40-60B; ☺dinner; bus 73, MRT Hualamphong) A modest street stall across the street from Burapa Birds Nest restaurant, this is a great place for greasy but delicious stir-fried faves such as *pât kĕe mow* – wide rice noodles stir-fried with Thai basil and so many chillies you might feel drunk, as the name implies.

THAI \$

### Nay Mong

(Map p650; 539 Th Phlap Phla Chai; dishes 40-60B; ☺dinner; bus 73, MRT Hualamphong) This minuscule restaurant is renowned for its delicious *hōy tôrt* (a crepe-like shellfish omelette). It is about 50m on the right-hand side from the intersection of Th Charoen Krung.

THAI \$

### SIAM SQUARE

Food vendors on Soi Kasem San 1 do a brisk business of feeding hungry clockwatchers and lounging *faràng* (foreigners); they are masters at communicating with hand gestures.



### MBK Food Court

(Map p660; 6th fl, MBK, cnr Th Phra Ram I & Th Phayathai; dishes 40-60B; ☺lunch & dinner; BTS National Stadium) The best introduction to street food a roving stomach could find. This mall food court has helpful English menus, cool air-con and all the standard dishes you'll need to know in order to conquer the menu-less street stalls.

THAI \$

### New Light Coffee House

(Map p660; 426/1-4 Siam Sq; dishes 60-200B; ☺11am-2pm & 6-10pm; BTS Siam; ☺) Travel back to the near past at this vintage diner popular

INTERNATIONAL \$\$

with Chulalongkorn University students. Try old-school Western dishes, accompanied by a roll and green salad, or choose from the extensive Thai menu.

### SUKHUMVIT

Fine dining is Sukhumvit's strong suit but you can find a few modest places too.

### Soul Food Mahanakorn

(www.soulfoodmahanakorn.com; 56/10 Soi 55/Thong Lor, Th Sukhumvit; mains 120-250B; ☺dinner; BTS Thong Lo) Started up by a US expat, this cosy bar/restaurant does upscale takes on rustic Thai dishes such as southern-style fried chicken and northern-style pork curry alongside cocktails, of course.

THAI \$\$

### Nasir Al-Masri

(Map p650; 4/6 Soi 3/1, Th Sukhumvit; mains 80-350B; ☺24hr; BTS Nana) One of several similar Middle Eastern restaurants in Little Arabia, Nasir Al-Masri is easily recognisable by its genuinely impressive floor-to-ceiling stainless steel 'theme'. Middle Eastern food generally means meat, meat and more meat, but there are also several delicious veggie-based mezzes.

MIDDLE EASTERN \$\$

### Bharani

(Sansab Boat Noodle; Map p650; 96/14 Soi 23, Th Sukhumvit; mains 50-200B; ☺10am-10pm; BTS Asok, MRT Sukhumvit) This cosy Thai restaurant dabbles in a bit of everything, from ox-tongue stew to fried rice with shrimp paste, but the real reason to come is for the rich, meaty 'boat noodles', a homage to the ancient Ayuthaya tradition of floating noodle vendors.

THAI \$

### Thonglee

(Map p650; Soi 20, Th Sukhumvit; mains 40-100B; ☺lunch & dinner, closed 3rd Sun of the month; BTS Asok, MRT Sukhumvit) One of the few remaining homestyle Thai places on Th Sukhumvit, this tiny kitchen offers a few dishes you won't find elsewhere, like *mōo păt gà-bì* (pork fried with shrimp paste) and *mèe gròrp* (sweet-and-spicy crispy fried noodles).

THAI \$

**Soi 38 Night Market**

THAI \$

(Soi 38, Th Sukhumvit; dishes 30-60B; ☺8pm-3am; BTS Thong Lo) For budget noshing in an expensive part of town, this nightly collection of Thai-Chinese stalls is something of an oasis. It is also open late for post-clubbing chowing.

**Bo.lan**

THAI \$\$\$

(Map p650; ☎0 2260 2962; www.bolan.co.th; 42 Soi 26/Rongnarong Phichai Songkhrum, Th Sukhumvit; set meal 1500B; ☺lunch & dinner) If you're going to do one upscale Thai meal in Bangkok, do it here. Started up by two former chefs of London's Michelin-starred *Nahm*, the emphasis is on set meals featuring full-flavoured regional Thai dishes.

**SILOM**

Bangkok's financial district does a bustling lunchtime business, and the Muslim and Indian restaurants, offshoots of their respective ethnic enclaves, are worth an evening outing.

**Chennai Kitchen**

INDIAN \$

(Map p650; 10 Th Pan; mains 50-150B; ☺10am-3pm & 6-9.30pm; BTS Surasak; ☹) This thimble-sized restaurant delivers southern Indian vegetarian without ever straying into 'blah'. For the determined, there's the arm-length *dosa* (a parchment-thin crepe) or a thali set for the indecisive.

**Somtarn Convent**

THAI \$

(Map p650; 2/4-5 Th Convent; mains 20-120B; ☺10.30am-9pm; BTS Sala Daeng, MRT Si Lom) Northeastern Thai food is usually relegated to gritty street stalls but this well-lighted place offers a less intimidating introduction to *lâhp* (a minced meat 'salad'), *sôm-dam* (papaya salad) and other Isan delights.

**Soi 10 Food Centres**

THAI \$

(Map p650; Soi 10, Th Silom; mains 20-60B; ☺lunch Mon-Fri; BTS Sala Daeng, MRT Si Lom) These two food barns tucked behind Soi 10 are the main lunchtime fuelling stations for this area's office staff. Choices range from southern-style *kôw gaang* (point-and-choose curries ladled over rice) to virtually every form of Thai noodle.

**Krua Aroy-Aroy**

THAI \$

(Map p650; Th Pan; mains 30-70B; ☺8am-8.30pm, closed 2nd & 4th Sun of each month; BTS Surasak) It can be crowded and hot, but *Krua Aroy-Aroy* ('Delicious Kitchen') lives up to its name. Stop by for some of Bangkok's richest curries, as well as a revolving menu of daily specials.

**Drinking**

Bangkok's curfew (midnight to 1am for bars) is strictly enforced, though there are always loopholes. Smoking has been successfully banned from all indoor bars and clubs and some open-air places as well.

Most backpackers are pleased to find that the party finds them on Th Khao San, where night-time equals the right time for a drink. Beer and cocktails are sold from every corner and a tonne of hip Thais have carved out a local scene too.

**Center Khao San**

BAR

(Map p654; Th Khao San) A classic Khao San watering hole, this long-running spot has a front-row view of the street's human parade as well as late-night bands.

**Molly Bar**

BAR

(Map p654; Th Rambutri) Packed on weekends for live music, this off-Khao San bar has a more mellow vibe on weekdays with outdoor seating amongst fairy lights.

**Hippie de Bar**

BAR

(Map p654; 46 Th Khao San) Despite the name, you'll be hard-pressed to find dreadlocks or a yoga mat at this boozier shack, popular with local university students. Regardless, everybody's welcome, and there's food, pool tables and a rockin' soundtrack.

**Taksura**

BAR

(Map p654; 156/1 Th TanooTanoo) Part of the adventure is actually locating this seemingly abandoned, century-old house. Reward your discovery with some spicy nibbles and a whisky set (a bottle of Thai whiskey mixed with soda water, Coke and ice).

**Molly Malone's**

BAR

(Map p650; 1/5-6 Th Convent, Th Silom; ☺11am-lam; BTS Sala Daeng, MRT Si Lom) A recent makeover has this longstanding pub leaning perilously towards Irish kitsch, but it still pulls a fun crowd and the service is friendly and fast.

**Cheap Charlie's**

BAR

(Map p650; Soi 11, Th Sukhumvit; ☺Mon-Sat; BTS Nana) A veteran of the bar world, this outdoor beer stall is decorated with novelty trinkets and other wooden curiosities. As the name suggests, drinks are easy on the wallet, attracting expats and front-loaders (drinkers heading elsewhere after cheap drinks here). It is located on a sub-*soi* off Soi 11, look for the 'Sabai Sabai Massage' sign.

**Wong's Place**

BAR

(Map p650; 27/3 Soi Sri Bumphen, off Soi Ngam Duphli, Th Phra Ram IV; ☎8pm until late; MRT Lumphini) Enforced curfew laws have sobered up Bangkok's reputation but there are still a few after-hours joints should sleeping seem out of the question. This late-night hovel is beloved by backpackers who stayed so long they're now expats; don't show up until after midnight.

**Entertainment**

Most dance clubs charge a cover fee ranging from 200B to 500B.

**Brick Bar**

LIVE MUSIC

(Map p654; ☎0 2629 4477; basement, Buddy Lodge, 265 Th Khao San; river ferry Tha Phra Athit) This underground pub hosts a revolving cast of live Thai bands slotted for an almost exclusively domestic crowd. If this all sounds a bit too foreign, come just before midnight for Teddy Ska's reggae beats.

**Ad Here the 13th**

LIVE MUSIC

(Map p654; 13 Th Samsen; river ferry Tha Phra Athit) Just over Khlong Banglamphu bridge, this cosy hole-in-the-wall is packed with regulars, cold beer, good cheer and a brilliant blues band.

**Brown Sugar**

LIVE MUSIC

(Map p660; 231/20 Th Sarasin; BTS Ratchadamri) Jazz it up with a visit to this intimate club dedicated to brass and blues.

**Saxophone Pub & Restaurant**

LIVE MUSIC

(Map p650; 3/8 Th Phayathai; BTS Victory Monument) A Bangkok live-music legend, Saxophone fills its beer-cellar bar with jazz, blues, reggae and rock, and big groups of partying friends.

**RCA**

DANCE CLUBS

(Royal City Ave; Th Phra Ram IX) This suburban strip of megaclubs packs in barely legal Thais,

professional drunks of every nationality (including a few dirty old 'uncles') and enthusiastic backpackers. The club venues change but at the moment you'll find the crowds at 808 Club, Flix/Slim and Cosmic Cafe.

**Glow**

DANCE CLUB

(Map p650; www.glowbkk.com; 96/4-5 Soi 23, Th Sukhumvit; admission from 200B; BTS Asoke, MRT Sukhumvit) This tiny club packs 'em in with a menu of music ranging from hip-hop to electronica and just about everything in between.

**Aksra Theatre**

TRADITIONAL ARTS

(Map p650; ☎0 2677 8888 ext 5730; www.aksra theatre.com; King Power Complex, 8/1 Th Rang Nam, Th Phayathai; tickets 400-600B; ☎shows 7.30-8.30pm Mon-Wed, dinner shows 6.30-7pm Thu-Sun; BTS Victory Monument) The descendants of the famous Joe Louis Puppet Troupe perform scenes from *Ramakian* with traditional knee-high puppets requiring three puppeteers to strike humanlike poses.

**Lumphini Boxing Stadium**

MUAY THAI

(Map p650; Th Phra Ram IV; tickets 1000-2000B; ☎6.30pm Tue, Fri, Sat; MRT Lumphini) The country's best *muay thai* fighters bubble up from the temple fair rings to the big-league in Bangkok. Aficionados say the best-matched bouts are reserved for Tuesday nights at Lumphini. Tickets aren't cheap for foreigners but bargaining isn't an option.

**Ratchadamnoen Stadium**

MUAY THAI

(Map p654; Th Ratchadamnoen Nok; tickets 1000-2000B; ☎bouts 6.30pm Mon, Wed, Thu & Sun; bus 503 & 70) Thursday nights at Ratchadamnoen typically feature the sport's leading contenders.

**Shopping**

Thailand is a great shopping destination but smart travellers opt for a shopping spree right before their return flight to avoid hauling extra cargo across Southeast Asia. If

**GAY & LESBIAN BANGKOK**

Bangkok's gay community is loud, proud and knows how to party. A newcomer might want to visit the websites **Utopia** (www.utopia-asia.com), **Dreaded Ned** (www.dreaded.com), **Fridae** (www.fridae.com) and **Lesbian Guide to Bangkok** (www.bangkoklesbian.com) for nightlife tips.

Bangkok's 'pink alleys' branch off Th Silom. Reliable standards include **Balcony Bar** (Map p650; 86-88 Soi 4, Th Silom; BTS Sala Daeng, MRT Silom) and **Telephone Bar** (Map p650; ☎0 2234 3279; 114/11-13 Soi 4, Th Silom; BTS Sala Daeng, MRT Silom), while dance clubs cluster on Soi 2, Th Silom. The lesbian hang-out is at **Zeta** (Phra Ram IX), a low-key club in RCA (Royal City Avenue).

## PINNING DOWN THE PARTY

Bangkok's party people are fickle and dance clubs are used up like tissues. To chase down the crowds check out **Dude Sweet** ([www.dudesweet.org](http://www.dudesweet.org)), which organises popular monthly parties, and **Bangkok Recorder** ([www.bangkokrecorder.com](http://www.bangkokrecorder.com)), which promotes various club theme nights and visiting celeb DJs. Other sources of info include **BK** (<http://bk.asia-city.com/nightlife>) or **Thonglor Ekamai** ([www.thonglor-ekamai.com](http://www.thonglor-ekamai.com)), which profiles upper Sukhumvit's expanding nightlife.

there isn't a posted price, then you should bargain for it.

### Chatuchak Market

MARKET

(Th Phahonyothin; [www.chatuchak.org](http://www.chatuchak.org); ☺9am-6pm Sat & Sun; BTS Mo Chit, MRT Chatuchak Park & Kamphaeng Phet) Chatuchak is the mother of all markets. On weekends it sprawls over a huge area with tens of thousands of stalls and hundreds of thousands of visitors a day. From handicrafts and antiques to second-hand clothes and housewares, Chatuchak has evolved from a utilitarian wholesaler to creative design supplier. Everyone leaves thoroughly exhausted, totally dehydrated and overloaded with armfuls of plastic bags – it's great fun. To navigate the market like a pro, pick up a copy of *Nancy Chandler's Map of Bangkok*. The market is north of central Bangkok.

### MBK

MALL

(Mahboonkrong; Map p660; cnr Th Phayathai & Th Phra Ram I; BTS National Stadium & Siam) Bangkok's most hyperactive mall, MBK is an air-conditioned playground for average folks, trendy Thai teenagers, escalator-shy grannies and sunburned Europeans. Small, inexpensive stalls and shops sell mobile phones and accessories, cheap clothes and toiletries.

### Siam Center & Siam Discovery Center

MALL

(Map p660; cnr Th Phayathai & Th Phra Ram I; BTS National Stadium & Siam) Thailand's first shopping centre, Siam Center opened its doors in 1976 and has refashioned itself for the fashion-conscious teens. The attached Siam Discovery Center is the leading lady of home decor. Peruse the 3rd-floor stores for an idea of what a Bangkok socialite's sky-high apart-

ment might look like. There is also an **Asia Books** branch here.

### Siam Paragon

MALL

(Map p660; Th Phra Ram I; BTS Siam) Touted as Southeast Asia's biggest mall, Paragon is a humongous homage to luxury, a seemingly frivolous venture in today's downgraded economy. On the third floor, **Kinokuniya**, Thailand's largest English-language bookstore, is the mall's most useful and busiest store. Most locals hang around the main lobby as if it were an urban park, or they venture to the basement-level food court for dressed-up Thai meals. Often the attached courtyard hosts Thai bands, fashion shows and other excessively amplified events.

### Patpong Night Market

MARKET

(Map p650; Patpong Soi 2, Th Silom; ☺7pm-1am; BTS Sala Daeng, MRT Silom) Knock-off designer bags and watches are the speciality amid Bangkok's red light district.

### Asia Books

BOOKS

(Map p650; [www.asiabook.com](http://www.asiabook.com); Soi 15, 221 Th Sukhumvit; ☺8am-9pm; BTS Asok, MRT Sukhumvit) Also a branch in Siam Discovery Center.

### Book Lover

BOOKS

(Map p654; Soi Ram Buttri; ☺noon-10.30pm Tue-Sun; bus 2, 15, 44, 511, river ferry Tha Phra Athit) Well-stocked used bookstore.

### Kinokuniya

BOOKS

(Map p660; [www.kinokuniya.com](http://www.kinokuniya.com); Siam Paragon 3rd fl, Th Phra Ram I; ☺10am-10pm; BTS Siam) The country's largest book store.

### Saraban

BOOKS

(Map p654; 106/1 Th Rambuttri; ☺9.30am-10.30pm; bus 2, 15, 44, 511, river ferry Tha Phra Athit) Stocking the largest selection of international newspapers and new Lonely Planet guides on Th Khao San.

### Shaman Bookstore

BOOKS

Susie Walking Street (Map p654; Susie Walking Street, off Th Khao San; ☺9am-11pm) Th Khao San (Map p654; Th Khao San; ☺9am-11pm) With two locations on Th Khao San, Shaman has the area's largest selection of used books.

## i Information

### Dangers & Annoyances

Bangkok's most heavily toured areas – Wat Phra Kaew, Th Khao San, Jim Thompson's House, Siam Square – are favourite hunting grounds for professional con artists. See the boxed text Out-smarting the Scams (p653).





## DENOMINATING MONEY

The Thai *baht* (B) is divided into colour-coded notes as well as coins of various sizes.

Coins come in 1B, 2B (gold-coloured), 5B and 10B denominations. There are 100 *satang* to 1B and occasionally you'll see 25 and 50 satang coins at department stores or supermarkets.

Notes are in 20B (green), 50B (blue), 100B (red), 500B (purple) and 1000B (beige) denominations of varying shades and sizes. In the dark it can be easy to mix up a 50B note with a 500B note so take care to segregate your bills by denomination. ATM withdrawals dispense cash in 1000B notes, which can be impossible for a taxi driver or market vendor to change. Break your big bills at 7-Elevens.

### Emergency

If you have a medical emergency and need an ambulance, contact the hospitals with English-speaking staff (listed under Medical Services).

**Fire** (☎199)

**Police & Emergency** (☎191)

**Tourist police** (☎1155; 🕒24hr) An English-speaking unit that investigates criminal activity involving tourists, including gem scams. It can also act as a bilingual liaison with the regular police.

### Internet Access

Internet cafes are ubiquitous and most are equipped with Skype and headsets for inexpensive overseas calls. The cheapest access is found around Th Khao San, where it starts at around 20B an hour. Siam Square is the next best bet, while the Th Sukhumvit and Silom areas are more expensive.

Wi-fi is mostly free of charge and is becoming increasingly available at hotels, guesthouses and public hot spots.

### Internet Resources

**Austin Bush Food Blog** ([www.austinbushphotography.com/category/foodblog](http://www.austinbushphotography.com/category/foodblog)) Food blog by Bangkok-based Lonely Planet author.

**Greg To Differ** ([www.gregtodiffer.com](http://www.gregtodiffer.com)) Stories, rants and observations on expat life in Bangkok.

### Media

The two English-language dailies, the *Bangkok Post* and the *Nation*, are available at streetside

newsagents near hotels or tourist areas. Monthly magazines are available in bookstores.

**Bangkok 101** ([www.bangkok101.com](http://www.bangkok101.com)) A monthly city primer with photo essays and reviews of attractions.

**Bangkok Post** ([www.bangkokpost.net](http://www.bangkokpost.net)) Leading English-language daily.

**BK** (<http://bk.asia-city.com>) Free weekly listings mag for the young and hip.

**CNN Go** ([www.cnn.go.com/bangkok](http://www.cnn.go.com/bangkok)) Online magazine covering hot spots, food trends and lifestyle news.

**The Nation** ([www.nationmultimedia.com](http://www.nationmultimedia.com)) English-language daily with a heavy focus on business.

### Medical Services

There are several outstanding hospitals in Bangkok with English-speaking staff.

**Bangkok Christian Hospital** (Map p650; ☎0 2235 1000; 124 Th Silom; BTS Sala Daeng, MRT Si Lom)

**BNH** (Map p650; ☎0 2686 2700; 9 Th Convent; BTS Sala Daeng, MRT Si Lom)

**Bumrungrad Hospital** (Map p650; ☎0 2667 1000; 33 Soi 3, Th Sukhumvit; BTS Phloen Chit)

### Money

Thai banks have currency exchange kiosks that have extended hours (usually 8am to 8pm) in many parts of Bangkok, especially tourist areas. ATMs are conveniently located. Go to 7-Eleven shops or other reputable places to break 1000B bills; don't expect a vendor or taxi to be able to make change on a note 500B or larger.

### Post

**Main post office** (Map p650; Th Charoen Krung; ☎8am-8pm Mon-Fri, 8am-1pm Sat & Sun) Poste restante and a packing service for parcels. Branch post offices also offer similar services.

### Tourist Information

**Bangkok Information Center** (Map p654; ☎0 2225 7612-4; [www.bangkoktourist.com](http://www.bangkoktourist.com); ☎8am-7pm Mon-Fri & 9am-5pm Sat & Sun; bus 32, 33, 64, 82, river ferry Tha Phra Athit)

**Tourism Authority of Thailand** (TAT; [www.tourismthailand.org](http://www.tourismthailand.org)) Main office (Map p650; ☎0 2250 5500; 1600 Th Phetchaburi Tat Mai; ☎8.30am-4.30pm; MRT Phetchaburi); Banglamphu (Map p650; ☎0 2283 1500; Th Ratchadamnoen Nok; ☎8.30am-4.30pm); Suvarnabhumi International Airport (☎0 2134 0040; 2nd fl, btwn Gates 2 & 5; 🕒24hr).

## Getting There & Away

### Air

Bangkok is the air-travel hub for Thailand and mainland Southeast Asia. **Suvarnabhumi**

## GETTING TO CAMBODIA: ARANYA PRATHET TO POIPEP

Many travellers undertaking the Angkor pilgrimage start this epic journey in Bangkok and cross the border at Aranya Prathet-Poipet. Resist the urge to book this trip through Th Khao San's guesthouses and travel agencies as the scams are numerous, annoying and time-consuming. The border is fraught with minor scams and hassles. Read up on the tricks and tricksters on **Tales of Asia** ([www.talesofasia.com/cambodia-overland.htm](http://www.talesofasia.com/cambodia-overland.htm)).

The crossing can be done in one day but if you get delayed in Aranya Prathet, there are a string of guesthouses along the road to the border that are happy to have you.

**Getting to the border** Buses leave from Bangkok's Northern and Northeastern (Mo Chit) bus terminal (207B, 4½ hours), Eastern (Ekamai) station (200B, four hours) and Suvarnabhumi (Airport) bus station (187-190B; three hours) directly to the border. Minivans also leave from Bangkok's Victory Monument (230B, four hours, every half-hour).

Two daily trains leave Bangkok's Hualamphong station (3rd-class 48B, six hours) to Aranya Prathet town, where sǒrngtǎao (15B), motorcycle taxi (60B) or tǔk-tǔk (80B) can take you the final 6km to the border.

Aranya Prathet is also accessible by bus from Chanthaburi (150B, four hours, hourly) and Khorat (190B, four hours, six daily).

**At the border** It is advisable to reach the border as early as possible, especially on weekends when casino-bound Thais and guest workers clog the immigration lines. Cambodia visas are available on arrival with the usual formalities (passport photo and US\$20 visa fee). Ignore any touts or money exchange services and watch out for pickpockets.

**Moving on** The best way to continue to Siem Reap is by taxi.

See p105 for information on crossing from Cambodia into Thailand.

**International Airport** (☎ 0 2132 1888; [www.bangkokairportonline.com](http://www.bangkokairportonline.com)), 30km east of Bangkok, handles all international air traffic and most domestic routes. The airport name is pronounced 'sǔ-wan-nǎ-poom,' and its airport code is BKK.

**Don Muang airport** (☎ 0 2535 1111; [www.airportthai.co.th](http://www.airportthai.co.th)), 25km north of central Bangkok, handles domestic routes with Nok Air, Orient Thai and Solar Air.

For a list of international and domestic airlines in Bangkok, see p783.

### Bus

Buses departing from the government bus station are recommended over those departing from Th Khao San and other tourist areas, due to a lower incidence of theft and greater reliability. The Bangkok bus terminals (all with left-luggage facilities) are as follows:

**Eastern bus terminal** (Ekamai; ☎ 0 2391 2504; Soi 40/Soi Ekamai, Th Sukhumvit; BTS Ekamai) Serves southeastern cities such as Rayong, Ban Phe (for Ko Samet), Chanthaburi, Trat and Laem Ngop (for Ko Chang).

**Northern & Northeastern bus terminal** (Mo Chit; northern routes ☎ 0 2936 2841, ext 311/442, northeastern routes ☎ 0 2936 2852, ext 611/448; Th Kamphaeng Phet) These terminals serve all northern and northeastern cities, including Chiang Mai, Nakhon Ratchasima (Khorat), Ayuthaya, Lopburi and Aranya

Prathet (near the Cambodian border). From the Mo Chit Skytrain station take bus 3, 77 or 509.

**Southern bus terminal** (Sai Tai Mai; ☎ 0 2435 1199; Th Bromaratchachonanee, Thonburi) Serves southern and western cities like Nakhon Pathom, Kancharaburi, Hua Hin, Surat Thani, Phuket and Hat Yai. Accessible by bus 79, 159, 201 or 516 from Th Ratchadamnoen (near Khao San) or bus 40 from Victory Monument.

**Suvarnabhumi public transport centre** (☎ 0 2132 1888; Suvarnabhumi Airport) Located 3km from Suvarnabhumi International Airport, this terminal serves various points east and northeast including Aranya Prathet (for the Cambodian border), Chanthaburi, Ko Chang, Nong Khai (for the Lao border), Rayong (for Ko Samet), Trat and Udon Thani. It can be reached from Suvarnabhumi Airport by a free shuttle bus.



### TRAVEL HINTS

Skip the bus services that originate out of Bangkok's Th Khao San; these often have hidden costs, commission-generating hassles and a high-rate of theft from stowed luggage.

## GETTING INTO TOWN

### Suvarnabhumi International Airport

**Airport Rail Link** A rail line linking Suvarnabhumi airport to central Bangkok opened in 2010. If you arrive at the Bangkok City Air Terminal (Makkasan station) at least three hours before your departure, there are check-in facilities for three airlines (Thai Airways, Bangkok Airways and Lufthansa).

» **Local service** (30 minutes, 45B, ☺6am-midnight) Six stops between airport and Phaya Thai station, which is connected to BTS Phaya Thai. Disembark at Phaya Thai and flag a cab to Khao San; BTS links to Siam Square area.

» **Express service** (15 minutes, 150B, ☺6am-midnight) Nonstop between airport and Makkasan/Bangkok City Air Terminal, accessible to MRT Phetchaburi. The MRT links to Silom and Sukhumvit.

**Local Bus** Local buses travel between central Bangkok and the airport's public transport centre, a 3km ride on a free shuttle bus from the airport. Bus fares start at 25B and run roughly from 6am to 9pm. Useful routes include the following:

- » Bus 551 (Victory Monument)
- » Bus 554 (Don Muang)
- » Bus 556 (Th Khao San)
- » Minivan 552 (On Nut BTS station)

**Intercity Bus** The airport's public transport centre has services to other eastern cities within Thailand; see Getting There & Away (p669) for more information.

**Taxi** Public meter taxis (not the 'official airport taxis') queue outside of baggage claim. Taxi lines tend to be long; you can always dodge the line by flagging a cab from the arrivals hall.

### Minivan

Privately run minivans (*rót dōo*) are increasingly replacing buses for fast and comfortable service between Bangkok and its neighbouring provinces as they travel directly into town (usually the central market) instead of the out-of-town bus stations. In Bangkok, Victory Monument (Map p650) is surrounded by various minivan depots with services to the following:

**Ayuthaya** (60B, one hour, from 5am to 8.30pm)

**Aranya Prathet** (for the Cambodian border; 230B, 3½ hours, from 6am to 6pm)

**Ban Phe** (for Ko Samet; 200B, 2½ hours, from 6am to 9pm)

**Muak Lek** (for Khao Yai; 120B, 2½ hours, from 8am to 8pm)

**Southern bus terminal** (35B, one hour, 6.30am to 9pm)

**Suvarnabhumi International Airport** (40B, one hour, from 5am to 10.30pm).

### Train

**Hualamphong station** (Map p650; ☎0 2220 4334, general information & advance booking 1690; Th Phra Ram IV; MRT Hua Lamphong)

Bangkok's central train station; from Sukhumvit and Silom, take the MRT, from Banglamphu (Khao San) take bus 53. See p786 for information on train routes and stops.

**Bangkok Noi station** (Thonburi; cross-river ferry Tha Rot Fai) A minor commuter line with service to Nakhon Phanom and Kanchanaburi.

## i Getting Around

Bangkok is nearly always choked with traffic, but it can be especially impossible to travel down Th Sukhumvit or Th Ratchadamnoen during rush hour. You will need a good map and a lot of patience to get around. If you plan to use Bangkok's economical bus system, purchase Roadway's *Bangkok Bus Map*. Check out *Nancy Chandler's Map of Bangkok* for a schematic representation of attractions, restaurants and other tips.

### Boat

**Chao Phraya River Express** (☎0 2623 6001) is a scenic and efficient way of exploring the sights in Ko Ratanakosin, Banglamphu and parts of Silom. The boats ply a regular route along the Mae Nam Chao Phraya between Tha Wat Ratchasingkhon in the south to Nonthaburi

Touts often offer flat fares (usually inflated), but you can try to bargain for a fare closer to the meter rate. For meter taxis you must also pay a 50B airport surcharge to the driver and toll charges (usually about 60B). Politely insist that the meter is used ('Meter, na kha/khrap') if the driver suggests otherwise. Depending on traffic, meter rates should be as follows:

- » Banglamphu/Khao San: 350B to 425B
- » Th Sukhumvit: 200B to 250B
- » Th Silom: 300B to 350B

## Don Muang Airport

**Bus** The following useful air-con buses stop on the highway in front of the airport:

- » Bus 510 (Victory Monument and Southern bus terminal)
- » Bus 513 (Th Sukhumvit and Eastern bus terminal)
- » Bus 29 (Northern bus terminal, Victory Monument, Siam Square and Hualamphong train station)

**Taxi** There is a 50B airport surcharge added to the meter fare and tolls are paid by the passenger. Sample fares:

- » Banglamphu/Th Khao San: 400B
- » Sukhumvit or Silom: 300-350B

**Train** Exit Terminal 1 towards the Amari Airport Hotel to connect to Don Muang train station with service to Hualamphong train station (5-10B, one hour, roughly every hour from 4am 9.30pm).

in the north and overlaps with the Saphan Taksin Skytrain station at Tha Sathon. During rush hour pay close attention to the boat's colour-coded flags to avoid boarding an express line. The company operates the following services:

**Express** – Indicated by an orange, yellow or yellow-and-green flag, 14B to 32B, morning and evening rush hour till 7pm.

**Local** – Without a flag, 9B to 13B, morning and evening rush hour till 6pm)

**Tourist** – Larger boat; 19B, one-day pass 150B, 9.30am to 3.30pm.

**Klong taxis** (tickets 7B to 20B, 6am to 7pm) zip up and down Khlong Saen Saep, a narrow waterway connecting eastern and western Bangkok. The canals are something akin to an open sewer so try not to get splashed and take care when boarding and disembarking as the boats stop for mere seconds. Useful piers include the following:

- Tha Phan Fah – Eastern terminus, Banglamphu.
- Tha Hua Chang – Siam Square area.
- Tha Pratunam Interchange pier, BTS Chitlom.

## BTS (Skytrain)

The elevated **Bangkok Mass Transit System** (BTS; ☎ 0 2617 7300; www.bts.co.th) is a slick ride through the modern parts of town. There are two lines: the Sukhumvit and Silom lines. Trains run frequently from 6am to midnight; fares vary from 15B to 40B. Ticket machines operate on a zone system: select your destination's zone number and deposit the required coins (5B and 10B denominations). Staffed booths provide change but do not sell single fare tickets. You can buy value-stored tickets from the booths.

Trains are labelled with the line and the terminal station (indicating the direction the train is travelling). The Sukhumvit line heading east terminates at On Nut; west at National Stadium. The Silom line heading north terminates at Mo Chit; south, Wongwian Yai. Silom is the interchange station between the two lines.

There are also interchange stations with MRT (Metro); see the MRT entry for more information.

## Bus

The Bangkok bus service is frequent and frantic and is operated by **Bangkok Mass Transit Authority** (☎ 0 2246 4262; www.bmta.co.th). Fares for ordinary buses start at 6.50B and air-con

buses at 11B. Most buses operate between 5am and 10pm or 11pm; a few run all night.

*Bangkok Bus Guide*, by thinknet, is the most up-to-date route map available. The following bus lines are useful:

**Bus 15** Sanam Luang (accessible to Wat Phra Kaew), Th Ratchadamnoen Klang (accessible to Th Khao San), MBK (connect to BTS).

**Bus 47** Sanam Luang, Th Ratchadamnoen, MBK.

### MRT (Metro)

Bangkok's subway or underground (depending on your nationality) is operated by the **Metro-politan Rapid Transit Authority** (MRTA; www.mrta.co.th). For visitors the MRT is most useful if travelling from Silom or Sukhumvit to the Hualamphong train station. Trains operate from 6am to midnight and cost 16B to 41B, depending on distance. The following MRT stations provide interchange to BTS (Skytrain):

**Chatuchak** (BTS Chatuchak)

**Sukhumvit** (BTS Asoke)

**Silom** (BTS Sala Daeng).

### Taxi

Most taxis in Bangkok are meter taxis, though some drivers 'forget' to use their meters or prefer to quote a flat (and grossly inflated) fare to tourists. Many of the taxis that park near tourist haunts operate under an informal no-meter policy. We suggest skipping these cabs and instead flagging down a roving cab on one of the main streets. Unless it is a rainy rush hour, there is usually no problem finding an available cab. Fares should generally run from 60B to 100B, depending on distance.

In most large cities, the taxi drivers are seasoned navigators familiar with every nook and cranny, but this is not the case in Bangkok where many an upcountry farmer moonlights while his fields rest. To ensure that you'll be able to return home, grab your hotel's business card, which will have directions in Thai.

Motorcycle taxis camp out at the mouth of a *soi* to shuttle people from the main road to their destinations down the lane. *Soi* trips cost 10B; don't ask the price, just pay them as you disembark.

### Túk-Túk

The Thai version of a go-kart is Bangkok's most iconic vehicle and its most enduring hassle. They chatter like a chainsaw, take corners at an angle and are relentless in drumming up business. There are so many túk-túk scams that you really need some tenure in the city to know how much your trip should cost before bargaining for a ride and when a túk-túk is handier and cheaper than a cab. If you climb aboard just for the fun of it, you might end up being taken for a ride, literally. Beware of túk-túk drivers who offer to take you on a sightseeing tour for 10B or 20B – it's a

touting scheme designed to pressure you into purchasing overpriced goods. You must fix fares in advance for all túk-túk rides.

## AROUND BANGKOK

### Floating Markets

The photographs of Thailand's floating markets – wooden canoes laden with multi-coloured fruits and vegetables, paddled by women wearing indigo-hued clothes and wide-brimmed straw hats – have become an iconic and alluring image for the kingdom. They are also a sentimental piece of history. Like all good nations do, Thailand has modernised, replacing canals with roads, and boats with motorcycles and cars. The floating markets, which were once lively trading posts for produce farmers and local housewives, have crawled ashore.

The most heavily promoted floating market is **Damnoen Saduak** (☺7am-4pm Sat & Sun), 104km southwest of Bangkok between Nakhon Pathom and Samut Songkhram. It is little more than a souvenir market catering to foreign tourists. If you don't expect authenticity, then the unique shopping setting makes for a good story back home.

Air-con buses 78 and 996 go direct from the Southern bus terminal in Thonburi to Damnoen Saduak (80B, two hours, every 20 minutes from 6am to 9pm). Most buses will drop tourists off directly at the piers. The going rate for boat hire is about 300B per person per hour. A yellow *sörngtäaou* (5B) does a frequent loop between the floating market and the bus stop in town.

The **Amphawa Floating Market** (see p673) is the Thai counterpart to Damnoen Saduak, focusing more on food than factory-made souvenirs.

## CENTRAL THAILAND

Thailand's heartland, the central region is a fertile river plain that birthed the country's history-shaping kingdoms of Ayuthaya and Sukhothai and crafted the culture and language that defines the mainstream Thai identity. The nationally revered river, the Mae Nam Chao Phraya is the lifeblood of the region and connects the country's interior with the Gulf of Thailand. Geographically, central Thailand is a necessary thorough-

## A JOURNEY OF RAILS & RUDDERS

The riverine character of central Thailand is still alive and well in the quaint canalside village of Amphawa in Samut Songkhram province, less than 100km from Bangkok. City slickers often make the weekend journey for the Amphawa Floating Market.

### Sights & Activities

The **floating market** (☉4-9pm Fri-Sun) is popular with nostalgic Bangkokians who have only read about old Siam's boat-based commerce in books. Floating noodle vendors paddle around looking for appetites. Many visitors spend the night to enjoy the country setting and zip through the canals on **long-tail boat tours** (60B per person Fri-Sun; 500B charter Mon-Thu) to see fireflies (*hing hōy*) illuminate the darkness; best viewed during the wet season.

### Sleeping

Many of the canalside houses offer **homestays** (fan/air-con 200/1000B). Accommodation can be either a mattress on the floor or upscale guesthouse-style rooms. You'll see signs around the market for accommodation offerings.

### Getting There & Away

The scenic route to Amphawa is via the Mahachai short-line train from Bangkok. The ride travels the back lots of Bangkok's urban grid and the marshy landscape along the Gulf of Thailand. Catch a train from Wong Wian Yai train station (located in Thonburi and accessible from central Bangkok via Skytrain) to Samut Sakhon (Mahachai; 10B, one hour, hourly departures), where you'll transfer to another nearby line to Samut Songkhram (Mae Klang).

At the end of the first leg (in Samut Sakhon), work your way through the fresh market to the river pier and across by ferry to Ban Laem (3B), where you'll find the train station for the second leg of the journey. Trains depart this sleepy station at 10.10am, 1.30pm and 4.40pm bound for Samut Songkhram (10B).

The train pulls right into the middle of a bustling day market, with vendors moving goods and sunshades minutes before the train's arrival. It is such a spectacle that it even appears on a YouTube clip.

From the market, charter a boat (800B) or hop in a nearby *sōrngtāou* (8B) for the 10-minute ride to Amphawa.

To return, catch a minivan from Amphawa (weekend service only) or Samut Songkhram to Bangkok's Victory Monument (70B, one hour).

fare for any Chiang Mai-bound traveller, but culturally it is a worthwhile stop.

## Ayuthaya

POP 137,550

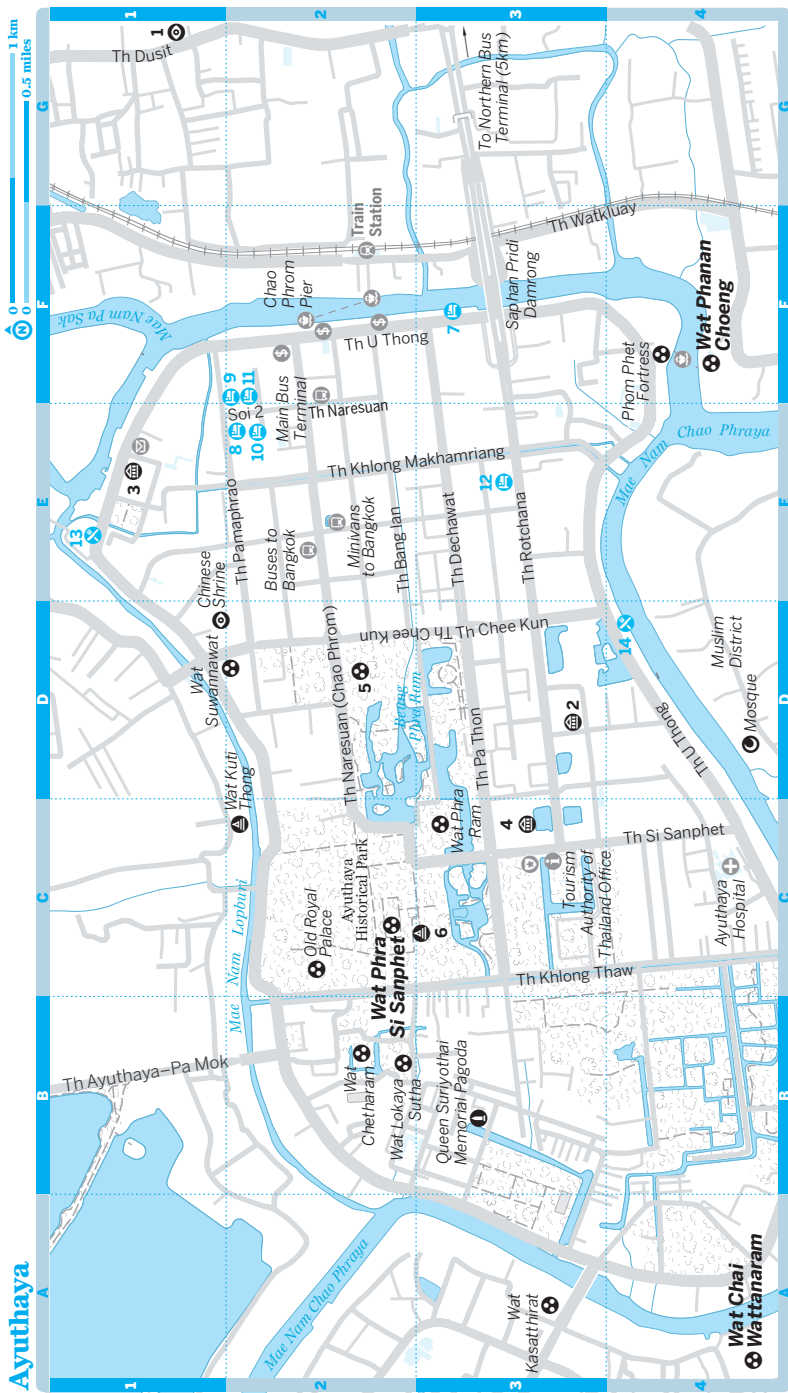
The fabled city, the fallen city: Ayuthaya crowned the pinnacle of ancient Thai history and defined the country's ascendancy to regional domination. It was built at the confluence of three rivers (Mae Nam Lopburi, Chao Phraya and Pa Sak) on a unique island of land and was auspiciously named after the home of Rama in the Indian epic *Ramayana*.

The rivers formed both a natural barrier to invasion and an invitation to trade, allowing the city-state to flourish into a fully-fledged nation from 1350 to 1767. Though the Thai kings outmanoeuvred Western power plays,

it was the repeated attempts by the Burmese that eventually sacked the city and ended Ayuthaya's reign. After two years of war the capital fell in 1767; the Burmese looted the city and the Thais re-established their power centre near present-day Bangkok.

Today the ruins of the old city survive with many battle scars amid a modern provincial town, a slight distraction for imagining what Ayuthaya once was. To its credit, the kingdom's history was better preserved and more accessible than previous kingdoms.

The modern town still clings to the old ways of the river, which acts as transport, bath and kitchen sink for its residents. The holiday of **Loi Krathong**, when tiny votive boats are floated on rivers as a tribute to the River Goddess, is celebrated with great fanfare in Ayuthaya.



## Sights

A Unesco World Heritage Site, Ayuthaya's historic temples are scattered throughout the city and along the encircling rivers. The ruins are divided into two geographical areas: ruins 'on the island', in the central part of town between Th Chee Kun and the western end of Th U Thong, which are best visited by bicycle; and those 'off the island' on the other side of the river, which are best visited on an evening boat tour or by motorbike.

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

### ON THE ISLAND

**Wat Phra Si Sanphet** TEMPLE  
(admission 50B) The most distinctive example of Ayuthaya architecture is Wat Phra Si Sanphet, thanks to its three bell-shaped *chedi* that taper off into descending rings. This site served as the royal palace from the city's founding until the mid-15th century, when it was converted into a temple.

## Ayuthaya

### Top Sights

Wat Chai Wattanaram.....	A4
Wat Phanan Choeng.....	F4
Wat Phra Si Sanphet.....	C2

### Sights

1 Ayothaya Floating Market.....	G1
2 Ayuthaya Historical Study Centre.....	D3
3 Chantharakasem National Museum.....	E1
4 Chao Sam Phraya National Museum.....	C3
5 Wat Phra Mahathat.....	D2
6 Wihaan Mongkhon Bophit.....	C3

### Sleeping

7 Baan Khun Phra.....	F3
8 Baan Lotus Guest House.....	E2
9 Chantana Guest House.....	F2
10 PU Inn Ubonpon.....	E2
11 Tony's Place.....	F2
12 Wiang Fa Hotel.....	E3

### Eating

13 Hua Raw Night Market.....	E1
14 Sai Thong.....	D4

## i

### KNOW MORE

The English-language audio guides (150B) – available at Wat Phra Si Sanphet, Wat Phra Mahathat and Wat Chai Wattanaram – provide excellent information and vivid details.

Although the grounds are now well tended, these efforts cannot hide the ravages of war and time. The surrounding buildings are worn through to their orange bricks, leaning to one side as gravity takes its toll. The complex once contained a 16m-high standing Buddha covered with 250kg of gold, which was melted down by the Burmese conquerors.

The adjacent **Wihaan Phra Mongkhon Bophit** houses a huge bronze seated Buddha. In 1955 the Burmese prime minister visited and donated 200,000B to help restore the building, an act of belated atonement for his country's sacking of the city 200 years before.

**Wat Phra Mahathat** TEMPLE  
(admission 50B) Wat Phra Mahathat has one of the first Khmer-style *praang* built in the capital. One of the most iconic images in Ayuthaya is Buddha's head engulfed by tentacle-like tree roots.

**Ayuthaya Historical Study Centre** MUSEUM  
(☎0 3524 5124; Th Rotchana; adult/student 100/50B; ☀9am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, to 5pm Sat & Sun) Getting a handle on the religious and historical importance of the temples is difficult to do without some preliminary tutoring. Ayuthaya Historical Study Centre has informative, professional displays about the ancient city.

**Chantharakasem National Museum** MUSEUM  
(Th U Thong; admission 100B; ☀9am-4pm Wed-Sun) This national museum contains a collection of Buddhist art, sculpture and antique weapons. The museum is housed within a former palace built in 1577.

**Chao Sam Phraya National Museum** MUSEUM  
(cnr Th Rotchana & Th Si Sanphet; admission 150B; ☀9am-4pm Wed-Sun) The less charming but larger Chao Sam Phraya National Museum protects the few surviving artefacts and treasures of Ayuthaya's golden period.



## PARTS OF A WAT

Planning to conquer Thailand's temples and ruins? With this handy guide, you'll be able to sort out your wats (Thai temple complex) from your what's that:

» **chedi** – large bell-shaped tower usually containing five structural elements symbolising (from bottom to top) earth, water, fire, wind and void; relics of Buddha or a Thai king are housed inside the *chedi*; also known as a stupa.

» **praang (prang)** – towering phallic spire of Khmer origin serving the same religious purpose as a *chedi*.

» **wihaan** – main sanctuary for the temple's Buddha sculpture and where laypeople come to make offerings; sometimes it is translated as the 'assembly hall'; typically the building has a three-tiered roofline representing the triple gems (Buddha, the teacher; Dharma, the teaching; and Brotherhood, the followers).

### OFF THE ISLAND

#### Wat Phanan Choeng

TEMPLE

(admission 20B) Wat Phanan Choeng contains a 19m-high sitting Buddha image, which reportedly wept when the Burmese sacked Ayutthaya. The temple is dedicated to Chinese seafarers and on weekends is crowded with Buddhist pilgrims from Bangkok. The best way to get here is to take the cross-river ferry (5B) from the pier near Phom Phet Fortress.

#### Wat Chai Wattanaram

TEMPLE

(admission 50B) A popular stop for shutterbugs, this is Ayutthaya's most photogenic temple with its proud central *praang* and riverside setting. It was built in 1630 and reclaimed from the jungle a mere 40 years ago.

#### Ayothaya Floating Market

MARKET

(☉9am-8pm) This replica of a floating market breaks up the monotony of temple-spotting with a mix of commerce and snacking. Thais adore these purpose-built floating markets, which are far from authentic but popular enough for good people-watching. The market is to the east of the old city off Th Dusit, near Wat Kudi Dao.

### Sleeping

Budget travellers can walk from the bus stop to the guesthouses, most of which are located on Soi 2, Th Naresuan.

#### Baan Lotus Guest House

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎0 3525 1988; 20 Th Pamaphrao; r 200-600B; 🍷🍷) Set in a shady garden, this converted teak house offers a calm respite for road-weary travellers. Staff are as charmingly old-school as the building itself.

#### Tony's Place

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎0 3525 2578; www.tonyplace-ayutthaya.com; 12/18 Soi 2, Th Naresuan; r 200-1200B; 🍷🍷) Budget rooms still offer just the basics, but renovated rooms cater to the flashpackers with almost palatial trimmings.

#### PU Inn Ubonpon

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎0 3525 1213; www.puguesthouse.com; 20/1 Soi Thaw Kaw Saw; r 200-900B; 🍷🍷🍷) The upbeat staff are always a friend indeed when arranging trips or sorting out travel details. Rooms are bright and clean.

#### Chantana Guest House

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎0 3532 3200; chantanahouse@yahoo.com; 12/22 Soi 2, Th Naresuan; r 400-500B; 🍷) Standing out from the nearby tumbledown spots, Chantana has helpful staff and clean rooms. A balcony room is well worth the extra 50B.

#### Baan Khun Phra

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎0 3524 1978; www.bannkunpra.com; 48/2 Th U Thong; dm/d 250/600B; 🍷) With a charming riverside location, this century old home could have gone upscale a long time ago but it remains delightfully shabby chic. Rooms are simple, though some are adorned with antiques. Dorms sleep up to four.

#### Wiang Fa Hotel

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎0 3524 3252; 1/8 Th Rotchana; r 500B; 🍷🍷) Rooms are small in this two-storey guesthouse. But an outdoor patio extends the living space and a laid-back ambience pervades.

### Eating

The range of restaurants in Ayutthaya can come as a disappointment after living it up in Bangkok.

**Hua Raw Night Market**

(Th U Thong; dishes 30-40B) This evening market offers a simple riverside setting and a range of Thai and Muslim dishes; for the latter look for the green star and crescent.

**Sai Thong**

(Th U Thong; dishes 90-150B; ☎9.30am-10pm) With 180 items on the menu, live music and spectacular food, this old-school restaurant is the best place to eat on the island. As well as the regular fare, there are interesting variations, such as chicken marinated in whiskey.

**i Information****Dangers & Annoyances**

Traffic lights are often absent from road junctions so take care when crossing intersections. Remember Thailand's unofficial road rules: if you're faster and larger, you have right of way. When cycling, put bags around your body, not in baskets where they could be snatched.

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

**Main post office** (Th U Thong)

**Ayuthaya Hospital** (☎1669, 0 3532 2555; cnr Th U Thong & Th Si Sanphet)

**TAT office** (☎0 3524 6076; 108/22 Th Si Sanphet; ☎8.30am-4.30pm) Distributes tourist information and maps.

**Tourist police** (☎emergency 1155; Th Si Sanphet)

**i Getting There & Away****Bus**

Ayuthaya has two bus terminals. The provincial bus stop is on Th Naresuan, a short walk from the guesthouse area. Services include:

**Lopburi** 40B; two hours; every 45 minutes.

**Suphanburi** 60B; two hours; every 30 minutes. Suphanburi is a transfer town for buses to Kanchanaburi.

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

**Victory Monument** 60B; 1½ hours; departing hourly from 5.30am to 7pm.

**Southern (Sai Tai Mai) station** 70B; one hour; frequent departures from 4.30am to 7pm.

**Northern (Mo Chit) station** 50B; 1½ hours; frequent departures. These buses also stop at Don Muang airport.

For long-distance travel to the north, the terminal is 5km east of the centre on the Asia Hwy.

**Sukhothai** From 255B to 328B; six hours; departing every two hours.

**Phitsanulok** From 224B to 227B; five hours; frequent departures.

THAI \$

**Chiang Mai** From 403B to 806B; nine hours; frequent.

**Train**

Ayuthaya's train station is on the eastern banks of the Mae Nam Pa Sak and is an easy walk from the centre city via a short ferry ride (5B). Sörnrgtáaou to the guesthouse area should cost 50B. Services include the following:

**Bangkok's Hualamphong station** Ordinary, rapid and express trains, 15B, 20B and 315B; around 1½ hours; frequent morning and night departures.

**Bangkok's Bang Sue station** Ordinary, rapid and express trains, 15B, 20B and 315B; around 1½ hours; frequent morning and night departures. Convenient for the Th Khao San area.

**Chiang Mai** Ordinary, rapid and express trains, 586B, 856 and 1198B; six departures a day.

**Pak Chong** Ordinary, rapid and express trains, 23B, 73B and 130B; frequent. The nearest station to Khao Yai National Park.

**Khon Kaen** Ordinary, rapid and express trains, 173B, 265B and 375B; six hours; four daily.

**i Getting Around**

Bikes can be rented at most guesthouses (50B). Túk-túk can be hired for the day to tour the sites (around 200B per hour); a trip within the city should be about 30B or 40B.

**Lopburi**

POP 26,500

This small, low-key town is a delightful respite from the rigours of the tourist trail. No aggressive túk-túk drivers, no grumpy guesthouse staff and few foreigners making you feel that you flew a long way to be with familiar faces. Lopburi is an ancient town with plenty of old ruins to prove its former occupation by almost every Southeast Asian kingdom: Dvaravati, Khmer and Ayuthaya. The old city is presently occupied by ordinary Thai life: noodle stands, motorcycle stores and, most importantly, a gang of monkeys. The city celebrates its resident monkeys with an annual festival during the last week of November.

**👁 Sights**

Lopburi's old ruins are easy to walk to from the town centre and a 150B day pass (available at Phra Narai Ratchaniwet) allows entry to all sights.

**Phra Narai Ratchaniwet**

MUSEUM

(Th Sorasak; admission 150B; ☎museum 8.30am-4pm Wed-Sun, grounds 8am-5.30pm) This

former palace now museum is a good place to begin a tour of Lopburi. Built between 1665 and 1677, the palace was designed by French and Italian architects, creating an unusual blend of styles. Inside the grounds is the **Lopburi National Museum**, which contains an excellent collection of Lopburi period sculpture, as well as an assortment of Khmer, Dvaravati, U Thong and Ayuthaya art, plus traditional farm implements.

### Prang Sam Yot

TEMPLE

(Sacred Three Spires; Th Wichayen; admission 50B; ☉8am-6pm) The most distinctive of Lopburi's ruins is Prang Sam Yot, which comprises three linked towers symbolising the Hindu Trimurti of Shiva, Vishnu and Brahma. Like any good Hindu shrine in this region, it was successfully converted to Buddhism with the addition of a few Lopburi-style Buddha images. This is also the resident monkeys' favourite hang-out place.

### Wat Phra Si Ratana Mahathat

TEMPLE

(Th Na Phra Kan; admission 50B; ☉7am-5pm) Directly across from the train station, Wat Phra Si Ratana Mahathat is a large 13th-century Khmer temple that's worth a look.

### Sleeping

Budget guesthouses are about all there is in Lopburi. In the old town most are old and basic, but they are within walking distance of the ruins.



### Noom Guest House

GUESTHOUSE \$

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

### Nett Hotel

GUESTHOUSE \$

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



### Eating

#### Khao Tom Hor

THAI

(cnr Th Na Phra Kan & Th Ratchadamnoen, dishes 30-80B) The busiest place in town offers excellent stir-fried dishes, including *pàd gàprow gài* (chicken stir-fried with basil). Service is speedy and efficient.

### Teu

THAI

(Th Prato Chai; dishes 40-70B; ☉3pm-12.30am) To eat with the locals, pull up a plastic stool and sup on fantastic *gaang Bàh nêua* (spicy jungle curry with beef) and a slushy frozen beer. Seating is opposite the restaurant or inside, next to the chaotic kitchen. No roman script sign so look out for the big red sign.

### Central Market

MARKET

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



### Drinking

When it comes to drinking, options in the old town are limited to **Noom Guesthouse** (Th Phraya Kamjat), where expats cradle their Changs and Leos, or around the corner there is **Sahai Phanta** (Th Sorasak), a popular venue with its 'songs-for-life' house band. There's no English sign, so look for the giant 'Benmore' banner on the roof.



### Information

**Muang Narai Hospital** (☎ 3661 6300 Th Pahnoyhtin)

**Post office** (Th Phra Narai Maharat)

**TAT office** (☎ 3642 2768; Th Phra Narai Maharat; ☉8.30am-4.30pm) An inconvenient 5km from the old town.



### Getting There & Away

Lopburi's **bus station** (Th Naresuan) is nearly 2km outside of the old town. Services include: **Ayuthaya** 40B; two hours; frequent departures.

**Bangkok's Northern & Northeastern (Mo Chit) station** 80B; three hours, frequent departures.

**Suphanburi** 65B; three hours; departures every 1½ hours. Head here for bus connections to Kanchanaburi.

Minivans leave from Th Na Phra Kan to Bangkok's **Victory Monument** (110B, frequent).

Lopburi's **train station** (Th Na Phra Kan) is in the old town. The train station has a left-luggage facility and some savvy travellers arrive early from Ayuthaya, stow their luggage for a few hour's visit and then hop on the train northward. There are frequent morning and early afternoon departures.

Services include:

**Ayuthaya** Ordinary, rapid and express trains, 13B, 20B and 310B; two hours.

**Bangkok's Hualamphong station** Ordinary, rapid and express trains, 28B, 50B and 344B; three to four hours.

**Phitsanulok** Ordinary, rapid and express trains, 49B, 99B and 393B.

## **i** Getting Around

Sählmlór go anywhere in old Lopburi for 30B. Sörngtáaou run a regular route between the old and new towns for 10B per person and can be used to travel between the bus station and the old town.

## Phitsanulok

POP 84,000

Because of its convenient location on an important train route, many travellers use Phitsanulok as a base for visiting the ancient city of Sukhothai. As an attraction in itself, Phitsanulok (often abbreviated as 'Philok') boasts a famous Buddha and a few minor curiosities.

## **o** Sights

**Wat Phra Si Ratana Mahathat** TEMPLE (☉6am-9pm) Known locally as Wat Yai, this famous temple contains the Phra Phuttha Chinnarat, regarded as one of the most beautiful and revered Buddha images in all of Thailand. This stunning bronze Buddha was cast in the 14th century in classic Sukhothai style, except for a unique detail: the flamelike halo that stretches from head to torso.

## Sergeant Major Thawee

**Folk Museum** MUSEUM (26/43 Th Wisut Kasat; admission 50B; ☉8.30am-4.30pm) The Sergeant Major Thawee Folk Museum displays a remarkable collection of tools, textiles and photographs from the province. It is spread throughout five traditional-style buildings with well-groomed gardens. Nearby is the founder's other hobbies: a small Buddha-casting foundry and an aviary. The museum is located south of central Phitsanulok; a túk-túk here should cost about 60B.

## **h** Sleeping

**Lithai Guest House** GUESTHOUSE \$ (☉0 5521 9626; 73 Th Phayalithai; r incl breakfast 220-460B; ☉) These airy rooms don't have much character but they don't cost much either. Most have large en suite bathrooms with hot water; cable TV, plentiful furniture

and a fridge. As well as breakfast, rates include free bottled water.

## Kraisaeng Place

HOTEL \$ (☉0 5521 0509; 45 Th Thammabucha; r 350-450B; ☉☉) An apartment-block hotel, Kraisaeng is a value find with well-equipped rooms, though a fair bit of traffic noise.

## **h** Eating

### Night Bazaar

THAI \$ (mains 40-80B; ☉5pm-3am) The city is particularly obsessive about night markets - there are no fewer than three dotted throughout town. This is the most famous because of the river-front restaurants specialising in *pàk búng loy fáh* (literally 'floating-in-the-sky morning glory vine'). Cooks fire up a batch of *pàk búng* in the wok and then fling it through the air to a waiting server who catches it on a plate. If you're lucky, you'll be here when a tour group is attempting the routine.

### Rim Nan

THAI \$ (5/4 Th Phaya Sua; mains 20-35B; ☉9am-4pm) North of Wat Phra Si Ratana Mahathat, this is one of a few similar restaurants serving the Phitsanulok speciality *gōoay-dēe-o hōy káh* (literally, 'legs-hanging' noodles). The name comes from the way customers sit on the floor facing the river, with their legs dangling below. There's no roman-script sign.

### Ban Mai

THAI \$\$\$ (93/30 Th Authong; mains 60-150B; ☉11am-2pm & 5-10pm; ☉) Dinner at this local favourite is like a meal at your grandparents': opinionated conversation, frumpy furniture, and an overfed Siamese cat. Don't expect home cooking though: Ban Mai specialises in unusual dishes like *gaang pèt bêt yáhng* (curry of smoked duck) or *yam dà-krái* (lemongrass salad).

## **w** Drinking

### Wood Stock

BAR (☉08 1785 1958; 148/22-23 Th Wisut Kasat; dishes 35-70B; ☉5pm-midnight) Combines funky 1960s- and '70s-era furniture, live music, and a cheap menu of *gáp glâam* (Thai-style nibbles).

## **i** Information

Internet shops dot the streets around the railway station and on the western bank of the river.

**Krung Thai Bank** (35 Th Naresuan; ☉to 8pm) An after-hours exchange window.

**Post office** (Th Phuttha Bucha)

## BUS SERVICES FROM PHITSANULOK

DESTINATION	FARE (B)	DURATION (HR)	FREQUENCY
Bangkok	224-380	5	hourly 7am-midnight
Chiang Rai	249-320	5	hourly 8am-midnight
Mae Sai	280-456	6	hourly 5.30am-midnight
Nan	238	6	two nightly departures
Mae Sot	210	5	two nightly departures
Chiang Mai	211-317	6	hourly 8am-midnight
Lampang	155-265	4	hourly 8am-midnight
Sukhothai	28-50	1	hourly 5.40am-6pm
Kamphaeng Phet	53-74	3	hourly 5am-6pm

**TAT** (☎0 5525 2742; 209/7-8 Th Borom Trailokanat; ☎8.30am-4.30pm) Distributes a walking-tour map.

### **i** Getting There & Away

Transport options out of Phitsanulok are good as it's a junction for several bus routes. Phitsanulok's **bus station** (☎0 5521 2090) is 2km east of town on Hwy 12. Minivans also depart from the bus terminal.

The **train station** (Th Ekathotsarot & Th Naresuan) is in the centre of town within walking distance of accommodation. Destinations include:

**Bangkok** 80B to 1164B; five to seven hours; 11 times daily.

**Chiang Mai** 143B to 1145B, seven to nine hours; six times daily.

### **i** Getting Around

Rides on the town's Darth Vader-like sähmlór start at about 60B.

## Sukhothai

POP 37,000

The Cambodians get irritated by such claims, but the ruins of Sukhothai are a mini version of the architectural styles found in Angkor. Considered the first independent Thai kingdom, Sukhothai emerged as the Khmer empire was crumbling in the 13th century and subsequently ruled over parts of the empire's western frontier for 150 years. The new Thai kingdom took artistic inspiration from its former overseers and the resulting city of temples is now a compact and pleasant collection of gravity-warped columns, serene Buddha figures and weed-sprouting towers.

Though Ayuthaya has a more interesting historical narrative, Sukhothai's ancient city is better preserved and architecturally more engaging. No surprise since Sukhothai (meaning 'Rising Happiness') is regarded as the blossoming of a Thai artistic sensibility.

The modern town of Sukhothai (often referred to as New Sukhothai; 12km from the ruins) is a standard, somewhat bland, provincial town but it is close and convenient.

### **i** Sights & Activities

#### SUKHOThai HISTORICAL PARK

Ranked as a World Heritage Site, the Sukhothai Historical Park (known in Thai as '*meuang kào*' or 'old city') comprises most of the ancient kingdom, which was surrounded by three concentric ramparts and two moats bridged by four gateways – important celestial geometry. Inside the old walls are the remains of 21 historical buildings; there are an additional 70 sites within a 5km radius. The ruins are divided into five geographic zones, each of which charges a 100B admission fee.

The historical park also hosts a beautiful version of Thailand's popular **Loi Krathong** festival in November.

#### CENTRAL ZONE

This is the historical park's main **zone** (admission 100B; ☎6.30am-8pm, plus per bicycle/motorcycle 10/30B) and is home to what are arguably some of the park's most well-preserved and impressive ruins. An audio tour can be rented at the ticket booth for 150B. This zone is best reached from town by sörngtääo. Once at the park, renting a bicycle is ideal; shops nearby rent bikes for 30B per day.

## Ramkhamhaeng National Museum

MUSEUM

(☎0 5561 2167; ☀9am-4pm) This national museum is a good place to start an exploration of Sukhothai history and culture. The most impressive display is a replica of the famous Ramkhamhaeng inscription, said to be the earliest example of Thai writing.

## Wat Mahathat

TEMPLE

Wat Mahathat is the crown jewel of the old city and 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

TEMPLE

Wat Si Sawai, just south of Wat Mahathat, has three Khmer-style *praang* and a moat. From images found in the *chedi*, this was originally a Hindu temple, later retrofitted for Buddhism.

## Wat Sa Si

TEMPLE

Wat Sa Si is a classically simple Sukhothai-style temple set on an island.

## Wat Trapang Thong

TEMPLE

Wat Trapang Thong, next to the museum, is reached by a footbridge crossing a large, lotus-filled pond. It remains in use today as a temple.

### NORTHERN ZONE

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

## Wat Si Chum

TEMPLE

This wat is northwest of the old city and contains an impressive 15m-high brick-and-stucco seated Buddha. This Buddha's elegant, tapered fingers are much photographed.

## Wat Phra Phai Luang

TEMPLE

Somewhat isolated to the north of the old city, Wat Phra Phai Luang is similar in style to Wat Si Sawai.

### WESTERN ZONE

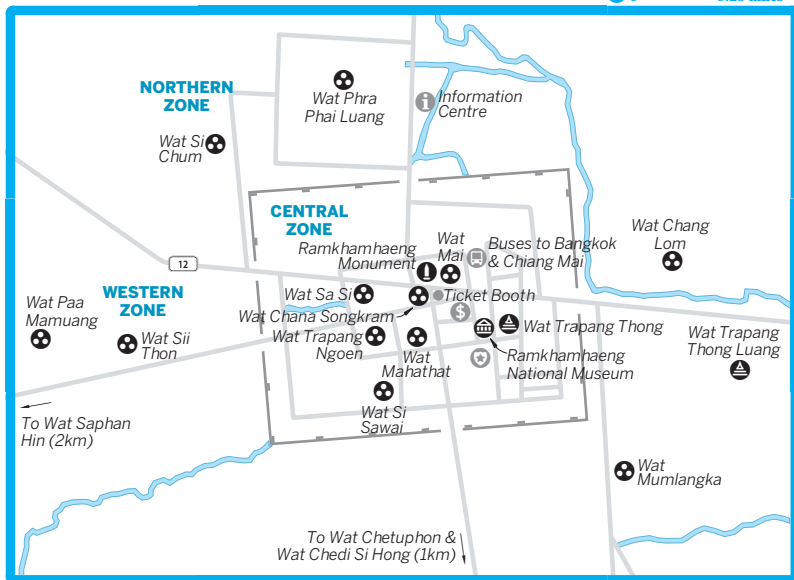
This **zone** (admission 100B, plus bicycle/motorcycle 10/30B; ☀7.30am-5.30pm) is 2km east of the old city walls but contains largely featureless ruins. A bicycle or motorcycle is necessary to explore this zone.

## Wat Saphan Hin

TEMPLE

Located on the crest of a hill, Stone Bridge Temple offers a fine view of the Sukhothai

## Sukhothai Historical Park



ruins to the southeast and the mountains to the north and south. All that remains of the original temple are a few *chedi* and the ruined *wihāhn*, consisting of two rows of laterite columns flanking a 12.5m-high standing Buddha image on a brick terrace.

## Tours

### Cycling Sukhothai

BICYCLE TOURS

(☎ 0 5561 2519; www.cycling-sukhothai.com; half/full day 600/750B, sunset tour 300B) A Belgian cycling enthusiast offers a variety of fun and educational bicycle tours of the area.

## Sleeping

### At Home Sukhothai

GUESTHOUSE \$

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

### Ban Thai

BUDGET HOTEL \$

(☎ 0 5561 0163; banthai\_guesthouse@yahoo.com; 38 Th Prawet Nakhon; r 200-500B; 🍷🍷🍷) Centred around a garden, this mish-mash of rooms and tiny bungalows is among the more popular budget places in town. Rooms aren't remarkable but the friendly atmosphere and low prices culminate in a winner.

### TR Room & Bungalow

GUESTHOUSE \$

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

### 4T Guesthouse

GUESTHOUSE \$\$

(☎ 0 5561 4679; www.4tguesthouse.ob.tc; 122 Soi Mae Ramphan; r 300-900B; 🍷🍷🍷🍷) Hardly a leaf is out of place at this expansive resort-like guesthouse. A smorgasbord of bungalows and spacious rooms spans just about every budget, and the swimming pool makes the decision even easier.

### Hung Jeng

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎ 0 5561 0585; 44/10 Th Prawet Nakhon; r 150-350B; 🍷🍷🍷) Maintained by an exceptionally lovely family, the rooms here are located in a rambling and colourful house and share toilets and balconies.

### J&J Guest House

GUESTHOUSE \$

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

### Sabaidee House

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎ 0 5561 6303; www.sabaideehouse.com; 81/7 Moo 1 Tambol Banklout; r 200-600B; 🍷🍷🍷) Having graduated from homestay status, this cheery guesthouse boasts five attractive bungalows and cheaper accommodation in the main house. Free bicycles and transport from the bus station. Sabaidee is located 1.5km west of the Mae Nam Yom, on a side street about 200m before the intersection with Rte 101 – look for the sign.

## Eating & Drinking

Thai towns love to claim a signature dish and Sukhothai weighs in with its own version of *kūaytiaw* (noodle soup), featuring a sweet broth, pork, ground peanuts and thinly sliced green beans. The dish is available at **Jayhae** (Th Jarot Withithong; dishes 25-40B; ☺7am-4pm) and **Ta Pui** (Th Jarot Withithong; dishes 25-35B; ☺7am-3pm), located across from each other on Th Jarot Withithong, about 1.3km west of the Mae Nam Yom.

### Dream Cafe

THAI \$\$

(86/1 Th Singhawat; dishes 80-150B; ☺lunch & dinner) Decorated with the owner's antique collection, Dream Cafe is a feast for the eyes. The menu features a bevy of Western dishes at slightly inflated prices and tasty Thai dishes from the management's own family recipe box.

### Night Market

THAI \$

(Th Jarot Withithong) Most vendors are accustomed to accommodating foreigners and even provide bilingual menus.

### Chopper Bar

BAR

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

## Information

There are banks with ATMs in New Sukhothai and a few in Old Sukhothai.

**Post office** (Th Nikhon Kasem)

**TAT** (☎ 0 5561 6228; Th Jarot Withithong; ☺8.30am-4.30pm) New location near the bridge in New Sukhothai.

## THE EMPIRE'S SUBURBS

The Sukhothai empire expanded its administrative centre and monument-building efforts to Si Satchanalai and Chaliang, two satellite cities about 70km away. Today the historic park containing the remaining temple ruins is set amidst rolling hills and offers a more pastoral experience than Old Sukhothai. An all-inclusive admission fee (220B) allows entry to Si Satchanalai, Chaliang's Wat Chao Chan and the Si Satchanalai Centre for Study & Preservation of Sangkalok Kilns.

### Si Satchanalai

This historic **zone** (admission 100B; ☀8.30am-5pm) covers roughly 720 hectares and is surrounded by a 12m-wide moat along the banks of Mae Nam Yom. An information centre distributes useful maps, and bicycles can be rented (20B) near the entrance gate. **Wat Chang Lom** has a *chedi* surrounded by Buddha statues set in niches and guarded by the remains of well-preserved elephant buttresses. Climb to the top of the hill supporting **Wat Khao Phanom Phoeng** for a view over the town and river. **Wat Chedi Jet Thaew** has a group of stupas in classic Sukhothai style.

### Chaliang

Chaliang is an older city site, dating to the 11th century, and sits 1km from Si Satchanalai. **Wat Phra Si Ratana Mahathat** (admission 20B) contains a classic walking Buddha, a hallmark of the Sukhothai era. **Wat Chao Chan** (admission 100B; ☀8am-5pm) has a large Khmer-style tower probably constructed during the reign of Khmer King Jayavarman VII (1181-1217). The roofless *wihāhn* contains the laterite outlines of a large standing Buddha that has all but melted away from exposure.

### The Kilns

The Si Satchanalai-Chaliang area was famous for its beautiful pottery, much of which was exported. The Chinese and Indonesians were once keen collectors, and some fine specimens can still be seen in the National Museum in Jakarta, Indonesia. **Si Satchanalai Centre for Study & Preservation of Sangkhalok Kilns** (admission 100B; ☀9am-4pm), 5km northwest of Si Satchanalai, has large excavated kilns and intact pottery samples documenting the area's historical pottery traditions.

### Getting There & Away

Si Satchanalai-Chaliang Historical Park is off Rte 101 between Sawankhalok and new Si Satchanalai. From Sukhothai, take a Si Satchanalai bus (46B, two hours, 11am) and ask to get off at 'meuang gòw' (old city). The last bus back to New Sukhothai leaves at 4.30pm.

**Tourist police** (☎1155; Sukhothai Historical Park)

### **i** Getting There & Away

The bus station is 1km northwest of the town centre on Hwy 101. Services include the following:

**Bangkok** 255B to 380B; seven hours; frequent.

**Chiang Mai** 218B; six hours; frequent.

**Phitsanulok** 28B to 39B; one hour; frequent.

**Sawankhalok** 19B to 27B; one hour; every hour.

**Si Satchanalai** 46B; 1½ hours; one morning departure.

**Mae Sot** Minivan departures 130B; three hours; every two hours 9am-4pm.

Alternatively, if you're staying near the historical park, buses for Bangkok (262B to 380B, six hours, 9am and 8.20pm) and Chiang Mai (300B, five hours, frequent departures from 7.30am to 8.30pm) can be boarded near Vitoon Guesthouse.

### **i** Getting Around

Sörnrgtāou run between New Sukhothai and Sukhothai Historical Park (20B, 30 minutes, 6am to 5.30pm), leaving from Th Jarot Withthong near Poo Restaurant.

Transport from the bus terminal into New Sukhothai costs 60B by charter. Motorbike taxis charge 40B. If going directly to Old Sukhothai, sörnrgtāou charge 180B and motorcycle taxis 150B. A ride by *sāhlór* around New Sukhothai should cost no more than 40B.



## Kamphaeng Phet

POP 30,000

An easy detour from the tourist trail, Kamphaeng Phet (Diamond Wall) is a peaceful provincial town known for its whitewashed city walls. Historically it played a protective role on the front lines of defence for the Sukhothai kingdom. It's a nice place to spend a day or so wandering around the ruins and experiencing daily Thai life.

### Sights

**Kamphaeng Phet Historical Park** HISTORIC SITE (📍 5571 1921; admission 100-150B, plus bicycle/motorbike 10/20B; 🕒 8am-5pm) A Unesco World Heritage Site, this historical park contains a number of temple ruins dating back to the 14th century. One sector of the historical park is the old city, sheltered within the town's namesake 'Diamond Wall'. Wat Phra Kaew is the dominant but subdued feature here.

The majority of ruins are 1.5km north of the city. Noteworthy is **Wat Phra Sri Iriyabot**, which features the shattered remains of standing, sitting, walking and reclining Buddha images.

### **Kamphaeng Phet National Museum**

MUSEUM

(📍 5571 1570; Th Pindramri; admission 100B; 🕒 9am-noon & 1-4pm Wed-Sun) This national museum has the usual survey of Thai art periods. Upstairs is a collection of artefacts from the Kamphaeng Phet area including an immense Shiva statue that is the largest bronze Hindu sculpture in the country.

### Sleeping & Eating

A busy night market sets up every evening near the river, just north of the Navarat Hotel, and there are some cheap restaurants near the roundabout.

### **Three J Guest House**

GUESTHOUSE \$

(📍 5571 3129; 79 Th Rachavitee; r 300-700B; 📞☎️) Mr Charin is the congenial host of this backpackers' lodge. Each of the bungalows is different, and the cheaper ones share a clean bathroom. Bicycles and motorbikes are available for rent.

### **Bamee Chakangrao**

THAI \$

(Th Ratchadamnoen; dishes 25-30B 🕒 8.30am-3pm) This restaurant is famous for its freshly made *bà mèe* (wheat-and-egg noodles), a speciality of Kamphaeng Phet. No English sign.

### Getting There & Away

The bus station is 1km west of Mae Nam Ping and serves the following destinations:

**Bangkok** Air-conditioned buses 210B to 315B; five hours; hourly.

**Sukhothai** 70B; 1½ hours; hourly.

**Phitsanulok** 56 to 78B; 2½ hours; hourly.

**Mae Sot** 140B; 2½ hours; 8am to 6pm.

If coming from Sukhothai or Phitsanulok ask to be let off in the old city or at the roundabout on Th Tesa to save a *sǒrngtǎaou* back to town.

Red *sǒrngtǎaou* (15B per person) go from the bus station to the roundabout across the river. From there take a *sǎhmǎor* anywhere in town for 20B to 30B. Motorcycle taxis from the bus station to most hotels downtown cost 40B.

## NORTHERN THAILAND

Forming the crown of the country is a mountainous region loved for its lush forest and unique cultural and natural attractions. This cascade of peaks and valleys unites northern Thailand with the peoples and the cultures of neighbouring Myanmar, Laos and south-western China. The region's ancient kingdom, known as Lanna Thai (Million Thai Rice Fields), established its capital in Chiang Mai, which retains its connection to the past. Other wanderers, such as the autonomous hill-tribe peoples, traversed the range, limited only by altitude rather than political boundaries.

## Chiang Mai

POP 174,000

Chiang Mai is a cultural darling: it is a cool place to kick back and relax, the streets of the old city are filled with monks and motorcycle-driving housewives, bookshops outnumber glitzy shopping centres and the region's Lanna heritage is worn with pride. For culture vultures, Chiang Mai is a vibrant classroom to study Thai language, cooking, meditation and massage.

The old city of Chiang Mai is a neat square bounded by a moat 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 the old district narrow *soi* lead to a quiet world of family-run guesthouses and leafy gardens.

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 the Mae Nam Ping. Once it crosses the river, the road is re-named Th Charoen Muang and eventually arrives at the main post office and train station.

Finding your way around Chiang Mai is fairly simple. A copy of Nancy Chandler's *Map Guide to Chiang Mai* is a good investment; pick up a copy at bookshops or guesthouses.

## Sights

Chiang Mai's primary attractions are the old city's historic and holy temples that show off distinctive northern Thai architecture. A few stand-out features include intricate carved gables, colourful exterior mosaics, Singha lions guarding the entrances and octagonal high-based *chedi*.

### Wat Phra Singh

TEMPLE

(Th Singharat; donations appreciated; ☺6am-6pm) Wat Phra Singh is the star amid the old city's famous temples and is a perfect example of Lanna architecture. Established in 1345, it houses the city's revered Buddha image, Phra Singh, which is the focal point for the religious festivities of Songkran (Thai New Year) in mid-April.

### Wat Chedi Luang

TEMPLE

(Th Phra Pokklao; donations appreciated; ☺6am-6pm) Wat Chedi Luang contains the ruins of a huge *chedi* dating from 1441 that was believed to be one of the tallest structures in Chiang Mai at the time. Little is known about its destruction: either by an earthquake or cannon fire in the 16th or 18th century. A partial restoration has preserved the 'ruined' look. The venerable Emerald Buddha, now housed in Bangkok's Wat Phra Kaew, occupied the eastern niche here in 1475. The temple's other attraction is the *lāk meuang* (city pillar, believed to house the city's guardian deity) enshrined in a small building to the left of the compound's main entrance. In May, the building is opened to the public for merit-making.

### Wat Phan Tao

TEMPLE

(Th Phra Pokklao; donations appreciated) Near Wat Chedi Luang, this small temple is hardly historic but immensely pretty with its old teak *wihāhn* constructed entirely of moulded teak panels fitted together and supported by 28 gargantuan teak pillars. The *wihāhn* also features *naga* (mythical serpent-being) bargeboards inset with coloured mirror mosaic.

### Wat Chiang Man

TEMPLE

(Th Ratchaphakhinai; donations appreciated) Wat Chiang Man is considered to be the oldest

wat within the city walls and was erected by King Mengrai, Chiang Mai's founder, in 1296. Two famous Buddha images (Phra Sila and Phra Satang Kamanee, or the Crystal Buddha) are kept here in the *wihāhn* to the right of the main *bōht* (central sanctuary). The Crystal Buddha is believed to have the power to bring seasonal rains.

### Wat Suan Dok

TEMPLE

(Th Suthep; donations appreciated) West of the old city, Wat Suan Dok is not Chiang Mai's most beautiful temple but its collection of whitewashed *chedi* framed by the nearby mountains of Doi Suthep and Doi Pui are a favourite photographic subject. The temple also hosts a Buddhist university and conducts popular meditation retreats (see the boxed text, p689).

### Chiang Mai City Arts & Cultural Centre

MUSEUM

(Th Ratwithi; admission 90B; ☺8.30am-5.30pm Tue-Sun) Conveniently located in the old city, the Chiang Mai City Arts & Cultural Centre is a municipally funded introduction to the city's history with surprisingly engaging displays.

### Chiang Mai National Museum

MUSEUM

(☎0 5322 1308; www.thailandmuseum.com; off Rte 11/Th Superhighway; admission 100B; ☺9am-4pm Wed-Sun) Less modern but more academically important is the Chiang Mai National Museum, northwest of the old city. The best curated exhibits are the Lanna art sections, which display Buddha images in all styles and periods.

### Wat Phra That Doi Suthep

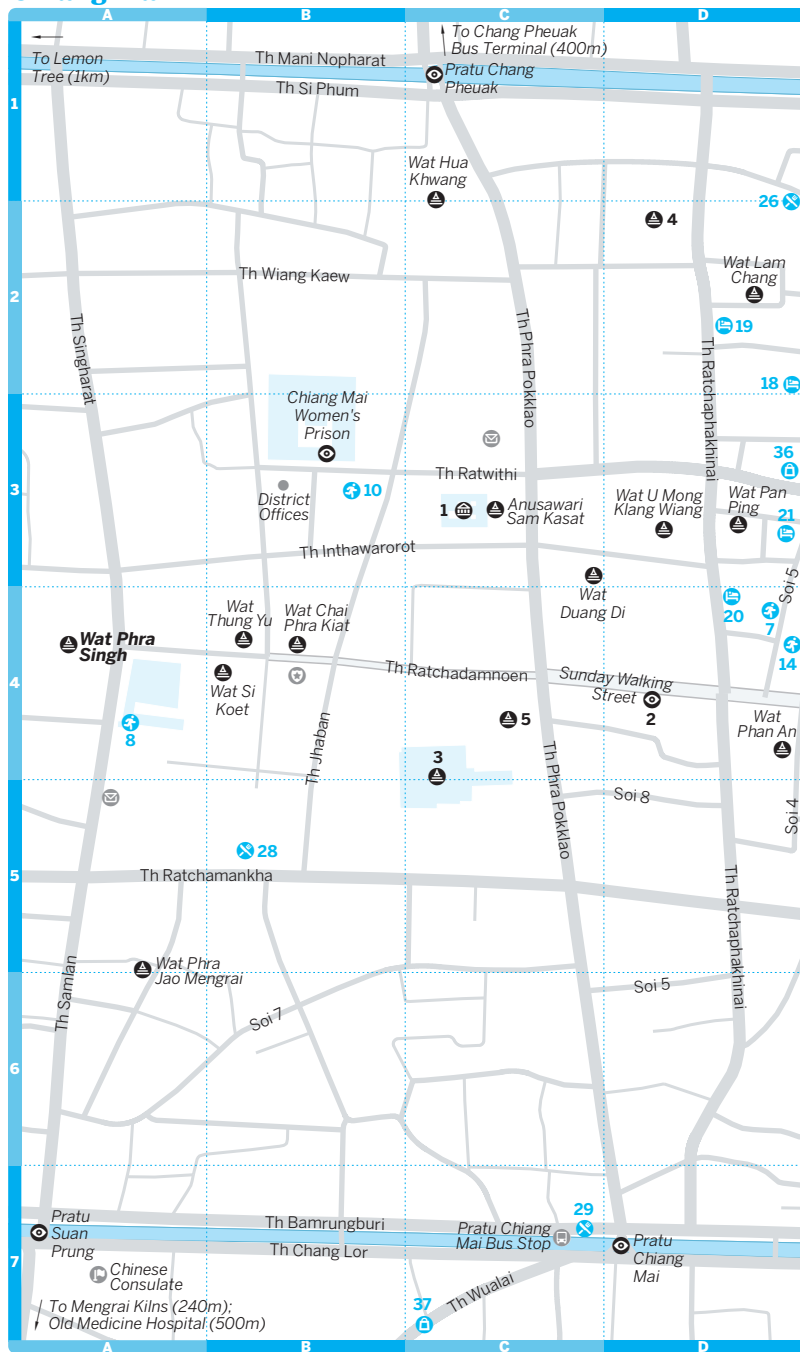
TEMPLE

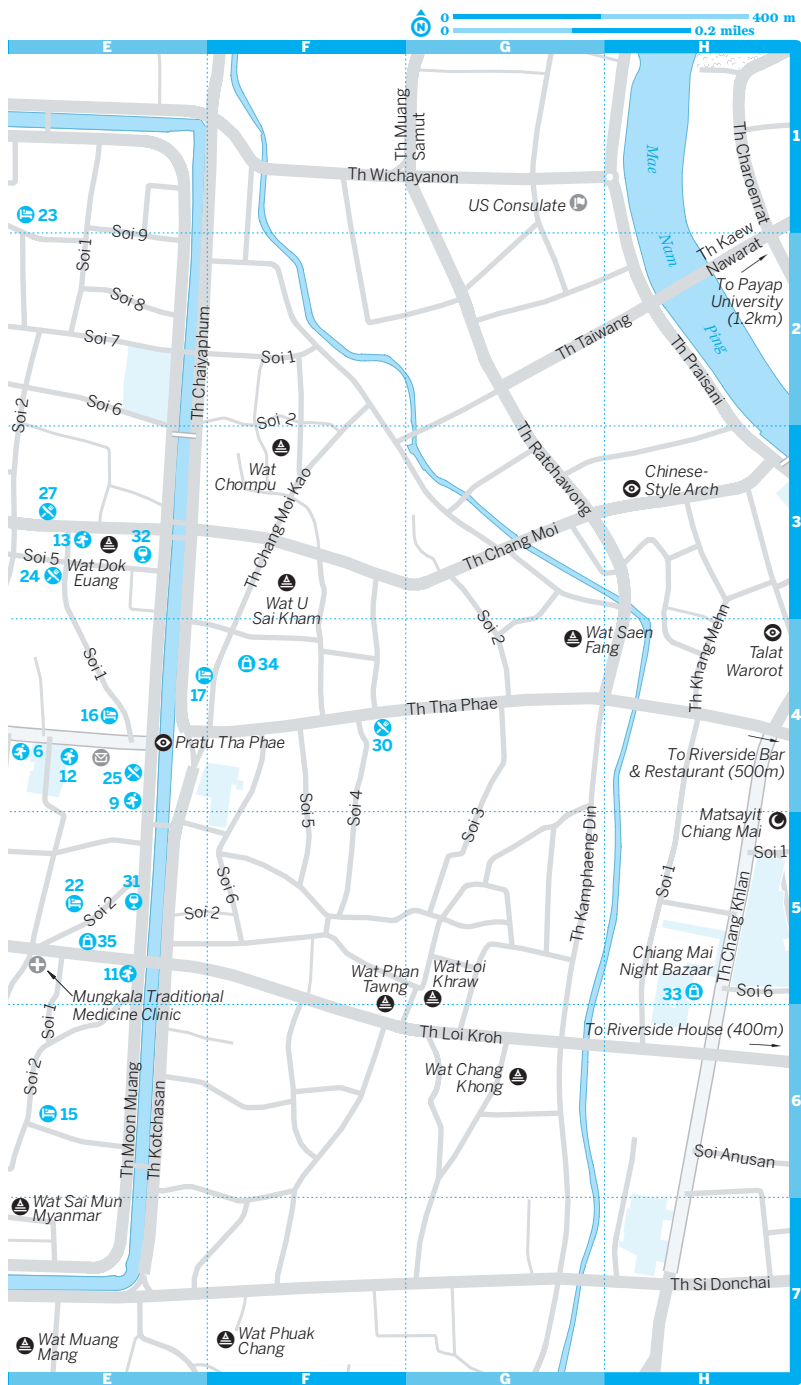
(admission 30B) Perched on a hilltop 16km northwest of town, Wat Phra That Doi Suthep is one of the north's most sacred temples. The site was 'chosen' by an honoured Buddha relic mounted on the back of a white elephant; the animal wandered until it stopped (and died) on Doi Suthep, making this the relic's new home. A snaking road

## SERVING TIME IN THE MASSAGE CHAIR

When you tire of sightseeing in the old city, just duck into the women's prison for a massage. Seriously. The **Chiang Mai Women's Prison Massage Centre** (100 Th Ratwithi; foot/traditional massage 150-180B; ☺8am-4.30pm) offers body and foot massages by inmates participating in a job-training program.

## Chiang Mai





## Chiang Mai

### 📍 Top Sights

- Wat Phra Singh ..... A4

### 📍 Sights

- 1 Chiang Mai City Arts & Cultural Centre ..... C3  
 2 Sunday Walking Street ..... D4  
 3 Wat Chedi Luang ..... C4  
 4 Wat Chiang Man ..... D2  
 5 Wat Phan Tao ..... C4

### 👤 Activities, Courses & Tours

- 6 American University Alumni ..... E4  
 7 Baan Thai ..... D4  
 8 Chiang Mai Mountain Biking ..... A4  
 9 Chiang Mai Thai Cookery School ..... E4  
 10 Chiang Mai Women's Prison  
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 11 Elephant Nature Park Booking  
 Office ..... E5  
 12 Lek Chaia ..... E4  
 13 Siam River Adventures ..... E3  
 14 Thai Farm Cooking School  
 Booking Office ..... D4

### 🛏 Sleeping

- 15 All in 1 ..... E6  
 16 Awanahouse ..... E4

- 17 Daret's House ..... E4  
 18 Jonadda Guest House ..... D2  
 19 RCN Court ..... D2  
 20 Safe House Court ..... D4  
 21 Siri Guesthouse ..... D3  
 22 Smile House 1 ..... E5  
 23 Supreme House ..... E1

### 🍴 Eating

- 24 Angel's Secrets ..... E3  
 25 AUM Vegetarian Food ..... E4  
 26 Blue Diamond ..... D2  
 27 Chiangmai Saloon ..... E3  
 28 Heuan Phen ..... B5  
 29 Talat Pratu Chiang Mai ..... C7  
 30 Taste From Heaven ..... F4

### ☕ Drinking

- 31 John's Place ..... E5  
 32 Kafe ..... E3

### 🛍 Shopping

- Backstreet Books ..... (see 34)  
 33 Chiang Mai Night Bazaar ..... H5  
 34 Gecko Books ..... F4  
 35 Lost Book Shop ..... E5  
 36 On the Road Books ..... D3  
 37 Saturday Walking Street ..... C7

ascends the hill to a long flight of steps, lined by ceramic-tailed *naga*, that leads up to the temple and the expansive views of the valley below.

Doi Suthep is accessible via shared *sörngtāou* that leave from the main entrance of Chiang Mai University on Th Huay Kaew. One-way fares start at 40B and increase from there depending on the destination within the park and the number of passengers. You can also charter a *sörngtāou* for about 600B or rent a motorcycle for much less. *Sörngtāou* also depart from Pratu Chang Pheuk within the old city.



## Activities

Chiang Mai is one of the easiest and most popular places in Thailand to arrange a hill-tribe trek, so competition for business is fierce. It is difficult for Lonely Planet to recommend a specific company because guides often float between companies and the standards fluctuate. Also note that most businesses in Chiang Mai are merely booking agents, not tour operators.

Relying on the travellers' grapevine is a good start, though opinions often diverge wildly. The difference in opinion often comes down to the trek's social dynamic. Although it is a tour of the outdoors, the social camaraderie is the unexpected highlight. For this reason, try to team up with travellers you enjoy hanging out with as you'll spend more time with them than the elephants or the hill-tribe villagers.

Most companies offer the same itinerary: about an hour trekking, another hour riding an elephant, some waterfall-spotting then spending the night in a hill-tribe village. Repeat if it is a multiday tour. Some trekkers have complained that the hike was too short, others report that it was too strenuous. Keep in mind that the humidity makes physical exertion feel more demanding.

Don't expect to have any meaningful connections with the hill-tribe villagers; in most cases, the trekking tours stay in rudimentary lodging outside the village and travellers have reported that the village hosts were most unwelcoming. Instead a trek is a good time to

get to know Thailand through the Thai guide, who is usually young and charismatic. If you want meaningful interaction with hill-tribe villagers, donate your time to one of the non-profits working with these communities; see Volunteering (p783) for more information.

We don't advise prebooking in Bangkok as the potential for rip-off is too great. Instead shop around locally to find the lowest commission rates.

It is also possible to go trekking in Mae Hong Son and Chiang Rai; the latter has trekking companies with an economic and educational development component.

Chiang Mai has developed a fairly sophisticated soft-adventure scene for travellers looking for more of a workout than the hill-tribe treks.

**Chiang Mai Mountain Biking** MOUNTAIN BIKING  
(☎08 1024 7046; www.mountainbikingchiangmai.com; 1 Th Samlan; tours 1450-2700B) Guided mountain-biking tours through Doi Suthep National Park.

**Click & Travel** CYCLING  
(☎0 5328 1553; www.clickandtravelonline.com; tours 950-1300B) Bicycle tours of cultural sights in Chiang Mai.

**Elephant Nature Park** ELEPHANT SANCTUARY  
(☎0 5320 8246; www.elephantnaturepark.org; 1 Soi 1, Th Ratchamankha; full-day tour 2500B)

Semi-wild sanctuary for abused or retired elephants; tours include watching the herd and bathing the animals.

**Peak** ADVENTURE TOURS  
(☎0 5380 0567; www.thepeakadventure.com; tours 1500-2500B) Variety adventure tours, from white-water rafting and trekking to rock climbing and abseiling.

**Siam River Adventures** RAFTING  
(☎08 9515 1917; www.siamrivers.com; Kona Café, 17 Th Ratwithi; tours from 1800B) White-water rafting and kayaking on Mae Nam Taeng.

## Courses

**Cooking**  
Cooking classes typically include a tour of a local market, hands-on cooking instruction and a recipe booklet. Classes start at 1000B and are held at either an in-town location for those with limited time or at an out-of-town garden setting for more ambience. There are dozens of schools.

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

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

## MEDITATION COURSES & RETREATS

The seekers and the curious often come to Thailand to explore the spiritual discipline of meditation.

Bangkok's **Wat Mahathat** (Map p654; ☎0 2222 6011; Th Maharat; ☺courses 7am, 1pm & 6pm, three hours; donations appreciated) offers meditation instruction as a religious complement to a sight-seeing tour of Ko Ratanakosin's famous temples.

The sacred city of Chiang Mai is home to **Wat Suan Dok** (see p685), which conducts monthly meditation retreats.

Female nuns are the primary residents at **Daen Maha Mongkol Meditation Centre** (Hwy 323, Sai Yok district, Kancharaburi), a forest temple outside of Kancharaburi. A British woman runs English-language meditation sessions (4am & 6pm; two hours; donations appreciated). The centre is off Hwy 323, 12km from the Tiger Temple, and is well signposted. By train, get off at Maha Mongkol station.

**Wat Pa Nanachat** (www.watpahnachat.org), in the northeastern town Ubon Ratchathani, was founded by renowned forest monk Phra Ajan Chah. The temple is geared toward serious monastic trainees who are non-Thai Buddhists and English is the primary language.

Thailand's most famous retreat is run by **Wat Suanmok** (Wat Suan Mokkaphalam; www.suanmokk-idh.org), near the southern town of Chaiya. It is a forest temple founded by Ajahn Buddhadasa Bhikkhu.

You can merge your beach needs with your spiritual needs at Ko Pha-Ngan's **Wat Khao Tham** (www.watkwtham.org). Periodic meditation retreats are held by an American-Australian couple.

## THAILAND'S HILL-TRIBE COMMUNITIES

Thailand's hill-tribe communities (referred to in Thai as *chao khao*, literally 'mountain people') are ethnic minorities who have traditionally lived in the country's mountainous frontier. Most tribes migrated from Tibet and parts of China some 200 years ago and settled along Southeast Asia's mountain belt from Myanmar to Vietnam. The Tribal Research Institute in Chiang Mai recognises 10 different hill tribes, but there may be up to 20 in Thailand.

### Hill-Tribe Groups

The **Karen** is the largest hill-tribe group in Thailand and number about 47% of the total tribal population. They tend to live in lowland valleys and practise crop rotation rather than swidden agriculture. Their numbers and proximity to the mainstream society has made them the most integrated and financially successful of the hill-tribe groups. Thickly woven V-neck tunics of various colours are typically worn. There are four distinct Karen groups – the Skaw (White), Pwo, Pa-O (Black) and Kayah (Red).

The **Hmong** are Thailand's second-largest hill-tribe group and are especially numerous in Chiang Mai province, with smaller enclaves in the other northern Thai provinces. They usually live on mountain peaks or plateaus above 1000m. Tribespeople wear simple black jackets and indigo or black baggy trousers (White Hmong) with striped borders or indigo skirts (Blue Hmong) and silver jewellery. Sashes may be worn around the waist, and embroidered aprons draped front and back.

The **Akha** are among the poorest of Thailand's ethnic minorities and live mainly in Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai provinces, along mountain ridges or steep slopes 1000m to 1400m in altitude. They are regarded as skilled farmers but are often displaced from arable land by government intervention. Their traditional garb is a headdress of beads, feathers and dangling silver ornaments.

Other minority groups include the Lisu, Lahu and Mien.

### Village Etiquette

The minority tribes have managed to maintain their own distinct cultural identity despite increased interaction with the majority culture, conversion to Christianity or Buddhism and adoption of second-hand clothing instead of traditional garb. If you're planning on visiting hill-tribe villages, talk to your guide about dos and don'ts.

- » Always ask permission before taking photos, especially at private moments inside dwellings. Many traditional belief systems view photography with suspicion.
- » Show respect for religious symbols and rituals. Don't touch totems at village entrances or sacred items. Don't participate in ceremonies unless invited to join.
- » Avoid cultivating a tradition of begging, especially among children. Instead talk to your guide about donating to a local school.
- » Avoid public nudity and be careful not to undress near an open window where village children might be able to peep in.
- » Don't flirt with members of the opposite sex unless you plan to marry them. Don't drink or do drugs with the villagers; altered states sometimes lead to culture clashes.
- » Smile at villagers even if they stare at you; ask your guide how to say 'hello' in the tribal language.
- » Avoid public displays of affection, which in some traditional systems is viewed as offensive to the spirit world.
- » Don't interact with the villagers' livestock; these creatures are valuable possessions not curiosities. Also avoid interacting with jungle animals, which may be viewed as visiting spirits.
- » Don't litter.
- » Adhere to the same feet taboos of Thai culture (see the boxed text on p775).

**Thai Farm Cooking School**

(☎08 7174 9285; www.thaifarmcooking.com; booking office, 2/2 Soi 5, Th Ratchadamnoen)

COOKING

**Language**

Being a university town, Chiang Mai fosters continuing education opportunities in Thai language.

**Payap University**

(http://ic.payap.ac.th; Th Kaew Nawarat; course from 7500B) Intensive Thai language courses and academic culture studies.

LANGUAGE

**American University Alumni**

(AUA; ☎0 5327 8407; www.learnthaiinchiangmai.com; 73 Th Ratchadamnoen; course 4200B) Six weeks of structured Thai-language coursework at different fluency levels.

LANGUAGE

**Massage****Lek Chaia**

(☎0 5327 8325; www.nervetouch.com; 27-29 Th Ratchadamnoen; course from 5000B) Specialises in *jāp sēn* (similar to acupressure) and the use of medicinal herbs.

TRADITIONAL MESSAGE

**Old Medicine Hospital**

(OMH; ☎0 5327 5085; www.thaimassageschool.ac.th; 78/1 Soi Siwaka Komarat, Th Wualai; courses 6000B) A traditional northern Thai program with two 10-day courses a month. Classes tend to be large during the months of December to February.

TRADITIONAL MESSAGE

**Muay Thai (Thai Boxing)****Lanna Muay Thai**

(Kiatbusaba; ☎0 5389 2102; www.lannamuaythai.com; 161 Soi Chiang Khian; day/month courses 400/8000B) A boxing camp northwest of town that offers authentic *muay thai* instruction to foreigners as well as Thais. 1998 Lumpini champion boxer Parinya Kiatbusaba (also a *kāter-i*, or transvestite) trained here.

MUAY THAI

**Festivals & Events****Flower Festival**

(early February) Celebrating Chiang Mai's agricultural bounty, this festival features a parade of flower-covered floats, beauty contest and dance performances.

CULTURAL

**Songkran**

(mid-April) Celebrate the Thai New Year in wet and wild Chiang Mai.

CULTURAL

**Loi Krathong**

(late October to early November) In Chiang Mai this national festival is known as Yi Peng and is celebrated by launching cylin-

CULTURAL

dral hot-air balloons as well as candle-lit miniature boats.

**☹ Sleeping**

A concentration of guesthouses can be found in the northeastern corner of the old city on Soi 7 and Soi 9 off Th Moon Muang. Most guesthouses make their 'rice and curry' from booking trekking tours and reserve rooms for those customers. Some guesthouses will arrange free transport from the bus/train station with advance warning and most have free wi-fi.

**TOP CHOICE Awanahouse**

(☎0 5341 9005; www.awanahouse.com; 7 Soi 1, Th Ratchadamnoen; r 225-850B; ☹@☹) What started out as a small guesthouse has grown into a multi-storey apartment-style building on a quiet *soi*. Awana is a bit institutional, but has large and bright rooms. The cheapest rooms have fans and shared bathrooms.

GUESTHOUSE \$

**Safe House Court**

(☎0 5341 8955; www.safehousecourt.com; 178 Th Ratchaphakhinai; r 350-550B; ☹@☹) A cut above the other cheapies, Safe House Court has a leafy location, bright rooms and friendly service.

GUESTHOUSE \$

**Smile House 1**

(☎0 5320 8661; www.smileguesthouse.com; 5 Soi 2, Th Rathamankha; r 300-1000B; ☹@☹) A little backpacker village flourishes around an old Thai house here. It's tucked away in a small nook of the old city. It's popular with backpackers for lounging around the pool with cold drink in hand.

GUESTHOUSE \$

**RCN Court**

(☎0 5341 8280-2; www.rcnguesthouse.com; 35 Soi 7, Th Moon Muang; r 350-500B; ☹@☹) This basic place is well known for its affordable monthly rates (from 6300B) and central location. Rooms (either fan or air-con) are nothing special but have cable TV and fridge. There is an outdoor kitchen for guests, a small front patio and a fitness room.

GUESTHOUSE \$

**Siri Guesthouse**

(☎0 5332 6550; 31/3 Soi 5, Th Moon Muang; r 350-450B; ☹) Go for one of the upstairs rooms that have more light and space. The cheaper rooms are fine, although boxy and small on the ground floor. It's a quiet old city location.

GUESTHOUSE \$

**Daret's House**

(☎0 5323 5440; 4/5 Th Chaiyaphum; s/d 160/220B) A long-time backpackers' fave

GUESTHOUSE \$



with stacks of well-worn rooms, Daret's looks like many of Th Khao San's backpacker flops. But because this is Lanna-land, amiable Khun Daret is often found in the cafe downstairs. You pay more for the luxury of hot water.

**Riverside House** GUESTHOUSE \$  
(☎ 0 5324 1860; www.riversidehousechiangmai.com; 101 Th Chiang Mai-Lamphun; r 500-800B; 🍷🍷) Be an adventurer on the east bank of the river at this modest abode. Reception is via the attached travel agency and the quietest rooms are deeper into the property.

**International Hotel Chiangmai** HOSTEL \$  
(☎ 0 5322 1819; www.ymcachiangmai.org; 11 Soi Sermesak, Th Hutsadisawee; r 500-1800B; 🍷🍷🍷) Quite possibly the ugliest building in a country where the competition is fierce, this local branch of the YMCA redeems itself with some excellent bargains for rooms with a view of Doi Suthep. Skip their overpriced dorm beds though.

**All In 1** GUESTHOUSE \$  
(☎ 0 5320 7133; www.allin1gh.com; 31 Soi 2, Th Moon Muang; r 400-700B; 🍷🍷🍷) Clean rooms with cable TV, plus outdoor garden bar.

**Supreme House** GUESTHOUSE \$  
(☎ 0 5322 2480; 44/1 Soi 9, Th Moon Muang; r 150B) Relaxed atmosphere and bar-hopping access.

**Jonadda Guest House** GUESTHOUSE \$  
(☎ 0 5322 7281; 23/1 Soi 2, Th Ratwithi; r 250-450B; 🍷) Spotless, basic rooms.

## Eating

Dining in Chiang Mai is homey and healthy with an emphasis on vegetarianism. The city is also well known for its covered markets.

**Talat Pratu Chiang Mai** (Th Bamrungburi) is a busy morning market selling fresh fruit, piles of fried food and fistfuls of sticky rice. After its midday siesta, the market caters to the dinner crowd.

The weekend walking streets (see boxed text, p694) have great eats, especially when it comes to northern Thai specialities like *khâo sawy*. More northern Thai specialities can be found near the Night Bazaar at the string of restaurants around **Ban Haw Mosque** (Matsayit Chiang Mai; Soi 1, Th Charoen Prathet), the anchor for Chiang Mai's Yunnanese Muslim community. But honestly, the atmosphere is way better than the food.

**TOP CHOICE** **Khun Churn** VEGETARIAN \$  
(Soi 17, Th Nimmanhaemin; buffet 100B; ☺lunch; 🍷) It's all-you-can-eat at this stylish vegetarian restaurant popular with health-minded Thais and international NGO workers.

**Angel's Secrets** VEGETARIAN \$  
(cnr Soi 1 & 5, Th Ratchadamoen; dishes 60-90B; ☺breakfast, lunch Tue-Sun; 🍷) Shielded by a fence of greenery, this outdoor eatery exudes a touchy-feely goodness through its tasty and freshly prepared vegetarian dishes.

**Heuan Phen** NORTHERN THAI \$ \$  
(☎ 0 5327 7103; 112 Th Ratchamankha; dishes 60-150B; ☺lunch & dinner) Chiang Mai's purveyor of northern Thai cuisine serves dinner in an antique-cluttered room that attracts visiting appetites, both Thai and foreign. The food is a tad lacklustre but the ambience is a treat. Daytime meals are served in a large canteen.

**AUM Vegetarian Food** VEGETARIAN \$  
(66 Th Moon Muang; dishes 50-120B; ☺lunch & dinner; 🍷) An easygoing place filled with used paperbacks and newspaper-thumbing ex-pats, AUM does respectable vegetarian Thai food, healthy juices and organic coffee.

**Blue Diamond** INTERNATIONAL \$  
(35/1 Soi 9, Th Moon Muang; dishes 50-100B; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) This relaxed garden cafe bakes its own bread, brews eye-opening coffee and Thai veggie fare. Breakfast is its speciality.

**Taste From Heaven** VEGETARIAN \$  
(237-239 Th Tha Phae; dishes 60-110B; ☺lunch & dinner; 🍷) Affiliated with the Elephant Nature Park, this vegetarian restaurant makes delectable curries and Thai-Indian fusion dishes. The pleasant courtyard garden offers a cool evening retreat.

**Burmese Restaurant** BURMESE \$  
(cnr Th Nimmanhaemin & Soi 14; dishes 30B; ☺lunch & dinner) This basic eatery sells delicious Burmese food attesting to Chiang Mai's increasing population of economic migrants. The food comes quick, goes down even quicker and is easy on the wallet.

**Lemon Tree** THAI \$  
(26/1-2 Th Huay Kaew; dishes 40-100B; ☺lunch & dinner) Near Kad Suan Kaew shopping mall, this cheery place does an exhaustive list of Thai dishes, like *kaeng paa lûuk thàng kài* (spicy jungle curry with free-range chicken).

## NORTHERN CUISINE

Thanks to northern Thailand's cooler climate, familiar vegetables such as broccoli and cauliflower might make an appearance in a stir-fry. Untranslatable herbs and leaves from the dense forests are also incorporated into regional dishes, imparting a distinct flavour of mist-shrouded hills. Even coffee grows here. Day-market vendors sell blue sticky rice, which is dyed by a morning glory-like flower and topped with an egg custard.

Showing its Burmese, Chinese and Shan influences, the north prefers curries that are milder and more stewlike than the coconut milk-based curries of southern and central Thailand. Sour notes are enhanced with the addition of pickled cabbage and lime. The most famous example is *khào sawy*, a mild chicken curry with flat egg noodles. A Burmese expat, *kaeng hang-leh* is another example of a northern-style curry. Like the Chinese, northern Thais love pork and vendors everywhere sell *kâap mǔu* (deep-fried pork crackling) as a snack and side dish.

### Chiangmai Saloon

INTERNATIONAL \$\$

(30 Th Ratwithi; mains 120-200B; ☺breakfast, lunch, dinner; @) Welcome to the Wild West, Thai style. A travellers' standby, this friendly old joint mixes Aussie beef with southern American know-how. Come for a meal that devolves into a drinking session.



### Drinking & Entertainment

The ale flows fast and furious at the bars along Th Moon Muang near Pratu Tha Phae. West of the old city, Th Nimmanhaemin is where Thai uni students go bar-hopping.

### John's Place

BAR

(Th Moon Muang) An old-school backpacker spot, John's dominates the corner wedge with neon and beer bellies. Climb the stairs to the roof deck where a cold beer is good company at sunset and beyond.

### Kafe

BAR

(Th Moon Muang) A cute wooden affair with a couple of sunny, outdoor tables snuggled in beside Soi 5, Kafe is often crowded with Thais and backpackers when every other place is empty. It offers a simple formula: cheap cold beer and efficient service.

### Dayli

BAR

(Soi 11, Th Nimmanhaemin) This ginormous outdoor bar-restaurant won't win any hygiene awards but it does excel in the medal-worthy category of cheap, cold beer. Late Friday and Saturday nights everyone becomes a Dayli convert.

### Riverside Bar & Restaurant

LIVE MUSIC

(Th Charoenrat) Chiang Mai's version of the Hard Rock Café, Riverside has been serving meals and music on the banks of the Mae Nam Ping for more than two decades.

On weekends, the Riverside knits together *faràng* and Thais into sing-along parties.

### Bridge Bar

LIVE MUSIC

(Soi 11, Th Nimmanhaemin) This cosy club hosts local bands that are loud enough to drown out your chattering travelling companion. Outside seating allows for mingling with local Thais.

### Warm-Up

CLUB

(40 Th Nimmanhaemin) The hippest spot in town, Warm-Up has been going steady with the young and beautiful for years now. Variety keeps this marriage alive: hip-hop, house and live bands occupy different corners of the club for attention-deficit dancers. Arrive late and dressed in your coolest duds: you'll be competing with spiked wolf hair-dos and pointy heels.



### Shopping

Chiang Mai has long been an important centre for handicrafts. Th Tha Phae is filled with interesting antique and textile stores. Soi 1, Th Nimmanhaemin is Chiang Mai's nascent boutique scene with arts and decor suited to handsome budgets.

### Backstreet Books

BOOKS

(☎0 5387 4143; 2/8 Th Chang Moi Kao) A local chain for used books.

### Gecko Books

BOOKS

(☎0 5387 4066; Th Chiang Moi Kao) Another local chain for used books.

### Lost Book Shop

BOOKS

(☎0 5320 6656; 34/3 Th Ratchamankha) Second-hand books free of plastic wrap for easy browsing; same owner as Backstreet Books.

## PEDESTRIAN COMMERCE

Once upon a time Chiang Mai was a destination for itinerant Yunnanese merchants trading goods along an ancient route from China all the way to Burma. Today the city's pedestrian markets tap into this tradition and expertly merge commerce and culture.

» **Sunday Walking Street** (Th Ratchadamnoen; ☀️4pm-midnight Sun) is a festive night bazaar that takes over the old city. Chiang Mai lets down its hippie hair with lots of ethnic chic accessories (many are handmade locally) and undyed cotton T-shirts for sale. The temples along the way host food stalls selling northern Thai cuisine and other shopping-stamina boosts. The market is extremely popular and gets very crowded.

» **Saturday Walking Street** (Th Wualai; ☀️4pm-midnight Sat) is a smaller version that unfolds along the traditional silver-smithing neighbourhood south of the old city. Vendors peddling many of the same wares and Thai snacks give everyone a reason to wander, nibble and shop.

» **Chiang Mai Night Bazaar** (Th Chang Khlan; 🌙7pm-midnight) is the leading night-time tourist attraction occupying an old Yunnanese trading post. The market offers a huge variety of ordinary souvenirs, some northern Thai handicrafts, and lots of people-watching and people-dodging on the congested footpaths.

### On the Road Books

(☎️05341 8169; 38/1 Th Ratwithi) Small selection of good quality reads.

BOOKS

## i Information

### Dangers & Annoyances

The majority of guesthouses in town subsidise their cheap room rates through commissions on booking trekking tours. For this reason, they might limit nontrekkers to a three-day stay, but ask at check-in.

Avoid the private bus and minivan services from Bangkok's Th Khao San to Chiang Mai because they are full of commission-generating schemes to subsidise the cut-rate fares.

### Emergency

**Tourist police** (☎️0 5324 7318, 24hr emergency ☎️1155; Th Faham; ☀️6am-midnight)

### Internet access

Internet cafes are everywhere and most guesthouses include wi-fi for free.

### Media

**1 Stop Chiang Mai** ([www.1stopchiangmai.com](http://www.1stopchiangmai.com)) City attractions with an emphasis on day trips and outdoor activities.

**City Life** ([www.chiangmainews.com](http://www.chiangmainews.com)) Monthly lifestyle magazine.

**Chiangmai Mail** ([www.chiangmai-mail.com](http://www.chiangmai-mail.com)) Weekly English-language newspaper.

**Irrawaddy News Magazine** ([www.irrawaddy.org](http://www.irrawaddy.org)) Respected journal covering Myanmar, northern Thailand and other parts of Southeast Asia.

### Medical Services

**Chiang Mai Ram Hospital** (☎️0 5322 4880; Th Bunreuangrit) Internationally savvy hospital.

**Malaria Centre** (☎️0 5322 1529; 18 Th Bunreuangrit) Does blood checks for malaria.

**McCormick Hospital** (☎️0 5392 1777; Th Kaew Nawarat) Best-value place for minor treatments.

### Money

All major Thai banks have branches and ATMs throughout Chiang Mai; many are along Th Tha Phae and Th Moon Muang.

### Post

**Main post office** (Th Charoen Muang) Inconveniently east of town; handy branches on Th Singarat/Samlan, Th Praisani and the airport.

### Telephone

Many internet cafes have headsets for Skype calls. Overseas calls can also be made from one of the private offices along Th Moon Muang.

**CAT office** (Th Charoen Muang; ☀️7am-10pm) Behind the main post office.

### Tourist Information

**TAT** (☎️0 5324 8604; 105/1 Th Chiang Mai-Lamp-hun; ☀️8.30am-4.30pm) Provides maps and brochures and answers basic tourist questions; does not make travel or accommodation bookings.

## i Getting There & Away

### Air

Regularly scheduled international and domestic flights arrive at **Chiang Mai International**

**Airport** (www.chiangmaiairportonline.com).

Destinations include the following:

**Kuala Lumpur** (from 2500B, daily flights) Via Air Asia.

**Bangkok** (from 1600B, daily flights) via Bangkok Airways (Suvarnabhumi Airport), THAI (Suvarnabhumi Airport), Orient Thai (Don Muang Airport) and Nok Air (Don Muang Airport).

**Luang Prabang** (from 4000B, three times weekly) Via Lao Airlines.

**Pai** (from 1890B, daily) Via Kan Air.

**Mae Hong Son** (from 1250B, daily) Via Nok Air and Kan Air.

**Singapore** (from 10,000B; four times weekly) Via Silk Air.

**Seoul** (16,000B, twice weekly) Via Korean Air.

## Bus

There are two bus stations in Chiang Mai.

The **Arcade bus station** (Th Kaew Nawarat), 3km northeast of town, covers long-distance destinations. For Bangkok travel, purchase tickets directly from bus station agents rather than tourist centre agents to ensure that you're travelling with a reputable company. From the town centre, a tük-tük or chartered sörngtääou to the Arcade bus station should cost about 50B to 60B.

**Chang Pheuk bus station** (Th Chang Pheuk), north of the old city, handles buses to nearby provincial towns; to reach the Chang Pheuk bus station get a sörngtääou at the normal 20B rate. Destinations include Fang (80B, three hours, frequent) and Tha Ton (90B, four hours, five daily).

## Train

The **train station** (☎0 5324 5364; Th Charoen Muang) is 2.5km east of the old city. There are six daily departures between Chiang Mai and Bangkok and the journey takes 12 to 15 hours. Most trains leave in the early evening or late afternoon and arrive in the morning. Fares vary depending on the type of train (express, rapid and sprinter), the type of car (1st, 2nd and 3rd class; the latter have either fan or air-con) and the type of seat (seat or sleeping berth, either upper or lower). Sample 2nd-class fares to Bangkok are as follows:

**Seats** (fan 391-431B, air-con 541-611B)

**Sleeping berths** (fan 491-541B, air-con 751-821B)

Advance bookings need to be made in person at the station and are recommended for securing air-con sleepers, particularly around public holidays or peak tourist season (November to March). Transport to the station via sörngtääou should cost 40B to 60B.

## i Getting Around

Airport taxis cost a flat 150B. If you aren't in a hurry, you can also walk out to the main road and flag down a tük-tük or red sörngtääou, which should cost 60B or 80B to your hotel.

Red sörngtääou circulate around the city operating as shared taxis. Flag one down and tell them your destination; if they are going that way, they'll nod and maybe pick up other passengers along the way. The starting fare is 20B, with longer trips 40B. Tük-tük rides around town cost about 40B to 60B; negotiate the fare beforehand.

You can rent bicycles (60B a day) or 100cc motorcycles (from 150B to 200B) to explore

## BUS SERVICES FROM CHIANG MAI'S ARCADE BUS STATION

DESTINATION	PRICE	DURATION (HR)	FREQUENCY
Bangkok	605-810B	9½	frequently from 6.30am-9.30pm
Chiang Khong	215-275B	6½	three daily
Chiang Rai	215-275B	6½	frequently from 5.30-5pm
Chiang Saen	165-220B	3-4	two daily
Khon Kaen	505B	12	10 daily
Lampang	20-100B	2	hourly from 6.30am-9.30pm
Mae Hong Son	145-340B	7-8	eight daily
Mae Sariang	100-200B	4-5	six daily
Mae Sot	240-310B	6½	two daily
Nan	150-420B	6	11 daily
Pai	75-150B	4	12 daily
Phitsanulok	210-320B	5-6	frequent
Sukhothai	220B	5-6	frequent

Chiang Mai. Bicycles are a great way to get around the city.

## Around Chiang Mai

### DOI INTHANON NATIONAL PARK

The highest peak in the country, Doi Inthanon (2565m), and the surrounding **national park** (admission 200B) have hiking trails, waterfalls and two monumental stupas erected in honour of the king and queen. It's a popular day trip from Chiang Mai for tourists and locals, especially during the New Year's holiday when there's the rarely seen phenomenon of frost.

Most visitors come on a tour from Chiang Mai but the park is accessible via public transport. Buses leave from Chang Pheuk terminal and yellow *sörngrtāou* leave from Pratu Chiang Mai for Chom Thong (70B), 58km from Chiang Mai and the closest town to the park. Some buses go directly to the park's entrance gate near Nam Tok Mae Klang, and some are bound for Hot and will drop you off in Chom Thong.

From Chom Thong there are regular *sörngrtāou* to the park's entrance gate (30B), about 8km north. *Sörngrtāou* from Mae Klang to the summit of Doi Inthanon (90B) leave almost hourly until late afternoon.

### MAE SA VALLEY LOOP

One of the easiest mountain escapes, the Mae Sa Valley loop travels from the lowland's concrete expanse into the highlands' forested frontier. The 100km route makes a good day trip with private transport. Golden Triangle Rider ([www.gt-rider.com](http://www.gt-rider.com)) publishes a detailed map of the area.

Head north of Chiang Mai on Rte 107 (Th Chang Pheuk) toward Mae Rim, then left onto Rte 1096. The road becomes more rural but there's a steady supply of tour-bus attractions: orchid farms, butterfly parks, snake farms, you name it.

The road eventually starts to climb and twist into the fertile **Mae Sa Valley**, once a high-altitude basin for growing opium poppies. Now the valley's hill-tribe farmers have re-seeded their terraced fields with sweet peppers, cabbage, flowers and fruits – which are then sold to the royal agriculture projects under the Doi Kham label.

On the outskirts of the valley, the road swings around the mountain ridge and starts to rise and dip until it reaches the conifer zone. Beyond, the landscape unfolds in

a cascade of mountains and eventually the road spirals down into **Samoeng**, a pretty Thai town, and then arcs back into Chiang Mai.

## Chiang Rai

POP 62,000

Leafy and well groomed, Chiang Rai is more liveable than visitable. The town itself is a convenient base for touring the Golden Triangle and an alternative to Chiang Mai for arranging hill-tribe treks. Don't assume you'll be the only foreigner in town; Chiang Rai is well-loved by well-heeled package tourists.

### Sights

#### Wat Phra Kaew

TEMPLE

(cnr Th Trairat & Th Reuang Nakhon) This temple's claim to fame is its role in the discovery of the country's highly revered Emerald Buddha (presently residing in Bangkok's Wat Phra Kaew). In the mid-14th century, lightning struck open the *chedi* here, thus revealing the Emerald Buddha within. The figure made a long and politically fraught journey across the country, to Laos and eventually was settled in Bangkok.

#### Oub Kham Museum

MUSEUM

(☎0 5371 3349; [www.oubkhammuseum.com](http://www.oubkhammuseum.com); 81/1 Military Front Rd; admission 300B; ☉8am-6pm) This museum houses an impressive collection of Lanna-era paraphernalia along with an odd assortment of Thai kitsch. Guided tours are obligatory. It is 2km outside town.

#### Hilltribe Museum & Education Center

MUSEUM

(☎0 5374 0088; [www.pda.org](http://www.pda.org); 3rd fl, 620/25 Th Thanalai; admission 50B; ☉9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-6pm Sat & Sun) Run by the nonprofit Population & Community Development Association (PDA), this museum covers the history of Thailand's major hill tribes with clothing displays, slide shows and a knowledgeable curator. PDA also organises hill-tribe treks.

### Activities

Trekking is big business in Chiang Rai. Most tours (starting at 1200B) typically cover the areas of Doi Tung, Doi Mae Salong or Chiang Khong. The following are primarily nonprofit community development organisations working in hill-tribe communities

## SLOW BOATS TO CHIANG RAI

Escape the daredevil highway antics of Thailand's bus drivers with a slow ride on the Mae Nam Kok departing from the small town of Tha Ton, north of Chiang Mai. The river ride is a big hit with tourists and includes stops at hill-tribe villages that specialise in Coca-Colas and souvenirs. This isn't unchartered territory but it is relaxing.

**Chiang Rai-bound boats** (☎ 0 5305 3727; 350B; departs 12.30pm) carrying 12 passengers, leave from Tha Ton and stop at Mae Salak (90B), a large Lahu village, and Ban Ruammit (300B), a Karen village. The trip takes three to five hours and both stops are well toured, but you can get off the path by joining a **hill-tribe trek** from here. You can also do the trip in reverse (from Chiang Rai to Tha Ton), a less popular direction affording you more leg room, but it also takes longer. Go to **CR Pier** (☎ 0 5375 0009) in the northwest corner of Chiang Rai. Passenger boats embark daily at 10.30am.

If you overnight in Tha Ton, check out **Apple Resort** (☎ 0 5337 3144; Tha Ton; r fan/aircon 350/500B; ☎), which is a pleasant riverside place with stylishly decorated garden bungalows.

Slow, local buses to Tha Ton (90B, four hours) leave from Chiang Mai's Chang Phueak station. You can skip an overnight in Tha Ton if you catch the first morning bus, though you might have to transit through Fang, 23km to the south.

Adding to your indecision, you could skip the river and backdoor to Chiang Rai via the ridgetop village of Mae Salong (p700). Yellow sörngtãaou make the scenic journey to Mae Salong (70B, 1½ hours, mornings only).

that use trekking as an awareness campaign and fundraiser.

### Mirror Foundation

TREKKING

(☎ 0 5373 7416; www.themirrorfoundation.org) This NGO sponsors educational workshops, advocates for Thai citizenship, works to prevent human trafficking as well as offers treks led by local guides; there are also village volunteer programs.

### PDA Tours & Travel

TREKKING

(☎ 0 5374 0088; www.pda.or.th/chiangrai) Culturally sensitive tours led by PDA-trained hill-tribe members. Profits are recycled back into the community for HIV/AIDS education, health clinics and educational scholarships.

### Akha Hill House

TREKKING

(☎ 08 9997 5505; www.akhahill.com; Akha River House) A portion of the profits from their guesthouse and trekking tours go into a local school.

## Sleeping

### Jansom House

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎ 0 5371 4552; 897/2 Th Jet Yod; r incl breakfast 450-500B; ☎@☎) This three-storey hotel offers spotless, spacious rooms set around a small plant-filled courtyard. Plus there are frills like cable TV, well-designed bathrooms and tiled floors.

### The North

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎ 0 5371 9873; www.thenorth.co.th; 612/100-101 Sirikon Market; r 350-450; ☎@☎) Located steps away from the bus station, this place has provided a bit of colour to a drab area. The 18 rooms combine Thai and modern design with a common chill-out area.

### Lek House

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎ 0 5371 1550; cnr Th Ratyotha & Th Baanpa Pragarn; r incl breakfast 350-550B; ☎@☎) This purple compound is home to a collection of simple fan-cooled rooms. Lek House is located near the corner of Th Thanalai and Th Baanpa Pragarn.

### Baan Bua Guest House

GUESTHOUSE \$

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

### Orchids Guest House

GUESTHOUSE \$

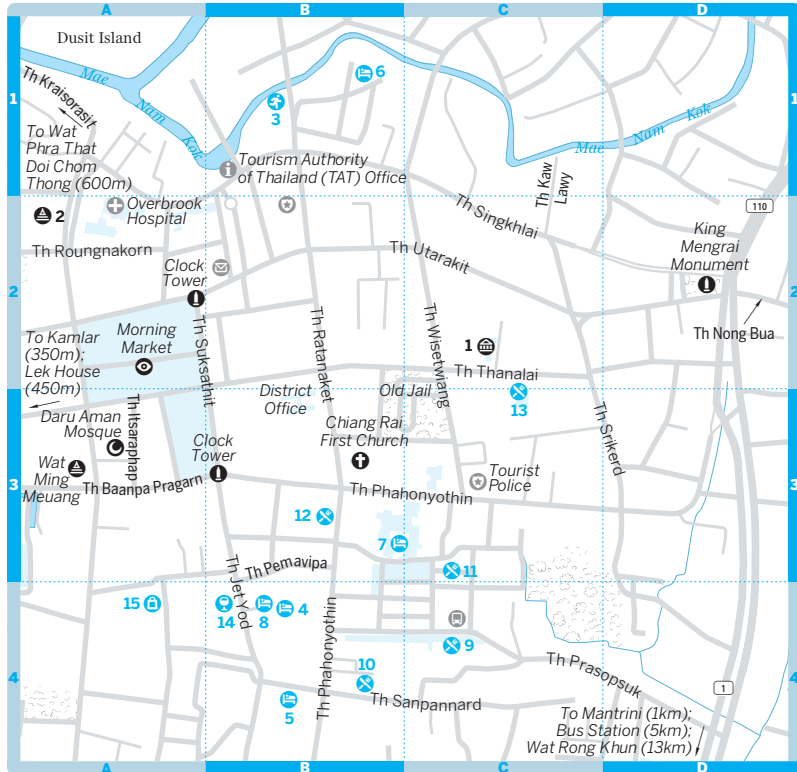
(☎ 0 5371 8361; www.orchidsguesthouse.com; 1012/3 Th Jet Yod; r 400B; ☎@☎) This collection of spotless rooms in a residential compound is a good budget catch.

### Jitaree Guest House

GUESTHOUSE \$

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

## Chiang Rai



THAILAND CHIANG RAI

## Eating

The **night market** has a decent collection of food stalls offering snacks and meals as well as post-noshing shopping.



### BaanChivitMai Bakery

BAKERY \$

(Th Prasopsuk; dishes 20-100B; ☎7am-9pm Mon-Sat, 2-9pm Sun) Locally grown coffee makes an appearance here along with Swedish-style sweets and the self-satisfaction of supporting a local NGO project.



### Nam Ngiew

#### Paa Nuan

VIETNAMESE, NORTHERN THAI \$

(Th Sanpannard; mains 10-100B; ☎9am-5pm) This understated place serves a delicious mix of Vietnamese and northern Thai dishes.

#### Paa Suk

NORTHERN THAI \$

(Th Sankhongnoi; mains 10-25B; ☎8am-3pm Mon-Sat) This immensely popular third-generation restaurant specialises in the local

dish *kà-nôm jeen nám ngée-o*, a thin broth of pork or beef and tomatoes served over fresh rice noodles. The restaurant is located between Soi 4 and Soi 5 of Th Sankhongnoi (the street is called Th Sathanpayabarn where it intersects with Th Phahonyothin); look for the yellow sign.

#### Phu-Lae

NORTHERN THAI \$\$

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

#### Old Dutch

INTERNATIONAL \$\$

(541 Th Phahonyothin; mains 150-300B; ✳) This cosy, foreigner-friendly restaurant is a good choice if you're tired of rice. There's a variety

## Chiang Rai

### Sights

- Hilltribe Museum & Education Center.....C2
- Wat Phra Kaew.....A2

### Activities, Courses & Tours

- Akha Hill House.....B1  
PDA Tours & Travel.....(see 1)

### Sleeping

- Baan Bua Guest House.....B4
- Jansom House.....B4
- Jitaree Guest House.....B1
- North.....B3
- Orchids Guest House.....B4

### Eating

- BaanChivitMai Bakery.....C4
- Nam Ngaiw Paa Nuan.....B4
- Night Market.....C3
- Old Dutch.....B3
- Phu-Lae.....C3

### Drinking

- Cat Bar.....B4

### Shopping

- Orn's Bookshop.....A4

of well-done Dutch and other Western dishes as well as baked goods.



### Drinking

#### Cat Bar

BAR

(1013/1 Th Jet Yot; ☎5pm-1am) Among the bars on Th Jet Yot, this spot mixes pool tables with live nightly music (from 10.30pm).



### Shopping

#### Orn's Bookshop

BOOKS

(off Soi 1, Th Jet Yot; ☎8am-8pm) Great used bookstore.



### Information

Banks can be found along Th Thanalai and along Th Utaakit. Internet access is readily available.

**Overbrook Hospital** (☎0 5371 1366; www.overbrookhospital.com; Th Singkhelai) Modern, English-speaking hospital.

**Post office** (Th Utaakit) South of Wat Phra Singh.

**TAT** (☎0 5374 4674; 448/16 Th Singkhelai; ☎8.30am-4.30pm)

**Tourist police** (☎0 5371 1779, 1155; Th Phahonyothin)



## Getting There & Away

### Air

**Chiang Rai airport** (☎0 5379 8000; Super-highway 110) is 8km north of town. Destinations include:

**Bangkok's Don Muang Airport** (1550B, 1¼ hours, twice daily) Via Orient Thai

**Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi Airport** (2164B to3120B, 1¼ hours, six times daily) Via Air Asia and THAI

**Chiang Mai** (1399B, 40 minutes, twice daily) Via Kan Air.

### Bus

Chiang Rai's **provincial bus station** (Th Prasopsuk) is in the heart of town; it also serves ordinary (fan) buses to nearby provinces. Destinations include:

**Chiang Khong** 65B; 2½ hours; hourly.

**Chiang Mai** 142B; seven hours; every 45 minutes from 6.30am to noon.

**Chiang Saen** 32B; 1½ hours, frequent.

**Mae Sai** 39B; 1½ hours; frequent.

If you're heading beyond Chiang Rai province (or are in a hurry), you'll have to go to the **new bus station** (☎0 5377 3989), 5km south of town on Hwy 1. Sörngtãaou linking it and the old station run from 5am to 9pm (10B, 20 minutes). Minivans also depart from here:

**Bangkok's Northern (Mo Chit) bus terminal** Air-con buses 546B to 706B, VIP 733B; 11 hours.

**Chiang Mai** Ordinary buses 106B, air-con 191B; four hours; hourly.

### Boat

Chiang Rai is accessible by boat along Mae Nam Kok from the northern tip of Chiang Mai province (see the boxed text, p697).

## Golden Triangle

The three-country border between Thailand, Myanmar and Laos forms the legendary Golden Triangle, once a mountainous frontier where the opium poppy was a cash crop for the region's ethnic minorities. Thailand has successfully stamped out its cultivation through infrastructure projects, crop-substitution programs and aggressive law enforcement. But the porous border and lawless areas of the neighbouring countries have switched production to the next generation's drug of choice: methamphetamine and, to a lesser extent, heroin. Much of this illicit activity is invisible to the average visitor and the region's heyday as the



## Golden Triangle &amp; Around



leading opium producer is now marketed as a tourist attraction.

### MAE SALONG

POP 25,400

Built along the spine of a mountain, Mae Salong is more like a remote Chinese village in Yúnnán than a Thai town. It was originally settled by the 93rd Regiment of the Kuomintang Nationalist Party (KMT), which fled from China after the 1949 revolution. The ex-soldiers and political exiles initially settled in Myanmar but later were forced to Thailand, where they supported themselves as middlemen between the opium growers and the opium warlords. The modern-day descendants still carry on the language and traditions (minus the profession) of their forefathers: Chinese is more frequently spoken here than Thai and the land's severe incline boasts tidy terraces of tea and coffee plantations.

An interesting **morning market** (☉6-8am) convenes at the T-junction near Shin Sane Guest House. The market attracts town residents and tribespeople from the surrounding districts. Most of the guesthouses in town can arrange **treks** to nearby hill-tribe villages, though the surrounding area has been significantly denuded over the years.

**Shin Sane Guest House** (☎0 5376 5026; 32/3 Th Mae Salong; s/d from 50/100B, bungalow

300B; @) is Mae Salong's original guesthouse, boasting the standards and prices of decades past. **Little Home Guesthouse** (☎0 5376 5389; www.maesalonglittlehome.com; 31 Moo 1, Th Mae Salong; s/d from 50/100B, bungalow 600B; @), next door to Shin Sane, is a delightful wooden house with basic rooms and spiffy bungalows. The friendly owner has produced an accurate map of the area.

Getting to Mae Salong is an adventure in transport: take a Chiang Rai-Mae Sai bus and get off at Ban Basang (ordinary 20B, 30 minutes, frequent). From there, sǒrngtǎou climb the mountain to Mae Salong (500B per vehicle split between passengers, one hour). You can also approach Mae Salong from the scenic western road via Fang or Tha Ton (50B).

### MAE SAI

POP 21,800

Thailand's northernmost town is a busy trading post for gems, jewellery, cashews and lacquerware, and is also a legal border crossing into Myanmar. Many travellers make the trek here to extend their Thai visa or to dip their toes into Myanmar.

Most guesthouses line the street along the Mae Nam Sai to the left of the border checkpoint. **Bamboo Guesthouse** (☎08 6916 1895; 135/3 Th Sailomjoi; r 150-200B) has bare-bones shelters. **Top North Hotel** (☎0 5373

1955; 306 Th Phahonyothin; d 400-600B, tr 900B; ☎☎), located along the main strip, is a short walk to the border bridge; it is an older hotel with spacious rooms.

Mae Sai has a **night market** (Th Phahonyothin) with an excellent mix of Thai and Chinese dishes. **Khrua Bismillah** (☎08 1530 8198; Soi 4, Th Phahonyothin; dishes 25-40B; ☎6am-6pm) is run by Burmese Muslims and does an excellent biryani; look for the green halal sign.

The **bus station** (☎0 5364 6437) is 4km from the immigration office. Destinations include Bangkok (air-con 582B to 749B, VIP 874B, 15 hours, six departures), Chiang Mai (air-con/VIP 241/375B, four to five hours, five departures) and Chiang Rai (ordinary 38B, 1½ hours, frequent). The bus to Tha Ton (51B) and Fang (71B) leaves at 7am and takes two hours.

On Th Phahonyothin by Soi 8 there's a 'bus stop' sign, from which sörngtáaou run to Sop Ruak (45B, frequent) and terminate in Chiang Saen (50B).

## CHIANG SAEN

POP 10,800

A sedate river town, **Chiang Saen** is famous in the Thai history books as the 7th-century birthplace of the Lanna kingdom, which later moved to Chiang Mai. You can wander around the kingdoms' ruins at **Wat Pa Sak** (admission 50B), about 200m from Pratu Chiang Saen, or survey the artefacts at **Chiang Saen National Museum** (☎0 5377 7102; 702 Th Phahonyothin; admission 100B; ☎8.30am-4.30pm Wed-Sun). Today, huge river barges from China moor in town, heralding the expanding and sanctioned interior Asian trade.

An easy day trip from Chiang Saen is the so-called 'official' centre of the Golden Tri-

gle, **Sop Ruak**, an odd souvenir and museum stop for package tourists. The **House of Opium** (Baan Phin; ☎0 5378 4060; www.houseofopium.com; admission 50B; ☎7am-8pm), across from Phra Chiang Saen Si Phaendin, has historical displays pertaining to opium culture. Another drug-themed museum is the **Hall of Opium** (☎0 5378 4444; www.goldentrianglepark.com; admission 300B; ☎10am-3.30pm), 1km south of town opposite the Anantara Resort & Spa. Run by royally sponsored Mah Fah Luang Foundation, the facility includes a fascinating history of opium and examines the effects of abuse on individuals and society.

Sleeping options in Chiang Saen include **Chiang Saen Guest House** (☎0 5365 0196; 45/2 Th Rimkhong; r 150-300B), opposite the river and night stalls, and **Bin's Guest House** (☎0 5365 0847; 71 Mu 8; r 300-700B, bungalows 200B), on the north side of town (about 1.5km north of the bus terminal) with views of the Mekong River. A night market sets up each evening along the bank of the Mekong River.

Chiang Saen has an informal bus terminal at the eastern end of Th Phahonyothin. Destinations include Chiang Rai (ordinary 70B, two hours, frequent) and Chiang Mai (ordinary/air-con 126/227B, five hours, two daily).

You can also travel directly to the Chinese town of Jinghong from Chiang Saen via **passenger ferry** (3500B one-way, 15hr) but departures are dependent on river conditions and service is usually suspended during the dry season of March to May. Further complicating the trip is the fact that you'll need a pre-arranged Chinese visa (the nearest consulate is in Chiang Mai; see p780). Call **Chiang Saen Tour and Travel** (☎0 5377 7051; 64 Th Rimkhong;

## GETTING TO MYANMAR: MAE SAI TO TACHILEIK

In peaceful times, foreigners may cross from Mae Sai into Tachileik, Myanmar. On occasion and without notice, the border may close temporarily. Ask about current conditions before making the trip to Mae Sai.

**At the border** The **Thai immigration office** (☎7am-6.30pm) is just before the bridge over the Mae Nam Sai in the centre of town. On the other side is the Myanmar immigration office, which charges 500B for a temporary ID card allowing a one-day pass; your passport is held as a deposit. The border town of Tachileik looks a lot like Mae Sai, except with more teashops and Burmese restaurants (go figure).

**Moving on** You're allowed to venture as far into Myanmar as Kengtung (the capital of the Shan state), but you'll need certain permits and permissions. The **Tourist Information office** can prepare the documents (three photos required) and the 14-day pass (US\$10 or 500B); it's also obligatory to hire a guide for the duration of your stay.

For information on this border crossing in the other direction, see the boxed text, p511.

☺8am-6pm) to determine current schedules before arranging a visa.

To Chiang Mai be sure to take the *sǎi mài* (new route), which is more direct. There are frequent sǒrngtǎou between Chiang Saen and Sop Ruak (20B, every 20 minutes from 7am to 5pm). Six-passenger speedboats also shuttle between the two towns (one way/return 500/600B, 35 minutes).

## CHIANG KHONG

POP 12,000

Remote yet lively Chiang Khong is historically important as a market town for local hill tribes and for trade with northern Laos. Travellers pass through en route to Laos and southern China.

## Sleeping

### Baanrimtaling

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎ 5379 1613; maleewan\_th@yahoo.com; 99/2 Moo 3; dm/r 100-120/150-450B; @☺) The rooms here are pretty run-of-the-mill but the homey atmosphere and river views add pizzaz.

### Portside Hotel

HOTEL \$

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

### PP Home

GUESTHOUSE \$

(Baan Pak Pon; ☎ 5365 5092; baanpakpon@hotmail.co.th; r 350-600B; \*☺☺) One of a dwindling number of locally owned accommodation, this attractive wooden house features large rooms with private balcony looking over the river.

### Baan-Fai Guest House

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎ 5379 1394; 108 Th Sai Klang; r 100-200B; ☺) Located in an attractive wooden Thai home, the basic rooms are a budget find.

### Boom House

BUDGET HOTEL \$

(☎ 5365 5136; www.boomhouseressort.com, in Thai; 406/1 Th Sai Klang; dm/r 100/250-400B; \*☺) This multilevel place has a variety of plain but tidy rooms, the more expensive of which have air-con, TV and fridge.

## Eating

### Khao Soi Pa Orn

NORTHERN THAI \$

(Soi G; mains 15-30B; ☺8am-4pm) Chiang Khong's version of *kǒw soy* forgoes the coconut milk and replaces it with a rich minced pork and

tomato mixture. There's no English-language sign here; look for the gigantic highway pillar at the eastern end of Soi 6.

### Bamboo Mexican House

INTERNATIONAL \$

(Th Sai Klang; mains 30-180B; ☺7am-8pm) Run by the manager of a now-defunct guesthouse, this tiny restaurant/bakery opens early and can prepare boxed lunches for the boat ride.

## Pai

POP 2000

This cool corner of the northern mountains started out as a hippie enclave for Chiang Mai bohos who would come to hang out beside the rambling river and strum out blues tunes at night. Word spread and the dusty little town now does a thriving trade in mountain scenery and laid-back living. Urban Thais have joined the Pai altar for its stress-reducing setting and the oddity of 'winter' (from December to January). The town itself – a modest mixture of Shan, Thai and Muslim Chinese residents – can be explored in a matter of minutes, but the real adventure lies along the paths in the hills beyond. Some might sniff that Pai is played out, but remember folks this isn't a race.

## Sights & Activities

Since Pai is more of a 'state of mind', it is lean on full-fledged tourist attractions. If you need an outing, head to **Wat Phra Thut Mae Yen**, 1km east of town, for its hilltop vista. The other main contender is **Tha Pai Hot Springs** (admission 200B; ☺6am-7pm), a well-kept park featuring a scenic stream and pleasant hot-spring bathing pools. The park is 7km southeast of town across Mae Nam Pai.

The rest of your time will be spent on various wanderings or pamperings. All the guesthouses in town can provide information on **trekking** (from 700B per day). Treks should include a maximum of 10 people.

### Thai Adventure Rafting

RAFTING

(☎ 5369 9111; www.thairafting.com; Th Chaisongkham; from 2500B) Folks rave about rafting on the Mae Nam Pai, available during the wet season only (July to December). Rafting trips last from one to two days.

### Pai Kayak

KAYAKING

(☎ 5306 4426; www.paikayak.com; Pai Let's Go Tour, Th Rangsiyanon) Two-hour kayaking excursions tackle the Mae Nam Pai.

## GETTING TO LAOS: CHIANG KHONG TO HUAY XAI

This is the most popular crossing for Chiang Mai-Luang Prabang (Laos) travellers.

**Getting to the border** The Mekong River village of Chiang Khong is where you can catch longtail boats to the Lao village of Huay Xai (30B, frequently from 8am-6pm). The pier is at the northern end of town.

**At the border** Foreigners can purchase a 30-day Lao visa upon arrival in Huay Xai for US\$30 to \$42, depending on nationality. There is an extra US\$1 charge after 4pm and on weekends; bring a passport photo or get one at the border for 40B.

**Moving on** From Huay Xai, there are boats to Luang Prabang. You can also continue by bus to Udomxai or Luang Nam Tha. Huay Xai also has transit connections to China (though Chinese visas need to be arranged beforehand). Buses from Huay Xai go directly to the Xishuangbanna town of Mengla.

For information on entering Thailand from Laos at this crossing, see p351.

### Pai Traditional Massage

MASSAGE

(☎ 0 5369 9121; 68/3 Soi 1, Th Wiang Tai; massage from 180B, sauna 80B; ☀9am-9pm) Northern Thai massage, *sàmun phrai* (medicinal herb) sauna and even massage courses.

### Thom's Pai Elephant Camp Tours

ELEPHANT RIDES

(☎ 0 5369 9286; www.thomelephant.com; 4 Th Rangsiyanon; rides 500-1500B) Jungle elephant rides through the forest to waterfalls and hot springs.

### Mam Yoga House

YOGA

(☎ 08 9954 4981; www.mamyoga.paieplorer.com; Th Rangsiyanon; 1-day course from 200B; ☀10amnoon & 3-5pm) Just north of the police station, Mam offers Hatha yoga classes



### Sleeping

Pai's accommodation upgraded after the 2005 flood and now very few cheapies remain. There are still some budget spots outside of town, which is more idyllically rural. During the cool season (November to April) it can be difficult to find a room and prices increase with demand.

### Breeze of Pai Guesthouse

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎ 08 1998 4597; Soi Wat Pa Kham; r 400-800B; ☼☼) This well-groomed compound near the river consists of nine attractive and spacious rooms and six large A-frame bungalows (with fan and air-con). It's close to the action without the noise pollution, and the friendly English owner can provide local advice.

### Pai Country Hut

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎ 08 4046 4458; Ban Mae Hi; r 500B; ☼) The bamboo bungalows here are utterly sim-

ple, but are tidy and have bathrooms and porch hammocks. Although it's not exactly riverside, it's the most appealing of several similar places in the area.



### Amy's Earth House

GUESTHOUSE \$\$

(☎ 08 6190 2394; www.amyhouse.net; Ban Mae Khong; bungalows 600B; ☼) Claiming to be Pai's adobe pioneer, Amy's simple mud huts overlook the valley and have open-air showers. The hotel is located about 3.5km outside town off the road to Mae Hong Song.

### Charlie's House

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎ 0 5369 9039; Th Rangsiyanon; r 200-600B; ☼) This long-standing and locally run place offers a range of options in a suburban compound.

### Mr Jan's Guest House

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎ 0 5369 9554; Soi Wanchaloem 18; r 300-2000B; ☼) Owned by a Pai native, the plain and dark rooms are set around a medicinal herb garden.



### Eating

During the day there's takeaway food at **Saengthongaram Market** (Th Khetkelang). For tasty local eats, try the **evening market** (gàht láang; Th Raddamrong; ☀3pm-sunset). Night vendors turn Th Chaisongkhram and Th Rangsiyanon into an open-air buffet, hawking all manner of food and drink from stalls and refurbished VW vans.

### Mama Falafel

ISRAELI \$

(Soi Wanchaloem; set meals 80-90B; ☀11am-8pm) This friendly native of Pai has been cooking up tasty falafel, hummus and other Israeli faves since 2002. Come on Friday and

## CAVE HOUNDS

The insides of northern Thailand's vast mountains have been carved and sculpted for millennia by water as it obeys gravity's pull. One of the most dramatic underground landscapes is Tham Lot (pronounced 'tām lôrt'), a large limestone cave about 70km from Mae Hong Son outside of the town of Soppong. It is one of the largest known caves in Thailand, stretching 1600m. There are impressive stalagmites, 'coffin caves' (an ancient and little-understood burial ritual) and a stream that runs through it. The tourism infrastructure is also applauded as a local ecotourism model. Local guides from nearby Shan villages must be hired to tour the caverns. You can base your stay at nearby **Cave Lodge** (☎0 5361 7203; www.cavelodge.com; dm 90-120B, r 250-2000B), which is run by an unofficial spelunking expert.

Tham Lot can be reached by motorcycle taxi (80B) from Soppong, which is accessible by bus from Pai (ordinary 40B, minivan 100B; 1 hour to 1½ hours) or Mae Hong Son (ordinary 40B, minivan 150B; two hours).

Saturday when she does hamin, the Jewish stew, accompanied by challah bread.

### Je-In Pai

VEGETARIAN \$

(Pure Vegetarian Food; Th Raddamrong; mains 40-80B; ☎10am-8pm; 🍴) Opposite the District Office, this simple open-air place serves tasty and cheap vegan and vegetarian Thai food.

### Good Life

INTERNATIONAL \$

(Th Wiang Tai; dishes 60-140B; ☎) Wheat grass and secondhand New-Age books function as interior design at this eclectic and popular cafe. The menu is mainly liquid – teas, coffees, 'juice joints' – but it also does breakfasts and vegetarian Thai dishes.

TOP CHOICE

### Laop Khom Huay Pu

NORTHERN THAI \$

(Ban Huay Pu; mains 35-60B; ☎9am-10pm) Escape the tofu junkies to this local carnivore eatery. The house special is *lâhp kôoa*, minced meat (beef or pork) fried with local herbs and spices. The restaurant is on the road to Mae Hong Son, about 1km north of town, just past the turn-off to Belle Villa and Baan Krating (no English sign).

### Yunnanese Restaurant

CHINESE \$\$

(Ban Santichon; mains 25-200B; ☎8am-8pm) This open-air place in Ban Santichon serves the traditional dishes of the town's Yunnanese residents. Standouts include *mântô* (steamed buns), served with stewed pork leg. Or you could always go for the excellent noodles, made by hand and topped with a mixture of minced pork, garlic and sesame. The restaurant is the giant rock in Ban Santichon, about 4km west of Pai.



## Drinking

### Bebop

LIVE MUSIC

(Th Rangsiyanon; ☎6pm-1am) If you want to become a card-carrying member of the Pai night-crawlers, hang your hat at Bebop. Live R&B and rock nightly.

## Information

Several places around town offer internet services (20B to 30B per hour). Banks and ATMs can be found along Pai's two main streets, Th Rangsiyanon and Th Chaisongkhram.

**Siam Books** (☎0 5369 9075; Th Chaisongkhram) Boasts the town's largest selection of new and used books.

## Getting There & Around

Pai's airport is 1.5km north of town and offers a daily connection to Chiang Mai (1890B, 25 minutes) on **Kan Air** (☎0 5369 9955; www.kanairlines.com).

The **bus stop** (Th Chaisongkhram) is in a dirt lot in the centre of town. The road from Chiang Mai to Pai and on to Mae Hong Son is savagely steep. Destinations include:

**Chiang Mai** 72B to 150B; three to four hours; frequent from 8am to 4pm.

**Mae Hong Son** 70B; 4½ hours; 11am and 1pm.

Minivans also depart from Pai's bus terminal. Bookings can be made at **aYa Service** (☎0 5369 9940; www.ayaservice.com; 22/1 Moo 3 Th Chaisongkhram). Destinations include:

**Chiang Mai** 150B; three hours; hourly from 7am to 4.30pm.

**Mae Hong Son** 150B; 2½ hours; hourly from 8.30am to 5.30pm.

Most of Pai is accessible on foot. For local excursions you can rent bicycles or motorcycles around town.

## Mae Hong Son

POP 6000

Northern Thai aficionados prefer the far-flung border feel of Mae Hong Son to that of Pai. Mae Hong Son is a quiet provincial capital that practically peers into Myanmar and is skirted by forested mountains. The local trekking scene in Mae Hong Son is the primary draw but the daily market and local eats further impress its fan base.

### Sights & Activities

Mae Hong Son's temples are surviving monuments to their Burmese and Shan artisans and benefactors and hint at the town's past as a logging and elephant-training centre. **Wat Jong Klang** and **Wat Jong Kham** boast whitewashed stupas and glittering zinc fretwork. The temples are often lit at night, reflecting in the still waters of Nong Jong Kham (Jong Kham Lake).

Glimpse the misty morning fog from **Wat Phra That Doi Kong Mu**, which sits on a hilltop west of town.

The **Poi Sang Long Festival** in March takes place at Wat Jong Klang and Wat Jong Kham. It's a surviving Shan custom in which young boys entering the monastery as novice monks are dressed in ornate costumes and paraded around the temple under festive parasols.

Treks to nearby hill-tribe villages, as well as **white-water rafting** and **longtail boat trips** on the Mae Nam Pai are all popular pastimes. Guesthouses can handle bookings for outdoor trips, which start at around 1000B for the day.

**Friend Tour** TREKKING  
(☎ 0 5361 1647; 21 Th Pradit Jong Kham) With nearly 20 years experience, this recommended outfit offers trekking, elephant riding and rafting, as well as day tours.

**Nature Walks** TREKKING  
(☎ 0 5361 1040, 08 9552 6899; www.trekkingthailand.com; from 1000B) Treks range from one-day nature walks to multiday journeys.

### Sleeping

**Coffee Morning** GUESTHOUSE \$  
(☎ 0 5361 2234; 78 Th Singhanat Bamrung; r 300-500B; @☎) This old wooden house unites

an attractive cafe-bookshop and four basic but cosy rooms. This isn't the best bargain around since bathrooms are shared but the atmosphere tips the scales.

**Friend House** GUESTHOUSE \$  
(☎ 0 5362 0119; 20 Th Pradit Jong Kham; r 150-400B; ☎) Clean and efficient, this guesthouse complex covers all the bases and a few rooms overlook the lake.

**Palm House Guest House** GUESTHOUSE \$  
(☎ 0 5361 4022; 22/1 Th Chamnansthit; r 300-600B; ☎) Slightly sterile, Palm House is clean and predictable with a few flourishes.

### Eating & Drinking

Mae Hong Son's **morning market** is a cultural and culinary adventure. Several vendors at the north end of the market sell *tòoa òn*, a Burmese noodle dish with thick chickpea porridge. Others sell a local version of *kà-nòm jeen nám ngèe-o* (thin white noodles) topped with Shan-style deep-fried vegetables.

There are two **night markets**: the one near the airport is mostly takeaway northern Thai food, while the market near Nong Jong Kham has seating and serves standard Thai food.

**Mae Si Bua** NORTHERN THAI \$  
(51 Th Singhanat Bamrung; dishes 20-30B ☎lunch) For authentic local eats, try this restaurant specialising in Shan curries, soups and dips. Auntie Bua doesn't speak English, but the universal language of pointing should work.

**Ban Phleng** NORTHERN THAI \$  
(108 Th Khunlum Praphat; mains 45-100B; ☎lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) A popular open-air restaurant, Ban Phleng does tasty local dishes, indicated as 'Maehongson style' on the English-language menu. It is located south of town – look for the white banners at the side of the road.

**La Tasca** ITALIAN \$\$  
(Th Khunlum Praphat; mains 89-209B; ☎lunch & dinner) This cosy place has been serving homemade pasta, pizza and calzone for as long as we can remember.

**Sunflower Café** BAR  
(Th Pradit Jong Kham; ☎7am-midnight) This open-air place combines draught beer, live lounge music and views of the lake. Sunflower also does meals and runs tours.

## **i** Information

Most of the banks on Th Khunlum Praphat have ATMs. A few internet shops can be found around the southern end of Th Khunlum Praphat.

**Post office** (Th Khunlum Praphat)

**Srisangwan Hospital** (☎0 5361 1378; Th Singhanat Bamrung)

**TAT** (☎0 5361 2982; Th Khunlum Praphat; ☎8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri) Across from the post office.

**Tourist police** (☎0 5361 1812, emergencies 1155; Th Singhanat Bamrung; ☎8.30am-4.30pm) Report thefts or lodge complaints here.

## **i** Getting There & Around

Mae Hong Son is 368km from Chiang Mai, but the terrain is so rugged that the trip takes at least eight long, but scenic, hours. For this reason, many people opt for the 35 minute flight to/from Chiang Mai (1590-1890B, 35 minutes, four flights daily) with **Kan Air** (☎0 5361 3188; www.kanairlines.com) and **Nok Air** (☎1318; www.nokair.co.th). The airport is near the centre of town.

Mae Hong Son's bus station is 1km south of the city. Destinations include:

**Bangkok** 718B to 838B; 15 hours; three departures from 2pm to 4pm.

**Chiang Mai** Northern route 127B; eight hours; 8.30am and 12.30pm. Southern route 178B; nine hours; frequent departures from 6am to 9pm.

**Mae Sariang** 95B; four hours; frequent departures from 6am to 9pm.

**Pai** (70B; 4½ hours 8.30am and 12.30pm.

Minivans also depart from the bus station. Destinations include:

**Chiang Mai** 250B; six hours; every hour from 7am to 3pm.

**Pai** 150B; 2½ hours; every hour from 7am to 4pm.

The centre of Mae Hong Son can be covered on foot. Motorbike rental is available from **PA Motorbike** (☎0 5361 1647; 21 Th Pradit Jong Kham; ☎7.30am-7.30pm), opposite Friend House.

**Salawin Tour & Trekking** (☎08 1024 6146; Th Laeng Phanit; 800B per person per day) are all recommended for their eco-conscious and culturally sensitive tours.

## **🛏** Sleeping

**Northwest Guest House** GUESTHOUSE \$ (☎08 9700 9928; www.northwestgh.blogspot.com; 81 Th Laeng Phanit; r 250-450B; 🍷🍷🍷) The rooms in this cosy wooden house have simple mattresses on the floor, but it offers helpful local tour advice.

**Mitaree Hotel** GUESTHOUSE \$ (☎0 5368 1110; www.mitareehotel.com; 256 Moo 2, Th Mae Sariang; r 250-500B; 🍷) This is Mae Sariang's oldest hostelry. It has fan-cooled rooms in the old wooden wing or air-con rooms with hot-water shower in the new wing.

## **🍴** Eating & Drinking

**Inthira Restaurant** THAI \$ (Th Wiang Mai; mains 30-150B; ☎8am-10pm) Probably the town's best restaurant, this place features a strong menu of dishes using unique ingredients such as locally-grown shiitake mushrooms and fish from the Mae Nam Moei.

**Leelawadee** THAI \$ (cnr Th Wiang Mai & Th Mae Sariang; mains 40-180B; ☎7am-9pm; 🍷) This cosy and friendly place has an English-language menu of both one-dish meals and mains, as well as real coffee and free wi-fi.

## **i** Getting There & Away

Bus destinations from Mae Sariang:

**Bangkok** 444B to 571B; 13 hours; four departures from 4pm to 7.30pm.

**Chiang Mai** 95B to 171B; four to five hours; five departures from 7am to 3pm.

**Mae Hong Son** 95B to 171B, three to four hours, six departures from 7am to 1am.

## WESTERN THAILAND

Tall rugged mountains rise up from the central plains to meet Thailand's western border with Myanmar. Though the distances from population centres are minor, much of the region remains remote and undeveloped with an undercurrent of border intrigue. Displaced ethnic minorities seek safe haven from military persecution in Myanmar, while the untamed forests provide much-needed animal habitats in an increasingly industrialised region. Kanchanaburi, just a

## Mae Sariang

Little-visited Mae Sariang is gaining a low-key buzz for its attractive riverside setting and emerging eco-trekking tours. There's natural beauty, ethnic and cultural diversity as well as a new breed of community-based trekking outfits.

**Dragon Sabai Tours** (☎08 548 0884; www.thailandhilltribeholidays.com; Th Mongkolchai);

**Mae Sariang Tours** (☎08 2032 4790, 08 8404 8402; www.maesariangtravel.multiply.com); and

few hours' bus ride from Bangkok, is a convenient and historical gateway to the region.

## Kanchanaburi

POP 47,147

If you don't have time for Chiang Mai and its surrounding mountain scenery, head to Kanchanaburi, west of Bangkok, quietly lounging alongside Mae Nam Khwae (Kwai River). The town has a healthy soft adventure scene – elephant rides and bamboo rafting – and is a peaceful place to relax if Bangkok made you dizzy. It also has an unlikely claim on WWII history as the site of a Japanese-operated WWII prisoner-of-war camp made famous by the movie *The Bridge Over the River Kwai*. Today visitors come to pay their respects to fallen Allied soldiers or to learn more about this chapter of the war.

### Sights

#### Death Railway Bridge (Kwai River Bridge)

HISTORICAL SITE

History often memorialises otherwise unremarkable places. Such is the case with this ho-hum bridge that provides a tangible hook to a compelling historical story.



Starting in 1942 during the Japanese occupation of Thailand, captured Allied soldiers and Burmese and Malay conscripts were transported to the jungles of Kanchanaburi to build 415km of rail – known today as the Death Railway because of the many lives (more than 100,000 men) lost. The railway was intended to link Thailand and Burma (Myanmar) in order to secure an alternative supply route for future Japanese conquests in Southeast Asia. The Japanese completed the Thai portion of the rail line in an astonishing 16 months – a construction feat considering the rough terrain, rudimentary equipment and harsh working conditions. The rails were joined 37km south of Three Pagodas Pass and in use for 20 months before Allied planes destroyed the bridge in 1945. Bomb damage on the now-reconstructed span is still apparent on the pylons closest to the riverbank.

The bridge is 2.5km from the town centre and is best reached via rented bicycle. Surrounding the bridge are tacky souvenir shops and other businesses that lack the gravitas the site should garner. At certain times you can walk across the span to the other side of the river where there are riverfront cafes and a more sylvan setting.


A **mini train** (20B, 15 mins, frequent departures from 8am-10am & noon-3pm) does a quick trip over the bridge from a nearby station. You can also ride along a longer portion of the POW-constructed line aboard trains that depart from Kanchanaburi's train station, across the bridge to the Nam Tok station north of town. This **historic line** (100B, two hr, 5.30am, 10.30am & 4pm departures) capitalises on the appeal to foreign tourists and charges them an inflated price for the one-way privilege.

During the first week of December there's a sound-and-light show put on at the bridge. The town gets a lot of tourists during this week, so book early.


#### Thailand-Burma Railway Centre MUSEUM

( 3451 0067; www.tbrcnline.com; 73 Th Chaokanen; admission 100B;  9am-5pm) So you know that there was a bridge, a war and a catchy movie song but that's all you know about Kanchanaburi's role in WWII. Before you head out to see the Kwai River Bridge, get a little history at this museum. Professional exhibits outline Japan's military endeavours in Southeast Asia during WWII and its plan to connect Yangon (in Burma) with Bangkok via rail for transport of military supplies.

#### Allied War Cemetery CEMETERY

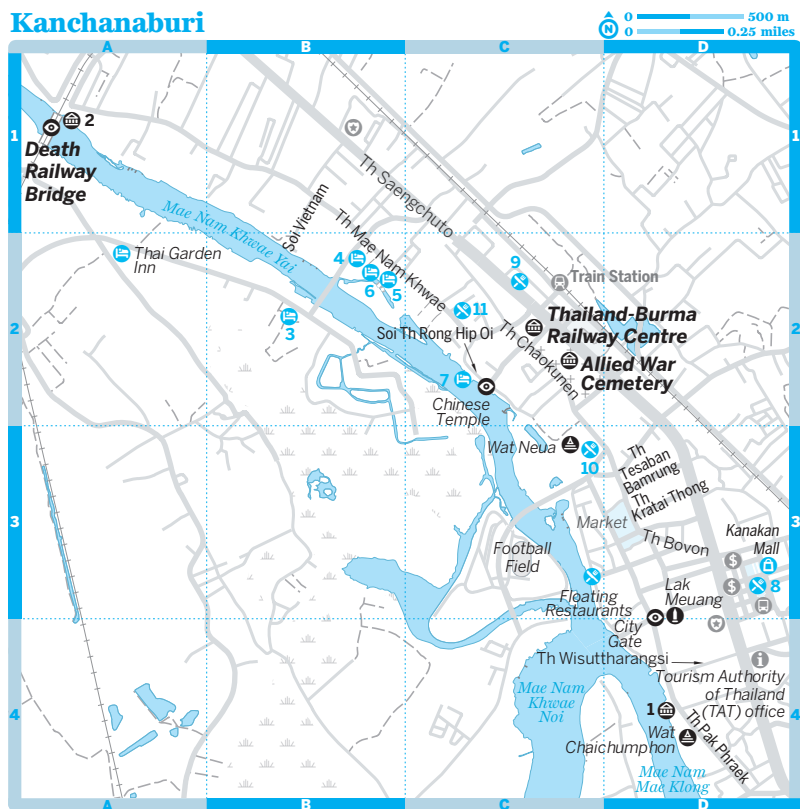
(Th Saengchuto;  8am-6pm) Across the street from the Thailand-Burma Railway Centre is this immaculately maintained cemetery providing final shelter for the POWs who died here. The cemetery is maintained by the War Graves Commission. Of the 6982 POWs buried here, nearly half were British; the rest came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

#### World War II Museum MUSEUM

(Th Mae Nam Khwae; admission 40B;  8am-6.30pm) Just southeast of the bridge is a privately owned museum, sometimes also called the JEATH War Museum to capitalise on the popularity of another museum by the same name in town. The collection might be the oddest assortment of memorabilia under one roof, but the building does afford picture-postcard views of the bridge.



## Kanchanaburi

**Jeath War Museum**

MUSEUM

(Th Wisuttharangsi; admission 30B; ☎8am-6pm) This outdoor museum is hosted by Wat Chai-chumphon (Wat Tai) and built to resemble the bamboo shelters where the POWs were housed. More a photo gallery than museum, it isn't very informative, but it is heartfelt, especially the fading pictures of surviving POWs who returned to Thailand for a memorial service. Jeath is an acronym of the countries involved in the railway: Japan, England, Australia/America, Thailand and Holland.

**Chung Kai Allied War Cemetery**

CEMETERY

Chung Kai, 4km south of town, was the site of a major prisoner camp during WWII. Allied POWs built their own hospital and church close to here. Today relatively few people come to see this remote cemetery, which is the final resting place of 1700 soldiers, mostly Dutch, British, French and Australian. Most graves have short, touching epitaphs.

The cemetery is across the Mae Nam Khwae Noi and can be easily reached by bicycle or motorcycle.

**Wat Tham Sua & Wat Tham Khao Noi**

TEMPLE

No visit to a Thai town is complete without seeing at least one temple. Here you can see two. These neighbouring hilltop monasteries, 14km south of town, offer almost panoramic views of the countryside. **Wat Tham Khao Noi** (Little Hill Cave Monastery) has an intricately designed Chinese-style pagoda while the larger **Wat Tham Sua** (Tiger Cave Monastery) boasts an 18m-tall Buddha covered in a golden mosaic. In front of the Buddha there is a conveyor belt with small silver trays into which donations are made and then tipped into a central pot. You can walk to the top or take the easy option and go by cable car (10B).

You'll need a motorbike to get out here; it's near Kheuan Meuang (City Dam).

## Kanchanaburi

### 📍 Top Sights

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

### 📍 Sights

1 Jeath War Museum .....	D4
2 World War II Museum.....	A1

### 🛏 Sleeping

3 Apple's Retreat .....	B2
4 Blue Star Guest House.....	B2
5 Pong Phen.....	B2
6 Sam's House .....	B2
7 VN Guest House.....	C2

### 🍴 Eating

Blue Rice .....	(see 3)
8 Night Market.....	D3
9 Night Market.....	C2
10 Saisowo .....	C3
11 Sri Rung Rueng .....	C2

## 🛏 Sleeping

The most atmospheric places to stay are built along the river. The once noisy karaoke barges are now limited to weekend evening merriment.

### 🏠 **Apple's Retreat**

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎ 0 3451 2017; www.appleno-kanchanaburi.com; 153/4 M.4 Bahn Tamakahn; r 490-690B; 🍷) With the welcoming smiles, this long-running guesthouse has friendly and knowledgeable staff and compact, clean rooms in a well-maintained garden. In a bid to be ecofriendly, the rooms lack a TV and fridge.

### 🏠 **Sam's House**

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎ 0 3451 5956; www.samsguesthouse.com; Th Mae Nam Khwae; d 400-800B; 🍷) Bright and airy from reception to terrace, rooms are basic but come with fine views of the hyacinth-covered water.

### 🏠 **Blue Star Guest House**

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎ 0 3451 2161; 241 Th Mae Nam Khwae; r 150-650B; 🍷📺) Set in a leafy garden, this is one laid-back crash pad with a variety of options.

### 🏠 **Pong Phen**

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎ 0 3451 2981; www.pongphen.com; Th Mae Nam Khwae; r 150-1000B; 🍷📺📺) Score a cheapie here and you'll have pool access at a serious bargain.

## VN Guest House

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎ 0 3451 4082; www.vnguesthouse.net; 44 Soi Th Rong Hip Oi; r 280-450B; 🍷📺) One of the best of the older floating raft guesthouses; prepare for a few passing karaoke rafts if you stay at the weekend.

## 🍴 Eating

The **night market** (Th Saengchuto), near the bus station, is well-known for *høy tórt* (fried mussels in an egg batter). Another **night market** (Th Saengchuto; 📅Thu-Tue) sets up near the train station and serves fried treats and blended drinks.

### 🍚 **Blue Rice**

THAI \$

(153/4 M.4 Bahn Tamakahn; dishes 50-100B) Along with standard Thai dishes, chef Apple imports other regional dishes, such as blue rice and refreshing *yam sôm oh* (pomelo salad).

### 🍜 **Saisowo**

THAI \$

(Th Chaokunen; dishes 20-30B; 🕒8am-4pm) This long-running noodle emporium has some of the finest *küayt'aw mǎu* (pork noodles) in town. No English sign.

### 🍜 **Sri Rung Reung**

INTERNATIONAL \$

(Th Mae Nam Khwae; dishes 60-150B) The food is reasonably authentic but you'd best ask if you want some kick to your *sôm-tam* (papaya salad).

## 📍 Information

Several major Thai banks can be found along Th Saengchuto near the market and bus terminal. Internet cafes can be found along Th Mae Nam Khwae. Check out www.kanchanaburi-info.com for general information.

**Post office** (Th Saengchuto)

**TAT** (☎ 0 3451 2500; Th Saengchuto; 🕒8.30am-4.30pm) Near the bus terminal, it provides information on trips beyond Kanchanaburi.

**Thanakarn Hospital** (☎ 0 3462 2366) Best-equipped hospital for foreigners.

**Tourist police** (☎ 0 3451 2668; Th Saengchuto)

## 📍 Getting There & Away

### Bus

Kanchanaburi's **bus station** (Th Saengchuto) is near Th Lak Meuang and the TAT office. Services:

**Bangkok's Southern (Sai Tai Mai) bus terminal** (84B to 99B, two hours, frequent)

**Bangkok's Northern (Mo Chit) bus terminal** (94B to 122B, two hours, frequent) Transfer station for buses to northern Thailand.

**Bangkok's Victory Monument** (110B, two hours, frequent)

**Sangkhlaburi** (180B to 192B, four hours, frequent)

**Suphanburi** (47B, two hours, frequent)  
Connections to Ayuthaya.

**Ratchaburi** (47B to 65B, two hours, frequent)  
Connections to Hua Hin or Phetchaburi.

### Train

Kanchanaburi's **train station** (Th Saengchuto) is 500m from the river, near the guesthouse area. Kanchanaburi is on the Bangkok Noi-Nam Tok rail line, which includes a portion of the historic Death Railway. The SRT promotes this as a historic route, and charges foreigners 100B for any one-way journey, regardless of the distance. Destinations include:

**Bangkok Noi station** (Three hours, departs 7.19am and 2.44pm) Located in Thonburi, across the river from Bangkok; trains depart for Kanchanaburi at 7.44am and 1.55pm.

**Nam Tok** (Two hours, departs 5.30am, 10.30am & 4.19pm) Returns to Kanchanaburi at 5.20am, 12.55pm and 3.15pm.

### **i** Getting Around

Sāhmłór within the city cost 50B a trip. Regular sōrngtāou ply Th Saengchuto for 10B, but be careful you don't accidentally 'charter' one. There are plenty of places hiring motorbikes along Th Mae Nam Khwae. The going rate is 150B per day and it's a good way of getting to the rather scattered attractions around Kanchanaburi. Bicycles can be hired from most guesthouses for around 50B a day.

## Around Kanchanaburi

Head out of town to explore Kanchanaburi's forests and rivers. Most of the guesthouses will book minivan tours that do a little bit of everything in a hurry.

**Erawan National Park** (☎ 3457 4222; admission 200B; ☀8am-4pm) is the home of the seven-tiered **Erawan Falls**, which makes for a refreshing day swimming in pools and climbing around the trails. Go early as this is a popular tour spot. Buses from Kanchanaburi stop at the entrance to the falls (50B, 1½ hours, hourly from 8am to 5.20pm) The last bus back to Kanchanaburi leaves at 4pm.

**Hellfire Pass Memorial** (admission by donation; ☀9am-4pm) curates a section of the Death Railway that was carved out of unforgiving mountain terrain under breakneck speed. The pass was so named for the fire-light shadows cast by the night-labouring POWs. Today a walking trail follows the old railbed. Located near the Km 66 marker on the Sai Yok-Thong

Pha Phum road, Hellfire Pass can be reached by a Sangkhlaburi-bound or Thong Pha Phum-bound bus (60B, 1½ hours, last bus back at 4.45pm). Inform the attendant of your destination so that the bus stops en route.

## Sangkhlaburi

Few tourists know the scenic but small town of Sangkhlaburi, but for international aid workers this is one of many remote outposts for refugee relief work. Many displaced people, whether they be Mon, Karen or Burmese, arrive in Thailand with few belongings and fewer rights. The town itself consists of just a few paved roads overlooking the enormous Kheuan Khao Laem (Khao Laem Dam). The surrounding wilderness is an underappreciated natural attraction boasting one of the largest conservation areas in Southeast Asia. Guesthouses in town can arrange outdoor outings.

**P Guest House** (☎ 3459 5061; www.pguesthouse.com; 8/1 Mu 1; r 250-950B; ☎) has English-speaking staff and rooms with lake views. Fan rooms are plain and have shared bathrooms. If you're interested in volunteer opportunities or visits to nearby forest sanctuaries, enquire here.

**Burmese Inn** (☎ 3459 5146; www.sangkhlaburi.com; 52/3 Mu 3; r 400-800B; ☎) has been renovated from flimsy to comfortable.

Travellers tend to eat at the main guesthouses, which all have lakefront restaurants. The **day market** is across from the bus stop and is good for sampling Mon-style curries (look for the large metal pots). **Baan Unrak**

### THE END OF THE ROAD

If you've come this far, you might as well follow the road all the way to the end: to the border crossing of **Three Pagodas Pass**, 28km north of Sangkhlaburi. The pass hosts a market on both sides of the border and has long been a notorious smuggling route for contraband (though it isn't obvious, you can always pretend). For many years now the entrance to the Burmese town of Payathonzu has been closed to foreigners, but things could always change and when this border is open you can usually obtain a day pass (500B or US\$10) to the Burmese market. Border formalities can be arranged at the checkpoint.

## OF MIGRANTS & MISFORTUNE

Burmese refugees first crossed into Thailand in 1984, when the Myanmar army penetrated the ethnic Karen state and began a campaign of forced relocation of the ethnic minority populations. Today there are three refugee camps around Mae Sot, and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that 140,000 Burmese, mainly ethnic Karen, live in nine camps that line the border between Thailand and Myanmar. Within the camps, the refugees are assured of protection from the military, but have little opportunities to gain an education, employment or an independent life because the Thai government does not recognise them as citizens or residents. Some have lived in this limbo state for decades.

**Bakery** (snacks 25B to 90B) is a meat-less cafe with excellent pastries and Thai dishes and is run by a local charitable organisation.

The bus stop is across from the day market; destinations include:

**Bangkok's Northern (Mo Chit) terminal** 228B to 293B; seven hours; four daily departures.

**Kanchanaburi** 175B; 3½ hours; frequent.

**Three Pagodas Pass** 30B; 45minutes; frequent.

## Mae Sot

POP 120,569

Mae Sot is a scruffy border town preoccupied with trading and cross-border traffic. But it's the population's diversity that is most striking - Indo-Burmese, Chinese, Karen, Hmong and Thai - an ethnic mix that makes border towns so intriguing. The town also hosts a relatively large population of foreign doctors and NGO aid workers, whose presence attests to the human cost of Myanmar's failed government.

There aren't a lot of official sights to lure tourists this far west, but a few come for a visa run and stay longer, realising that they can tap into the charitable spirit through a variety of volunteer organisations or escape the tourist crowds of northern Thailand with visits to the nearby underdeveloped nature preserves and hill-tribe communities.

## 👁 Sights & Activities

### Border Market

MARKET

There is an expansive covered market alongside the Mae Nam Moei on the Thai side of the border that sells a mixture of workaday Burmese goods and cheap Chinese electronics. However the real reason most come here is to cross to Myawadi in Myanmar (see p712). The border was closed at the time of writing, though that status could change.

Sörngtāou go to the border (20B, frequent departures from 6.30am to 5.30pm), 5km west of Mae Sot; ask to be let off at '*rim moei*' (Moei River bank). The last sörngtāou going back to Mae Sot leaves at 5.30pm.

### Herbal Sauna

SAUNA

(Wat Mani; admission 20B; ☺3-7pm) Many a rural Thai temples once boasted herbal saunas, a relaxing past-time. Gender specific facilities are located towards the back of the monastery grounds, past the *gū-dī* (the monk's living quarters).

### Borderline Shop

HANDICRAFTS

(☎0 5554 6584; www.borderlinecollective.org; 674/14 Th Intharakhiri; ☺10am-6pm Tue-Sat, 2-6pm Sun) This shop has a bit of everything: it's a cafe, cooking school and craft collective, selling work by refugee women.

## 🛏 Sleeping



### Ban Thai Guest House

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎0 5553 1590; 740 Th Intharakhiri; r 250-950B; 🍷🍷🍷) Mae Sot's best budget spot is also a favourite among visiting volunteers. Five converted Thai houses sit atop a well-manicured lawn, and the common area is conducive to meeting someone doing something interesting.

### Green Guest House

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎0 5553 3207; 406/8 Th Intharakhiri; dm 100B, r 120-250B) Run by a teacher and her husband, this peaceful guesthouse offers a variety of good-sized rooms with TV. It is a great value, centrally located place.

### Bai Fern Guesthouse

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎0 5553 1349; www.bai-fern.com; 660 Th Intharakhiri; r 150-300; 🍷🍷) Set just off the road in a large house, the rooms here are tidy, but plain. All have well-equipped shared bathrooms. The service is very friendly with the

use of a kitchen, fridge and wireless internet in the communal area.

## Eating

Mae Sot is a culinary crossroads. For breakfast head to the area south of the mosque where several Muslim restaurants serve sweet tea, roti and *nanbya* (a tandoori-style bread). The town's vibrant day market is the place to try Burmese dishes such as *mohinga*, a popular noodle dish. And Mae Sot's night market, at the eastern end of Th Prasat Withi, features mostly Thai-Chinese dishes.

**Khrua Canadian** INTERNATIONAL \$\$  
(3 Th Sri Phanit; dishes 40-280B; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner) This is the place to go to get away from Asia for awhile. The servings are large, the menu is varied and local information is plentiful.

**Lucky Tea Garden** BURMESE \$  
(Th Bun Khun; mains 10-50B; ☺5.30am-9pm) For the Burmese teashop experience without a border crossing, visit this friendly cafe equipped with sweet tea, tasty snacks, and of course, bad Burmese pop music.

**Aiya** BURMESE \$  
(533 Th Intharakhiri; dishes 45-80B; ☺lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) Opposite Bai Fern Guest House, Aiya does Burmese and vegetarian.

## Drinking

For a night on the town, head to the bars at the western end of Th Intharakhiri.

**Mali Bar** BAR  
(Th Intharakhiri; ☺6pm-midnight) Staffed by Burmese and popular with the NGO set, this rather dark bar has a pool table and a world music soundtrack.

## Information

There are several banks with ATMs in the town centre.

**Tourist police** (☎1155; 738/1 Th Intharakhiri) East of the town centre at the border market.

## Getting There & Away

**Se Southeast Express** (522/3 Th Intharakhiri) is a helpful travel agent. The bus station is 1.5km west of town. Destinations from Mae Sot include the following:

**Bangkok** (307B to 613B, eight hours, frequent)

**Chiang Mai** (253B to 326B, six hours, two morning departures)

**Phitsanulok** (157B, four hours, frequent) By minivan.

**Sukhothai** (125B, three hours, frequent) By minivan.

Orange sörngtāou bound for Mae Sariang (200B, six hours, six departures from 6.20am to 12.20pm) depart from the old bus station near the centre of town.

## NORTHEASTERN THAILAND

Thailand's other regions have natural beauty, but the northeast has soul. The main event in this undervisited region is the people, friendly folks who might invite you over to share their picnic under a shade tree.

That's not to say that there isn't beauty in the flat, sun-beaten landscape of rice fields punctuated by shade trees and lonely water buffaloes. Indeed, you've never seen such a vivid green until you've trundled through in the wet season when rice shoots are newly born.

### GETTING TO MYANMAR: MAE SOT TO MYAWADI

This border has been closed since 2010. In the event it reopens, the following information applies. Mae Sot is a legal crossing point into the Myanmar town of Myawadi for a one-day stay. Since this border doesn't grant entry into all of Myanmar, most travellers use it to renew an expiring Thai visa.

**Getting to the border** The border is 5km west of Mae Sot; sörngtāou make the trip to the border (20B, frequent departures from 6.30am to 5.30pm).

**At the border** Mae Sot's **Thai immigration booth** (☎0 5556 3000; ☺6.30am-6.30pm) can verify the border's open/closed situation. When open, you are required to pay US\$10 (or 500B) for a day pass into Myanmar and your passport is left as a deposit. Then you're free to wander around Myawadi as long as you're back at the bridge by 5.30pm Myanmar time (which is a half-hour behind Thai time). On your return to Thailand, you will receive a new 15-day visa.

Also referred to as Isan, the northeast is one of Thailand's most rural and agricultural regions. It is a tapestry of Lao, Thai and Khmer traditional cultures, which meandered across the shifting borders much like the mighty Mekong River. The Mekong defines a wide arc across the northern reaches of the region passing small riverfront towns. Local festivals display the region's unique fusion of cultures, and magnificent mini-Angkor Wats were left behind by the Khmer empire.

There's little in the way of guesthouse culture and few English speakers. Indeed, this is the end of the tourist trail and the beginning of the Thailand trail.

## Nakhon Ratchasima (Khorat)

POP 2 MILLION

To most shoestringers, Nakhon Ratchasima (or more commonly known as 'Khorat') is just a transit hub. Bland concrete development has buried much of its history, and its status as Thailand's second-largest city makes Bangkok look exponentially more interesting. But if you're curious, Khorat is a part of the urban Isan puzzle, where village kids grew up to be educated bureaucrats living comfortable middle-class lives – an economic success story.

### Sights

**Thao Suranari Memorial** HISTORIC SITE  
(Khun Ying Mo Memorial; Th Ratchadamnoen) In the city centre is the defiant statue of Thao Suranari, 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 offering gifts and prayers or hired singers to perform Khorat folk songs. The annual Thao Suranari Festival is held 23 March to 3 April.

**Dan Kwian** HANDICRAFTS VILLAGE  
Just a quick trip out of town, Dan Kwian has been producing pottery for hundreds of years and is something of a magnet for Thailand's artistic hippies. The ceramic creations are famous for their rough texture and rust-like hue derived from local kaolin sources. The village is essentially a row of art-gallery shops lining the highway. To get here, hop on a bus (14B, 30 minutes) from Khorat's southern city gate, the eastern gate or Bus Station 2.

### Sleeping

**Doctor's House** GUESTHOUSE \$  
(☎08 5632 3396; 78 Soi 4, Th Seup Siri; r 200-350B; ☹) The only backpacker abode in town, this old wooden house has simple but clean rooms with shared bathroom. It's not for party animals as the gate is locked at 10pm.

**Sansabai House** HOTEL \$  
(☎0 4425 5144; www.sansabai-korat.com; 335 Th Suranari; r 270-600B; ☹☎) Though the lobby might dampen your spirits, even the cheapest rooms are bright and spotless and come with minifridge and little balconies.

**Sri Ratna Hotel** HOTEL \$  
(☎0 4424 3116; 7 Th Suranaree; r 180-300B; ☹) Sri Ratna trades the Doctor's House's homey vibe for a central location. It has the ambience of an insane asylum, but the owners run it with care and efficiency.

### Eating

Khorat is famous for *pàt mềe khoràht*, a local twist on the ubiquitous *pàt thai*.

**Rabieng-Pa** THAI \$\$  
(☎0 4424 3137; 284 Th Yommarat; dishes 60-330B; ☺dinner) The leafiest and loveliest restaurant on this busy stretch of Th Yommarat has a massive picture menu ensuring a tasty meal.

**Wat Boon Night Bazaar** THAI \$  
(Th Chumphon; ☺6-10pm) Head east to the Wat Boon Night Bazaar where you can sample all the market specialties: deep-fried crickets, pork sausages and other Isan delights.

**Ming Ter** VEGETARIAN \$  
(Th Rajadamnern; dishes 30-80B; ☺breakfast & lunch; ☎) This homey vegetarian affair does mock-meat versions of Thai and Chinese standards (though the menu is in Thai). Avoid communication confusion by pointing to something in the buffet tray.

**Gai Yang Saang Thai** NORTHEASTERN THAI \$  
(Th Rajadamnern; whole free-range chicken 150B; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner) Some of the best *gài yâhng* in Khorat for over 40 years. No English sign.

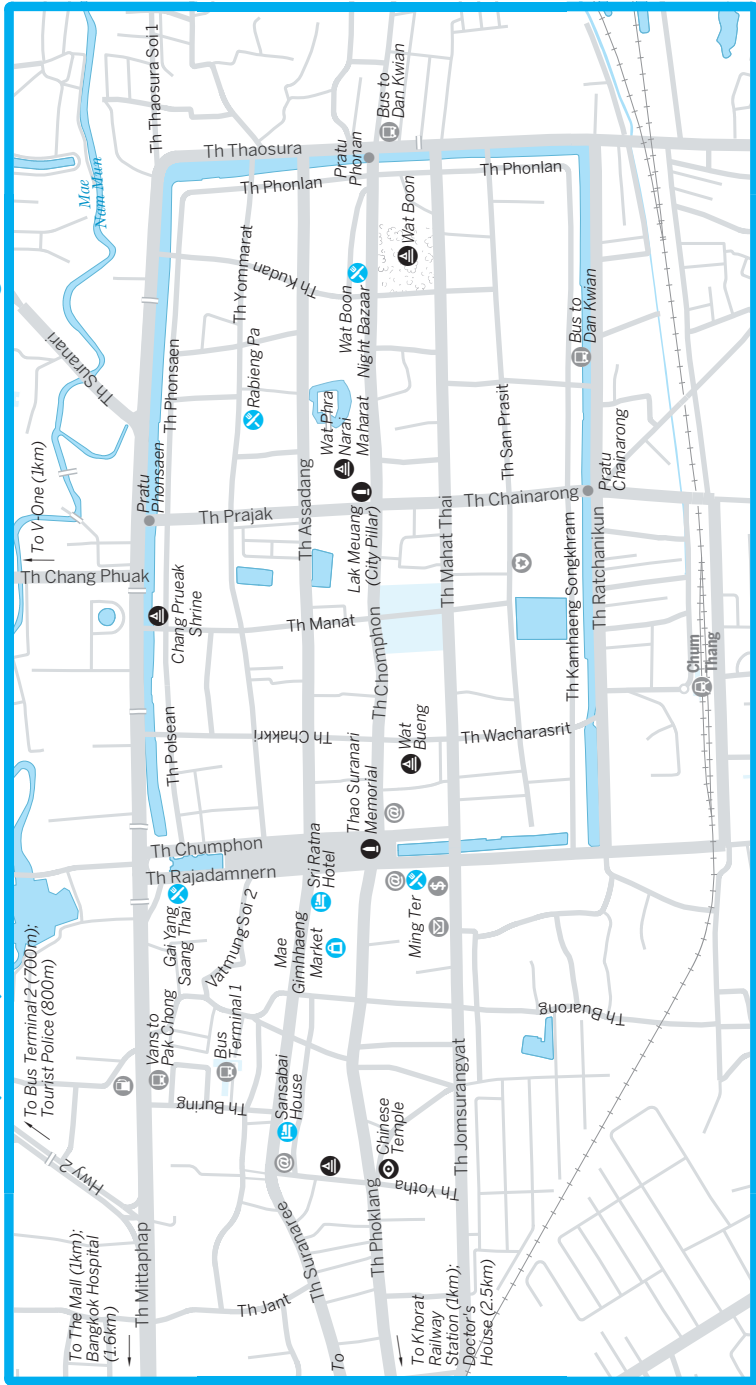
### Information

There are banks galore in central Nakhon Ratchasima, all with ATMs and some with exchange services.

**Post office** (Th Jomsurangyat)  
**Bangkok Hospital** (☎0 4426 9999; Th Mittaphap)

### Nakhon Ratchasima (Khorat)

0 0.25 miles 500 m



## ISAN CUISINE: PUTTING THE FIRE IN SPICY

The holy trinity of Isan cuisine – *kài yâang* (grilled chicken), *sôm-tam* (papaya salad) and *khào niaw* (sticky rice) – are integral to the identity of hard-working farmers. The Isan diaspora has been so widespread that their cuisine has now been adopted as mainstream.

Every Isan town wakes to a veritable chicken massacre, in which side-of-the-road grills are cluttered with marinated carcasses, and wafts of smoke lure appetites. Beside the grill is an earthenware *khrok* (mortar) and wooden *sàak* (pestle) beating out the ancient rhythm of *sôm-tam* preparation: in go grated papaya, sliced limes, a fistful of peppers, sugar and a host of preferential ingredients. People taste the contents and call out adjustments: more *nâam plaa* (fish sauce) or *plaa raa* (fermented fish sauce, which looks like rotten mud). Everything is eaten with the hands, using sticky rice as a 'spoon', and a plate of fresh, chalky-tasting vegetables help offset the chilli burn.

**TAT** (☎0 4421 3666; Th Mittaphap; ☀8.30am-4.30pm) Next to Sima Thani Hotel.

**Tourist police** (☎0 4434 1777, ☎1155) Opposite Bus Station 2, north of the city centre.

### **i** Getting There & Away

#### Bus

Nakhon Ratchasima has two bus stations: **Bus Station No 1** (☎0 4424 2899; Th Burin) in the city centre serves Bangkok and towns within Nakhon Ratchasima province. Destinations include Bangkok's Northern & Northeastern (Mo Chit) bus station (154B to 250B, three hours) and **Pak Chong** (60B, one hour), the access point for Khao Yai National Park.

**Bus Station No 2** (☎0 4425 6006; Hwy 2) serves all other destinations and also has minivan service. The white No 15 *sörngtâaou* with purple stripes and the blue-and-white No 7 go to Bus Terminal 2 (*bor kôr sôr sörn*). Destinations include:

**Aranya Prathet** (190B, four hours)

**Ayuthaya** (132B, four hours)

**Chiang Mai** (435B to 653B, 12 to 13 hours)

**Khon Kaen** (118B to 230B, three hours)

**Lopburi** (120B, 3½ hours)

**Nang Rong** (66B to 85B, two hours) Access point for Phanom Rung.

**Nong Khai** (210B to 420B, six hours)

**Surin** (90B to 157B, four hours)

**Trat** (324B, eight hours) Transfer town for Ko Chang.

**Ubon Ratchathani** (203B to 330B, five to six hours)

#### Train

The **train station** (☎0 4424 2044; Th Mukkhamontri) is on the western side of the city. There are frequent services between Bangkok and the two terminal stations of Nong Khai and Ubon Ratchathani, though buses to most destinations are faster. Destinations:

**Bangkok's Hualamphong train station** (3rd class 100B, 2nd class 243B to 325B, five hours)

**Ubon Ratchathani** (3rd-class 168B, 2nd-class fan 243B, air-con 423B, five to six hours)

**Nong Khai** (3rd-class 214B, 2nd-class air-con 368B, 5½ hours)

### **i** Getting Around

*Sörngtâaou* (8B) run fixed routes through the city, but even locals complain about how difficult it is to figure out the numbers and colours assigned to the routes. Most pass down Th Suranari near the market, which is a good place to start. Heading west on Th Suranaree, the yellow *sörngtâaou* No 1 with white and green stripes will take you past the train station, near the Doctor's House.

Túk-túk and motorcycle taxis cost between 30B and 70B around town.

## Phimai

Of the many Khmer temples that pepper Isan, **Phimai Historical Park** (☎0 4447 1568; Th Anantajinda; admission 100B; ☀7.30am-6pm) is an easy day trip from Khorat, making it an ideal ruin for those pressed for time. Tourist infrastructure is further augmented by English-speaking guides, a valuable resource in these parts.

The temple was built a century before its strikingly similar cousin Angkor Wat and marked one of the westernmost outposts of the Khmer empire's holy highway of laterite temples. The site was originally started by King Jayavarman V in the late 10th century and finished by King Suryavarman I (r 1002-49). The majestic structure boasts a 28m-tall main shrine of cruciform design and made of white sandstone, while the adjunct shrines are of pink sandstone and laterite. The sculptures



over the doorways to the main shrine depict Hindu gods and scenes from the Ramayana.

**Phimai National Museum** (Th Songkhran; admission 100B; ☉9am-4pm Wed-Sun), outside the main complex, has a fine collection of Khmer sculpture, including temple lintels and other architectural ruins.

If Khorat is too busy for you, consider overnighting in Phimai town. Options include **Old Phimai Guesthouse** (☎08 0159 5363; www.phimaigh.com; Th Chomsudasadet; dm/s/d 100/170/200-370B; 🏠🚶), an old wooden house tucked down a quiet *soi*. The friendly hosts are a great source of information and run day trips to Phanom Rung.

**Sai Ngam** (Beautiful Banyan; admission free; ☉daylight hr) is a 350-plus years old tree that blankets an island east of town where food vendors serve *pât phimai*, which is basically *pât mèche khoráht*, which is basically *pât thai*.

All buses to Phimai leave from Khorat's Bus Station 2 (36B to 50B, 1¼ hours, half-hourly departures until 10pm).

## Khao Yai National Park

Thailand's oldest and most remarkable national park, **Khao Yai** (☎08 6092 6529; admission 400B) is a vast wilderness astonishingly close to the country's major population centres. This is one of the largest intact monsoon forests in mainland Asia and, along with neighbouring forest complexes, it is now a Unesco World Heritage Site.

The park is centred around a 1351m-high mountain on the western edge of the Dangrek range, which forms a natural boundary between Thailand and Cambodia. There are more than 50km of trekking trails (many of them formed by the movement of wildlife), some wild elephant herds, majestic waterfalls (for part of the year) and impressive bird life.

The most beautiful time to visit is just after the monsoon rains in November through to the start of the hot season (around April) when the landscape is green and the waterfalls are full. But this is also when leeches are at their fiercest.

The park headquarters has some general trail information but doesn't have an accurate trail map. For the major highlights it is easy enough to visit on your own but you'll need a guide for minor trails and to spot wildlife. The guesthouses in Pak Chong can arrange transport and day tours. **Greenleaf Guesthouse** has long earned enthusiastic praise and a new player, **Bobby's Jungle**

**Tours** (☎0 4432 8177; www.bobbysjungletour skhaoyai.com) looks promising.

## Sleeping & Eating

Staying within the park cuts out your commute, though access to food and transport are limited. Park restaurants at the visitor centre close at 7pm. Most backpackers base themselves in the nearby town of Pak Chong.

**TOP CHOICE** **Greenleaf Guesthouse** GUESTHOUSE \$ (☎0 4436 5073; www.greenleaftour.com; Th Thanarat, Km75; r 200-300B; 🏠) Step past the slightly chaotic common areas to find good-value rooms (with cold-water private bathrooms) at this long-running family-owned place. Note that in high season they might be 'full' if you don't book a tour.

**Park Accommodation** CAMPING \$ (☎0 2562 0760; www.dnp.go.th/parkreserve; camping 30B, r from 800B) Within the park there are campsites and a variety of rooms and bungalows, which require advance reservation through the central park's system. Camping gear is also available for rent.

**Khao Yai Garden Lodge** HOTEL \$\$ (☎0 4436 5178; www.khaoyaijardgelodgekm7.com; Th Thanarat, Km 7; r 250-2500B; 🏠🚶🚶) This lodge is mainly an upscale resort but there are a few shared-bath cheapies for the hoi polloi.

## Getting There & Around

All 2nd-class Bangkok-Khorat buses stop in Pak Chong (from Bangkok 108B to 139B, two hours; from Khorat 60B to 74B, one hour). From Bangkok, use the Northern & Northeastern bus terminal. There are also minivans to Bangkok's Victory Monument (160B, 2½ hours; hourly) that depart from the traffic light, and to Khorat (60B, one hour, every 20 minutes) from the market. Minivans departing from Khorat stop in Ayuthaya (90B) and Lopburi (70B) and accept Pak Chong passengers if there are empty seats.

Sörnngtāou travel the 30km from Pak Chong to the park's northern gate (40B, 45 minutes, every half-hour from 6am to 5pm); hop aboard on Th Thanarat in front of the 7-Eleven store and hop off at the ticket gate. From here it is another 14km to the visitor centre; hitchhiking this stretch is quite common. There are also motorcycle rentals at the gate and in Pak Chong town (300B).

Pak Chong is also on the rail line, but this is only a good option if you're coming from Ayuthaya (3rd class 53B, 2nd-class 83B to 173B, two hours, frequent), which saves you from backtracking into Bangkok.

## Phanom Rung Historical Park

Spectacularly located atop an extinct volcano, **Prasat Phanom Rung** (☎0 4463 1746; admission 100B; ☀6am-6pm) is the largest and best restored of the ancient Khmer sanctuaries in Thailand. Dating from the 10th to 13th centuries, the complex faces east towards the sacred capital of Angkor in Cambodia. It was first built as a Hindu monument and features sculpture relating to Vishnu and Shiva. Later it was converted into a Buddhist temple.

The craftsmanship at Phanom Rung represents the pinnacle of Khmer artistic achievement, on a par with the bas-reliefs at Angkor Wat in Cambodia. One of the most striking design features is the promenade, an avenue sealed with laterite and sandstone blocks and flanked by sandstone pillars with lotus-bud tops. It leads to the first and largest of three *naga* bridges, which are the only surviving architectural features of their kind in Thailand.

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 windows with false balustrades. Once inside the temple walls, check out the galleries and the *gopura* (entrance pavilion), paying particular attention to the lintels over the doors.

If you can, plan your visit for one of the four times of the year when the sun shines through all 15 sanctuary doorways. This solar alignment happens during sunrise on 3 to 5 April and 8 to 10 September and sunset on 5 to 7 March and 5 to 7 October (one day earlier in leap years).

Several English-speaking guides (fees are negotiable) are available at the information centre.

### Sleeping

Phanom Rung is a day trip from Nakhon Ratchasima (Khorat) and Surin, but some people spend the night in Nang Rong, the nearest town to the temple.

### **P California Inter Hostel**

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎08 1808 3347; www.pcalifornianangrong.webs.com; Th Sangkakrit; r 250-700B; ☎@☎) On the east side of town, this guesthouse has bright, good-value rooms. The friendly, English-speaking owners are full of advice about the area and can arrange Phanom Rung tours as well as bike and motorcycle hire.

## A 'RUIN'ED NEIGHBOURHOOD

Surrounding Phanom Rung are other minor Khmer ruins worth visiting for their remote ambience. **Prasat Muang Tam** (admission 100B; ☀6am-6pm) was once a shrine to Shiva and dates to the 10th or 11th century. A 150B combo ticket allows entry to both Phanom Rung and Muang Tam. Motorcycle taxis will make the trip from Phanom Rung for another 150B.

### **Honey Inn**

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎0 4462 2825; www.honeyinn.com; 8/1 Soi Si Kun; r 250-350B; ☎@☎) This place, 1km from the bus station, has simple rooms.

### Getting There & Away

For day-trippers from Khorat (Nakhon Ratchasima) or Surin, take a bus to Ban Tako (60B to 85B, two hours, hourly), a well-marked turn-off 14km east of Nang Rong, the closet village to the historic site. From here the easiest option is to hire a motorcycle taxi (300B to 400B roundtrip).

If you're overnighting in Nang Rong, buses pass through from Khorat (70B to 80B, two hours, hourly) and Pak Chong (1st class 140B, 2½ hours, hourly). From Nang Rong there's a *sörngtāou* that leaves from the old market at the east end of town to the parking lot at the foot of Phanom Rung. You'll need to hire transport up the mountain.

## Surin & Around

POP 41,200

There's not a lot to see in sleepy Surin until the annual Elephant Roundup comes to town in November. The rest of the year, a few travellers trickle through en route to the Khmer temple of Phanom Rung and other minor temples that line the Cambodian border. Culturally, Surin has a strong Khmer influence, and the province is renowned for its silk-weaving villages.

Surin is also a launching point for a little-used border-crossing point for Siem Reap-bound travellers (see p719).

### Sights

#### **Elephant Study Centre**

ELEPHANT VILLAGE

(☎0 4414 5050; Ban Ta Klang; admission 100B; ☀shows 10am & 2pm) To see Surin's elephants on their home turf, head to this village, about 50km north of Surin. The Suay people are a minority ethnic group who traditionally

herded and trained elephants. Twice daily elephant shows include the usual tusker tricks. There are also elephant rides and a homestay program. Sǒrngtǎaou run here from Surin's bus terminal (50B, two hours, hourly), with the last one returning at 4pm.

### Craft Villages

HANDICRAFT CENTRES

There are many silk and silvercraft villages within easy striking distance of Surin town. These villages' traditional arts display Khmer influences and are not widely available in the rest of the country. **Ban Tha Sawang**, 8km from Surin, is one of the most renowned silk villages in Thailand, known for its exquisite brocade fabrics (*pâh yók torng*). Sǒrngtǎaou (15B, 20 minutes) run regularly from Surin's day market, and a tǔk-tǔk should cost about 150B to 200B.

**Ban Khwao Sinarin** and **Ban Chok**, about 18km north of Surin, are known for silk and silver respectively. Khun Manee, who runs **Phra Dab Suk** (☎08 9865 8720; Ban Khwao Sinarin) on the main drag takes visitors to see

silk being woven; call in advance. Big blue sǒrngtǎaou to Ban Khwao Sinarin (25B, 1½ hours, hourly) leave from Surin's train station.

## Volunteering

Surin has a volunteer scene thanks to **Starfish Ventures** (☎08 1723 1403; www.starfishvolunteers.com) and **LemonGrass Volunteering** (☎0819775300; www.lemongrass-volunteering.com). If you'd like to spend some quality time with elephants, the **Surin Project** (☎08 4482 1210; www.surinproject.org; 12,000B), run by the Elephant Nature Park, helps educate villagers about ecotourism opportunities as a revenue alternative to street begging.

## ★ ★ Festivals

The annual **Elephant Round-up** (November) showcases the elephants in mock battles and various feats of strength and dexterity, and all of the hotels fill up with foreigners – an astonishing feat in itself.

## WEIRD & WONDERFUL ISAN

From ghouls to gunpowder, Isan dominates in the bizarre attractions category.

### Dan Sai's Spirit Festival

The raucous **Phi Ta Khon Festival** is a cross between the revelry of Carnival and the ghoulishness of Halloween. The festival coincides with a subdued Buddhist holy day of Bun Phra Wet (Phra Wet Festival), honouring the penultimate life of Buddha, Phra Wessandara (often shortened in Thai to Phra Wet). But in Dan Sai the main event is a rice-whisky-fuelled parade in which villagers don masks to transform themselves into the spirits who welcomed Phra Wet's return. The shop **Kawinthip Hattakham** (☎08 9077 2080; phitakham@yahoo.com; 70/1 Th Kaew Asa; ☉6.30am-8pm) can help arrange homestay accommodation. Dan Sai sits between Loei (60B, 1½ hours) and Phitsanulok (94B, three hours) and the festival usually occurs in June.

### Yasothon's Kaboom Fest

**Rocket Festivals** (*Bun Bāng Fai*) are held across Isan in May and June to tell Phaya Thaen, a pre-Buddhist rain god, that it's time for him to send down the wet stuff; but no place celebrates as fervently as Yasothon, where the largest rockets, called *bāng fai síp lāhn*, are 3m long and packed with 500kg of gunpowder. There are homestays available and Yasothon can be reached by bus from Nakhon Ratchasima (158B to 205B, four hours) and Ubon Ratchathani (66B to 85B, 1½ hours) and by minivan from Mukdahan (76B, two hours, every half-hour).

### Si Saket's Glass Temple

Before recycling was in vogue, the idea for the **Million Bottle Temple** (Wat Lan Khuat; ☉daylight hr) was born from a religious vision. In 1982, the abbot dreamt of a sanctuary in heaven made of diamonds and gems. Wishing to replicate this divine splendour he set about covering the temple buildings in the most sparkly material he could find: green bottles. And today the temple shines *sort of* gem-like. The temple sits outside of Si Saket in Khun Han, 11km south of Hwy 24 via Rte 2111. Public transport is limited so you'll have to rent a motorbike in Surin.

## GETTING TO CAMBODIA

If you find yourself in this remote corner of Thailand, you're surprisingly close to Cambodia's Angkor temples. The following are little-used crossings that can get you to Siem Reap.

### Chong Chom to O Smach

**Getting to the border** Minibuses leave from Surin's bus terminal to the border (60B, 1½ hours, frequent).

**At the border** Travellers have reported Thai officials charging unnecessary fees (politely decline this opportunity). Cambodian visas (US\$20; bring a passport photo) are available at the border.

**Moving on** Transport is tricky on the Cambodian side; share taxis go to Samraong and moto or private taxis do the remainder to Siem Reap, though the road is in poor condition.

See p93 for information on doing the trip in the opposite direction.

### Chong Sa Ngam to Choam

This remote crossing provides access to the former Khmer Rouge stronghold of Anlong Veng and on to Siem Reap.

**Getting to the border** There is no direct public transport from Surin or Si Saket to the border so it is easiest (though not cheapest) to hire transport.

**At the border** Cambodian visas are available at the border with the usual formalities (US\$20, passport photo).

**Moving on** Once across, travellers have reported hiring motos to tour Khmer Rouge sites, like Pol Pot's grave, and the road to Siem Reap is in good condition.

See p91 for information on doing the trip in the opposite direction.

## Sleeping & Eating

During the elephant roundup, every hotel in town is booked and rates can triple; reserve well in advance.

### Pirom-Aree's House GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎08 4451 5140; Soi Arunee, Th Thungpo; s/d 120/200B) This guesthouse is 1km west of the city in a peaceful but somewhat far-flung location. Still, Pirom is a knowledgeable asset for tourism in Isan and can arrange tours to Khmer ruins. The wooden, shared bathrooms back onto a shady garden and rice paddy.

### Ban Donmai GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎08 9948 4181; Rte 226; r 300-500B; ☎) The 'Treehouse' is a combination of Gilligan's Island and a dishevelled basement. It's 3km from downtown, along the highway. Boon-yai and Nan, the cheerful owners, prefer that guests book at least a day in advance; in return, there's free pick-up.

### Night Bazaar THAI \$

(Th Krungsri Nai; ☎5-10pm) Everybody in town turns up for the pedestrian-only market to shop, eat dinner and watch each other.

### Petmanee 2 NORTHEASTERN THAI \$

(☎08 4451 6024; Th Murasart; dishes 20-60B; ☎lunch) Surin's most famous purveyor of *sôm-tam* and *kài yâang* is down a small *soi* south of Ruampaet Hospital and next to Wat Salaloi. There's no English spoken or written here and no English sign, but the food is so good it's worth the hassle.

## Getting There & Away

The **bus terminal** (Th Jit Bamrung) is one block from the train station. Destinations include the following:

**Aranya Prathet** 137B; six hours; three daily.

**Bangkok** 250B to 320B; seven hours.

**Nakhon Ratchasima** 90B to 157B; four hours; every half-hour.

**Ubon Ratchathani** 105B to 200B; three hours.

The **train station** (Th Nong Toom & Th Thawasan) is centrally located. Destinations:

**Bangkok** 3rd class 73B, 2nd class 279B to 399B; three hours.

**Ubon Ratchathani** 3rd class 81B, 2nd class 122-150B; seven hours.

## GETTING TO LAOS: CHONG MEK TO VANG TAO

This busy border crossing connects to Laos' Si Phan Don (Four Thousand Islands) region via Pakse; it is also the only Thai-Lao border where you don't have to cross the Mekong.

**Getting to the border** Minivans from Ubon Ratchathani go to Chong Mek (100B, 1¼ hours, every half hour). There are also direct buses from Ubon to Pakse that stop at the border for visa formalities.

**At the border** The crossing is largely hassle-free, save for the occasional practice of a 50B 'stamping' levy by Lao officials. Lao visas are available on the spot for US\$30 to US\$42, depending on nationality; a passport photo is also needed.

**Moving on** The southern Lao city of Pakse is about 45 minutes away.

For information on crossing this border in the opposite direction, see p362.

## Ubon Ratchathani

POP 115,000

Although it is one of the bigger cities in the region, Ubon still retains a small-town feel thanks to the relaxing nature of the Mae Nam Mun, Thailand's second-longest river, and its palpable Lao heritage. It is easily traversed by foot and easily appreciated by aimless wandering.

Ubon doesn't see a lot of foreign visitors because it is in an odd corner of the country, but there is a nearby Thai-Lao border crossing that provides an alternative route into southern Laos.

### Sights

#### Wat Si Ubon Rattanam

TEMPLE

(Th Uparat) Wat Si Ubon Rattanam houses the 7cm-tall Topaz Buddha (Phra Kaew But-sarakham), which was reportedly brought here from Vientiane at Ubon's founding and is the city's holiest possession.

#### Ubon Ratchathani National Museum

MUSEUM

(Th Kheuan Thani; admission 100B; ☺9am-4pm Wed-Sun) Housed in a former palace of the Rama VI era, Ubon National Museum is a good place to delve into local history and culture.

### Festivals

#### Candle Parade

FESTIVAL

Ubon is most famous for its Candle Parade, when huge wax sculptures are paraded to the temples. It marks the beginning of the Buddhist rains retreat in July.

### Sleeping & Eating

Rates shoot up and availability goes down during the Candle Festival.

#### Sri Isan Hotel

HOTEL \$

(☎0 4526 1011; www.sriisanhotel.com; Th Ratchabut; r 380-800B; 📞@☎) The exception to Isan's low-grade hotels is this cheerful place.

#### Thongcome Mansion

HOTEL \$

(☎08 1579 3629; Th Suriyat; r 350B; 📞) This little family-run place has some of Ubon's spiffiest rooms in this price range.

#### River Moon Guesthouse

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎0 4528 6093; 21 Th Sisaket 2; r 150-200B; 📞) A crumbling old place with cheap rooms, 300m from the train station.

#### Jumpa-Hom

THAI \$

(Th Phichit Rangsan; dishes 55-1500B; ☺dinner; 📞) Lovely and delicious, Jumpa-Hon does a little of everything.

#### Night Market

THAI \$

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

#### Porntip Gai Yang

#### Wat Jaeng

NORTHEASTERN THAI \$

(Th Saphasit; dishes 20-130B; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner) 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 purveyor of *gàì yâhng*, *sôm-dam*, sausages and other Isan foods.

### Information

**Main post office** (Th Luang; ☺8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat, Sun & holidays)

**Ubonrak Thonburi Hospital** (☎0 4526 0285; Th Phalorangrit)

**TAT** (☎ 0 4524 3770; www.tatubon.org; 264/1 Th Kheuan Thani; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm)

**Tourist police** (☎ 0 4524 5505, emergency ☎ 1155; Th Suriyiat)

## **i** Getting There & Around

Ubon's **bus terminal** (☎ 0 4531 6085; Th Chayangkun) is located at the far northern end of town, 3km from the centre. It is accessible via sǒrngtǎaou No 2, 3 or 10. Destinations include:

**Bangkok's Northern & Northeastern (Mo Chit) bus terminal** 385B to 473B, eight hours.

**Nakhon Ratchasima** 203B to 330B, five to six hours.

**Mukdahan** 75B to 135B, 3½ hours.

**Surin** 105B to 200B, three hours.

The **train station** (☎ 0 4532 1588; Th Sathani) is located in Warin Chamrap, south of central Ubon, accessible via sǒrngtǎaou No 2. There are a couple of night trains in either direction connecting Ubon and Bangkok (3rd class 245B, 2nd class 371B to 551B).

Numbered sǒrngtǎaou (10B) run throughout town. A tǔk-tǔk trip will cost at least 40B.

## Mukdahan

POP 34,300

Mukdahan is a well-oiled revolving door between Thailand and Savannakhet in Laos, thanks to the Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge 2, an infrastructure link brought about by the ambitious Trans-Asia Highway project that continues by road all the way to the Vietnamese port town of Danang. Though the world has arrived at Mukdahan's doorstep, the town provides little distraction between arrival and departure.

If you need to overnight here, **Ban Rim Suan** (☎ 0 4263 2980; Th Samut Sakdarak; r 330B; 🍷🍷) is the best budget deal in the city.

**Wine Wild Why?** (11 Th Samron Chaikhongthi; dishes 40-150B; 🍷lunch & dinner) is an atmospheric eatery for Thai and Isan food.

**Goodmook** (414/1 Th Song Nang Sathit; dishes 70-380B; 🍳breakfast, lunch & dinner; 🍷) has all the ingredients of a travellers' cafe: an international menu, free wi-fi and actual decor. The **night market** (Th Song Nang Sathit; ☎ 4-10pm) provides plenty of Vietnamese food along with the usual suspects.

Mukdahan's bus terminal is on Rte 212, west of town. Take a yellow sǒrngtǎaou (10B) from Th Phitak Phanomkhet near the fountain. Destinations include:

**Bangkok's Northern & Northeastern bus terminal** 390B to 502B, 10 hours, evening departures.

**Nakhon Phanom** 52B to 88B, 2½ hours, frequent.

**That Phanom** 28B to 45B, one hour.

**Khon Kaen** 155B to 187B, 4½ hours, frequent.

**Ubon Ratchathani** (75B to 135B, 3½ hours, frequent).

## That Phanom

This drowsy hamlet is a little piece of Laos on the wrong side of the Mekong River. It is not a place you'd chart a course to on purpose but if you're headed to Nong Khai from the Mukdahan border crossing, That Phanom is a lovely detour. The highlight in town is **Wat Phra That Phanom** (Th Chayangkun), crowned by an iconic *tǎht*, a needle-like Lao-style *chedi*. A lively **Thai-Lao market** (🕒 7am-noon Mon & Thu) gathers by the river north of the pier where Lao merchants sell herbal medicines, forest roots and river crabs. During the **That Phanom Festival** (late January or early February) visitors come for a boisterous temple fair including *mǒr lam* (Isan traditional music).

**Kritsada Rimkhong Hotel** (☎ 08 1262 4111; www.ksdrinkhong-resort.com; 90 Th Rim-

### GETTING TO LAOS: MUKDAHAN TO SAVANNAKHET

The Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge 2 links Mukdahan and Savannakhet, where onward transport continues to the Vietnamese coast.

**Getting to the border** From Mukdahan, buses (45B, 45 minutes, hourly from 7.30am to 7pm) make the crossing.

**At the border** Border formalities are handled on the bridge. A 30-day Lao visa is available for US\$30 to \$42, depending on nationality; bring a passport photo.

**Moving on** On the Lao side there are long-distance buses to Vietnam, a journey of about seven hours.

For information on crossing from Laos into Thailand, see p357.

khong; r 350-500B; 🏠🍴🍷) has rooms that range from plain to attractive.

There's a small **night market** (🕒4-10pm) and **riverside eateries** (Th Rimkhong) for dinner.

That Phanom's bus station is west of town with services to Ubon Ratchathani (95B to 167B, 4½ hours, hourly), Mukdahan (26B to 45B, one hour), Udon Thani (109B to 167B, four hours, five daily) and Nakhon Phanom (27B to 47B, one hour, five daily). You can also take one of the frequent sörngtāaou (35B, 90 minutes) that park in town.

## Nakhon Phanom

POP 31,700

This tidy provincial capital has a picturesque setting beside the Mekong River overlooking the asymmetrical peaks of Laos. With its French colonial buildings and Vietnamese influences, this is a little piece of Indochina on the far northeastern fringes of Siam. There's also a legal border crossing into Laos should you be looking for an escape hatch.

The **TAT Office** (📞4251 3490; Th Sunthon Wijit; 🕒8.30am-4.30pm) has a map pointing out several heritage buildings. The neighbouring village of Ban Na Chok, 3km west of town, gave refuge to Vietnamese liberator Ho Chi Minh. He planned the resistance movement in what is now called **Uncle Ho's House** (admission 50B), which served as his residence from 1928-29. More Uncle Ho memories are kept at the **community centre** (donations appreciated; 🕒8am-5pm).

The city runs an hour-long **sunset cruise** (📞08 6230 5560; 50B; departs 5pm) along the

Mekong on *Thesaban 1*, which docks across from the Indochina Market.

Nakhon Phanom is famous for its October **illuminated Boat Procession**, a modern twist on the ancient tradition of floating offerings to the Mekong *naga*, a mythical serpent that appears in Buddhist art and iconography.

**Winter Hotel** (📞0 4251 1946; 272 Th Bamrung Meuang; r 250-400B; 🏠🍴🍷) has clean if elderly rooms. **Nakhon Phanom Design Center Hostel** (NDC; 📞08 5668 1780; Th Goo-bahtwai; dm incl breakfast & bicycle 350B; 🏠🍷) is an outpost of cool occupying a converted shophouse with loads of character.

The outdoor terrace at the **Indochina Market** (Th Sunthon Wijit; 🍳breakfast, lunch & dinner) has choice seats that frame the mountain views. The **night market** (Th Fuang Nakhon; 🕒4-9pm) cooks up a variety of take-away food. **Luk Tan** (📞0 4251 1456; 83 Th Bamrung Meuang; buffet 89B; 🍳dinner), in the centre of town, is a quirky spot featuring international dishes.

The **bus terminal** (Th Fuang Nakhon) is east of the town centre. Destinations include Nong Khai (210B, six hours, six daily departures), Udon Thani (155B to 195B, five hours, frequent), Mukdahan (52B to 88B, two hours, hourly), That Phanom (27B to 49B, one hour, five daily) and Bangkok (450B to 592B, 12 hours, morning and evening departures).

## Nong Khai

POP 61,500

Adorable Nong Khai has a winning recipe: a sleepy setting beside the Mekong River, enough tourist amenities to dispel isolation

### GETTING TO LAOS: REMOTE BORDERS

#### Nakhon Phanom To Tha Khaek

Though not the most convenient crossing, Nakhon Phanom feeds into the Lao town of Tha Khaek.

**At the border** The new Thai-Lao Friendship bridge opened in 2011 and the crossing is now made by bus. Lao visas are available at the border for US\$30 to US\$42, depending on nationality; bring a passport photo.

**Moving on** Savannakhet is a two-hour bus ride from Tha Khaek.

See p354 for information on doing the trip in the reverse direction.

#### Bueng Kan to Paksan

Although it's very rarely done, you can cross the border here to Paksan, but only if you already have your Lao visa. The boat costs 60B per person and goes when there are eight passengers. Buses to Bueng Kan leave from Nong Khai (100B, 2½ hours, six daily), Nakhon Phanom (130B, three hours, six daily) and Udon Thani (150B, 4½ hours, 12 daily).

## AT HOME WITH THE HERD

Thailand's rural northeast is flush with village homestay programs, mainly aimed at urban Thais who didn't grow up beside a rice paddy. Of the few that can accommodate English-speaking visitors is **Kham Pia Homestay** (☎0 4241 3578, 08 7861 0601; www.thailandwildelephanttrekking.com; per person 200B, meals 50-90B), which is located within walking distance of the 186-sq-km Phu Wua Wildlife Reserve. The reserve has nature trails and a resident herd of elephants. Kham Pia is 190km east of Nong Khai, just 3km off Hwy 212. Buses from Nong Khai (140B, 3½ hours) will drop you at Ban Don Chik, 3km away.

and enough local attractions to fill a day with sightseeing, snacking and wandering. It's an easy overnight train ride from Bangkok and sits right on a convenient border crossing into Vientiane, Laos.

### Sights

**Sala Kaew Ku** SCULPTURE PARK  
(Wat Khaek; admission 20B; ☉8am-6pm) A curious, must-see attraction, Sala Kaew Ku is a sculpture park that was born from a spiritual vision by a Brahmanic yogi-priest-shaman who emigrated from Laos. The statues are a potpourri of the Hindu and Buddhist pantheon, and the immense statues offer some freaky photo opportunities. While the motivations for its 20-year construction were undoubtedly spiritual, the end result is a masterpiece of modern religious art. The sculpture park is 5km southeast of town. It is easily reached by bicycle from Nong Khai; Mut Mee Guest House distributes maps.

**Talat Tha Sadet** MARKET  
(Th Rimkhong; ☉8.30am-6pm) Talat Tha Sadet follows the river, obscuring the view with stalls selling crusty French baguettes, salted and grilled river fish, silks, souvenirs, and, if you look really hard, possibly the kitchen sink.

### Volunteering

Nong Khai has sprouted a volunteer scene. **Isara** (www.isara.org) and **Open Mind Projects** (www.openmindprojects.org) place volunteers.

### Festivals

Like many other northeastern towns, Nong Khai has a **Rocket Festival** (*Bun Bang Fai*), which begins on Visakha Bucha day in late May/early June.

The end of Buddhist Lent (*Ork Phansaa*) in late October/early November ushers in a variety of river-based events, including **long-tail boat races** and the mysterious **naga fireballs** (when illuminated seem-

ingly gaseous balls rise out of the river on the night of the full moon).

### Sleeping

Nong Khai is the only Isan town with a full-fledged backpacker scene, so enjoy it while you can.

**Mut Mee Garden Guesthouse** GUESTHOUSE \$  
(☎0 4246 0717; www.mutmee.com; Soi Mutmee, Th Kaew Worawut; r 150-1200B; 🍷🍷) Overlooking the mighty Mekong, the Mut Mee is a destination in itself. The rooms are good value, the garden is *sooooo* relaxing and the friendly English owner is a great storyteller.

**Ruan Thai Guesthouse** GUESTHOUSE \$  
(☎0 4241 2519; 1126/2 Th Rimkhong; r 200-400B, f 1200B; 🍷🍷🍷) Once little more than a small private home, this pleasant spot has grown with the boom times and now boasts a variety of quality rooms and a flower-filled garden.

**E-San Guesthouse** GUESTHOUSE \$  
(☎08 5010 2540; 419/1 Th Khun Muang; r 200-700B; 🍷🍷) This quiet place east of Talat Tha Sadet has simple rooms in a beautifully restored wooden house. There's also a modern air-con wing as well.

**Sawasdee Guesthouse** GUESTHOUSE \$  
(☎0 4241 2502; www.sawasdeeguesthouse.com; 402 Th Meechai; s/d 160/200-450B; 🍷🍷🍷) This Franco-Chinese shophouse has tidy rooms (the fan options share bathrooms) that are rich in history though lacking in decor. The owner is quite a character.

### Eating

**TOP CHOICE** **Nagarina** THAI \$  
(☎0 4241 2211; Th Rimkhong; dishes 40-250B; 🍷🍷🍷) Associated with Mut Mee Guesthouse, this floating restaurant turns out real-deal Thai without turning



## GETTING TO LAOS: NONG KHAI TO VIENTIANE

Nong Khai to Vientiane is one of the most popular Thai-Lao border crossings.

**Getting to the border** Túk-túk from central Nong Khai go to the Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge (100B for two people), where border formalities are handled.

**At the border** After getting stamped out of Thailand, you can take a minibus (20B) across the bridge to the Lao immigration checkpoint, where visas are available (US\$32 to US\$42, depending on nationality; bring a passport photo).

**Moving on** From the bridge it's 22km to Vientiane, via buses, túk-túk and taxis. If you already have a Lao visa, there are also direct buses to Vientiane from Nong Khai's bus terminal (55B, one hour).

For information on making this crossing in the opposite direction, see p321.

down the spicy, fishy flavours. There's a sun-set cruise (100B) most nights around 5pm.



### Dee Dee Pohchanah

THAI \$

(Th Prajak; dishes 40-230B; ☺lunch & dinner) Dee Dee means 'really good' in Thai and you can tell from the crowd.

### Daeng Namnuang

VIETNAMESE \$

(Th Rimkhong; dishes 45-180B; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner; ☺) This massive Vietnamese restaurant has grown into an Isan institution known throughout the country for its *nám neu-ang* (pork spring rolls).

### Saap Lah

NORTHEASTERN THAI \$

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



### Drinking

There are several pubs along Th Rimkhong, the riverfront road. Two standouts are **Gaia** (☺7pm-late Wed-Mon) and **Warm Up** (476/4 Th Rimkhong; ☺7pm-2am), which has a pool table and is popular with Thais and travellers.



### Shopping

#### Hornbill Bookshop

BOOKS

(☺0 4246 0272; Soi Mut Mee, Th Kaew Worawut; ☺10am-7pm Mon-Sat) Best used English-language bookstore in Isan.



### Information

There is no shortage of banks with ATMs in town. For a wealth of information on Nong Khai and the surrounding area, visit [www.mutmee.com](http://www.mutmee.com).

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

**Nong Khai Hospital** (☺0 4241 1504; Th Meechai)

**Post office** (Th Meechai)

**TAT** (☺0 4242 1326; Hwy 2; ☺8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri)

### Getting There & Away

Nong Khai's main **bus terminal** (☺0 4241 1612) is just off Th Prajak, by the Pho Chai market, about 1.5km from the riverfront guesthouses. Nearby is Udon Thani, a major bus hub with more transport options. Destinations include:

**Bangkok's Northern & Northeastern (Mo Chit) station** 2nd class 350B, 1st class 450B, VIP 700B; 11 hours; afternoon and evening departures.

**Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi (Airport) bus station** 454B; nine hours; departs 8pm.

**Udon Thani** Ordinary 25B, 1st class 47B, one hour; frequent departures.

**Nakhon Phanom** Ordinary 175B, 2nd class 220B; six hours; six daily.

The **train station** (☺0 4241 1592; Hwy 212) is 2km west of town. Two express trains connect to **Bangkok** (2nd-class air-con 498B; 11 to 12 hours; one morning and one afternoon departure).

## Udon Thani

POP 227,200

Sprawling Udon Thani is too big to be charming and too conservative to be cultured. It boomed on the back of the Vietnam War when it hosted a US air base. Today it sees relatively few foreigners other than a large number of former sex tourists now married to Thai women.

The rest of us might roll through to visit **Ban Chiang**, one of the earliest prehistoric cultures known in Southeast Asia. The affiliated **museum** (☺0 4220 8340; admission 150B;

## Ko Samet



0 0.5 1 km  
0 0.5 miles



☉8.30am-4.30pm) displays pottery and tools from the civilisation and includes an excavation pit used as a burial ground dating to 300 BC. Ban Chiang is 50km from Udon Thani and accessible from bus terminal 1 via Sakhon Nakhon- or Nakhon Phanom-bound buses; get off at Ban Nong Mek (40B, 45 minutes) and hire a tük-tük (60B) for the remainder.

Simple but friendly guesthouses in town include **P & Mo Guesthouse** (☎08 4031 8337; 39 Th Rung Sun; r 300-400B; 📶📶), near the bus station, and **Udon Backpackers** (☎08 9620 8684; www.udonbackpacker.com; 299/5 Soi Fairach 1; 150B; 📶). In Ban Chiang, **Lakeside Sunrise Guesthouse** (☎0 4220 8167; Ban Chiang; r 250B; 📶) has a countryside setting near the museum and a helpful English-speaking owner who rents out bikes (50B per day) and motorcycles (250B per day).

Udon has two bus stations, connected by the yellow city bus. **Bus Terminal No 1** (☎0 4222 2916; Th Sai Uthit) serves Bangkok's Northern and Northeastern (Mo Chit) bus station (550B to 641B, eight hours, eight daily), Suvarnabhumi airport (418B, eight hours, 9pm) and Khorat (181B to 258B, 4½ hours, half-hourly).

**Bus Terminal No 2** is on the Ring Rd west of the city. Destinations include Loei (66B to 92B, three hours, frequent) and Chiang Mai (409B to 613B, 12 hours, six daily). For Nong Khai (35B to 47B, one hour, frequent) you can use either terminal, but the most frequent departures are from Rangsin Market, reached by the No 6 sörngtāaou.

Udon Thani is on the Bangkok-Nong Khai rail line. Destinations include Bangkok (2nd class 479B, 10 to 11 hours, two daily departures) and Nong Khai (3rd class 11B, 2nd class 55B to 85B; one hour; three daily departures).

## EASTERN GULF COAST

Thailand's east coast isn't as stunning as the postcard-famous southern coast, but it is an ideal beach jaunt from jostling Bangkok if you're pinched for time or travelling overland to/from Cambodia. While your friends are still packed into buses en route to Ko Pha-Ngan, you'll be sun-kissed and sandy-toed.

### Ko Samet

Bangkok's beachy backyard, Ko Samet is close enough for a weekend escape, yet worlds away from the urban bustle. Traffic-weary Thais, foreign expats and beach-hopping

backpackers are Samet's steady clientele – and everyone squeezes into the petite east-coast beaches. It's been a **national park** (admission 200B) since 1981 and is still surprisingly rustic considering Thailand's penchant for urban makeovers of its seaside parks. Walking trails connect the beaches and the rocky headlands, the interior road isn't paved and coconut trees tower over the buildings.

The northeast part of the island has the most popular and populated areas. **Hat Sai Kaew** is the widest swathe of sand popular with Russian and domestic package tourists. The beach is beautiful but busy by day with speedboats and at night with karaoke and discos.

More subdued than its northern neighbour, **Ao Hin Khok** and **Ao Phai** are two gorgeous bays separated by rocky headlands. The crowd here tends to be younger and more stylish than the middle-aged crew in Hat Sai Kaew and the parties are late-nighters. These two beaches are the traditional backpacker party centres of the island.

**Ao Thian** (Candlelight Beach) is punctuated by big boulders that shelter small sandy spots ideal for castaways. It is one of Samet's most casual, easygoing beaches and is deliciously lonely on weekdays. On weekends, Bangkok university students serenade the stars with all-night guitar sessions.

The cove 'caboose' is **Ao Wai**, a lovely beach far removed from everything else (in reality it is 1km from Ao Thian).

Bring along mosquito spray as the forested island is home to everyone's favourite blood suckers.

### Sleeping & Eating

Most bungalows have restaurants offering mixed menus of Thai and traveller food. Weekday rates don't rank well on the value scale (fan rooms start at 800B) but look incredibly attractive considering that weekend and holidays rates increase by as much as 100%. Eat locally at the noodle bars and stir-fry joints in Na Dan, the small village next to the pier.

#### Laem Yai Hut Resort

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎0 38644282; Hat Sai Kaew; r 800-1000B; 📶) A colourful collection of weather-worn huts camp out in a shady garden on the north end of the beach. The laid-back vibe creates an alternate backpacker universe in a firmly rooted package-tour beach.

**Jep's Bungalows**

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎0 3864 4112; www.jepbungalow.com; Ao Hin Khok; r 500-1600B; 📶📶) Good old Jep's still has cheapie fan huts clambering up a forested hillside, just like the old days (a mere five years ago).

**Candlelight Beach**

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎08 1762 9387; Ao Thian; r 700-1200B; 📶) On the beach, these fan and air-con bungalows with sea-facing porches have a natural, woody ambience.

**Tonhard Bungalow**

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎08 1435 8900; Ao Thian; r 700-1500B; 📶) On a wooded part of the beach, this place has bungalows that vary from basic to less basic. But in return you get a friendly and relaxing setting.

**i Information**

ATMs and internet cafes can be found in Na Dan and Ao Wong Deuan.

**Ko Samet Health Centre** (☎0 3861 1123;

☎8.30am-9pm Mon-Fri, to 4.30pm Sat & Sun) For minor medical problems; on the main road between Na Dan pier and Hat Sai Kaew.

**i Getting There & Around**

Ko Samet is reached by boat from the mainland town of Ban Phe. Services include:

**Ferry to Na Dan** (One-way 50B, return 100B, 45 minutes, hourly 8am to 4pm) Easiest access to Samet.

**Ferry to Ao Wong Deuan** (One-way 50B, one hour, two daily departures) Service varies with the season.

**Speedboat charter** (250B for 10 passengers, 2500B for the boat) Disembarks at requested beach.

Ban Phe's **bus station** (near Tha Thetsaban) serves the following destinations:

**Bangkok's Eastern (Ekamai) station** (157B, four hours, hourly 6am to 6pm)

**Bangkok's Victory Monument** (250B, hourly 7am to 6pm, four hours)

**Laem Ngop** (350B, two daily departures, four to five hours) Mainland pier for boats to Ko Chang.

The nearby town of Rayong has more transport options, including Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi (Airport) bus station (165B, 2½ hours, eight daily departures); sǒrngtǎau make the trip between Ban Phe and Rayong (25B, frequent).

Sǒrngtǎau on the island cost from 20B to 80B, depending on your destination and the number of passengers. Most drivers charge between 200B to 500B for the vehicle if there aren't enough people to split the cost.

**Chanthaburi & Trat**

Surrounded by palm trees and fruit plantations, Chanthaburi and Trat are mainly transit transfers for travellers headed to Ko Chang or the Cambodian border. If you stop to catch your breath, you'll find that Chanthaburi dazzles with its weekend gem market, and sleepy Trat is filled with old teak shophouses and genuine small-town living.

**🛏 Sleeping & Eating****CHANTHABURI**

You're unlikely to need a bed in Chanthaburi, but just in case...

**River Guest House**

HOTEL \$

(☎0 3932 8211; 3/5-8 Th Si Chan; r 150-400B; 📶📶) Standard hotel boxes aren't much to get excited about but this is as good as it gets in the budget range. There's a fair bit of highway noise, so request a room on the opposite side of the building.

**Seafood Noodle Shop**

THAI \$

(Th Sukhaphiban; dishes 25-50B; ☺lunch & dinner) The old city, along Mae Nam Chanthaburi, is where you'll find most sightseeing Thais eating this Chanthaburi variation of the basic rice-noodle theme; nearby are other home-made snacks.

**TRAT**

You're more likely to overnight in Trat and the town has a small but charming guest-house scene.

**Ban Jaidee Guest House**

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎0 3952 0678; 6 Th Chaimongkol; r 200B; 📶) This relaxed Thai-style home decorated with artistic flourishes has simple rooms with shared bathrooms. It's very popular, so book ahead.

**Residang House**

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎0 3953 0103; www.trat-guesthouse.com; 87/1-2 Th Thana Charoen; r 260-500B; 📶📶) Big beds with thick mattresses, good bathrooms with hot showers - what more do you need? Fan rooms come with breezes and balconies.

**TOP CHOICE Cool Corner**

CAFE \$

(☎08 4159 2030; 49-51 Th Thana Charoen; dishes 50-150B; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner) Though it's no longer on the corner, this cafe is as cool as ever and the artist/owner still serves up great vibes, good beats and darn good mango lassies.

### Kluarimklong Cafe

(☎0 3952 4919; cnr Th Thana Charoen & Soi Rimklong; dishes 70-90B; ☺lunch & dinner) The winning combination here is delicious Thai food served in modern air-conditioned surroundings. The dishes are surprisingly affordable given the slick decor.

THAI \$

## i Information

**Bangkok Trat Hospital** (☎0 3953 2735; Th Sukhumvit; ☺24hr) Best health care in the region. It's 400m north of the town centre.

**Tratosphere Bookshop** (23 Rimklong Soi, Trat; ☺8am-10pm) Load up on beach reading or get travel tips on the area.

**Trat Map** (www.tratmap.com) An online directory of businesses and attractions in Trat.

## i Getting There & Away

Most buses originating in Bangkok stop in Chanthaburi and Trat.

### Chanthaburi

For travellers heading to/from the northeast, Chanthaburi is the transfer station. Chanthaburi's **bus station** (Th Saritidet) serves the following:

**Bangkok's Eastern (Ekamai) station** (187B, 3½ hours, hourly 6am to 11.30pm)

**Bangkok's Northern (Mo Chit) station** (187B; four hours; two daily departures)

**Trat** (70B, 1½ hours; every 1½ hour; 6.30am to 11.30pm)

**Khorat** (266B; hourly 6am to 6pm) Gateway to the northeast.

**Sa Kaew** (106B to 137B; hourly 6am to 10pm) Transfer point for buses to Aranya Prathet border crossing.

Chanthaburi's minivans leave from a stop near the market and go to Trat (80B), Rayong (100B) and Ban Phe (120B; for Ko Samet).

### Trat

The bus station is outside of town; local sǒrngtǎau leave from Th Sukhumvit near the market to the bus station (20B to 60B, depending on number of passengers). Destinations:

**Bangkok's Eastern (Ekamai) station** (248B, 4½ hours, hourly 6am to 11.30pm)

**Bangkok's Northern (Mo Chit) station** (248B; 5½ hours; two morning departures)

**Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi (Airport) station** (248B; 4 to 4½ hours; five daily departures)

**Chanthaburi** (70B; 1½ hours; every 1½ hour 6.30am to 11.30pm)

**Hat Lek** (120B to 150B; one hour) Minivans depart when full; morning departures are more frequent.

Minivans to Chanthaburi (80B) leave when full from a stop on Th Sukhumvit north of the indoor market. **Family Tour** (☎08 1996 2216; Th Sukhumvit cnr Th Lak Meuang) runs minivans to Bangkok's Victory Monument (300B, five hours, hourly 8am to 5pm) and continue on to Th Khao San (350B).

### To Laem Ngop Piers

Ko Chang-bound travellers have several bus options to reach the mainland pier of Laem Ngop. From Bangkok's Eastern (Ekamai) station buses go all the way to Laem Ngop's Tha Centrepoint (250B, five hours, three morning departures). This route includes a stop at Suvarnabhumi (Airport) bus station as well as Trat's bus station. In the reverse direction, there are two afternoon departures from Laem Ngop. There are also bus and minivan options directly to Ko Chang (see p733).

From Trat town, shared sǒrngtǎau leave from a stop on Th Sukhumvit to Laem Ngop's Tha Centrepoint (50B per person for six passengers; 45 minutes). If departing from Laem Ngop's other piers, inquire about land transfer when you purchase your boat tickets.

## Ko Chang

Jungle-clad Ko Chang used to sit on the forgotten eastern frontier but these days it has been lassoed into Thailand's package tourism industry, with an assortment of sophisticated resorts, tonnes of bars and daily flights from the capital to nearby Trat. Plenty of backpackers still make the Ko Chang-Cambodia tour. Though it is no longer a castaway's idyll, Ko Chang has a way with hyperactive visitors: diving and snorkelling spots are nearby, the forested interior can be explored by foot or by elephant, and kayaks can survey sea coves and mangrove bays. Ko Chang is part of a larger **national park** that includes neighbouring islands.

## 👁 Sights & Activities

Mainly the west coast has been developed for tourism. In the northwest is **Hat Sai Khao**, by far the biggest, busiest and brash-est beach. The backpacker fave is **Lonely Beach**, which is lonely no more, especially at night. An old-fashioned fishing community in **Bang Bao** has become a bustling tourist market. The **east coast** is largely undeveloped with only a few low-key spots, like Hat Yao (Long Beach).

In a forested setting in the northern interior, **Ban Kwan Chang** (☎08 1919 3995; Khlong Son; ☺8.30am-5pm; 900B) offers a quiet experience with its nine resident elephants.

Ko Chang cuts an impressive and heroic profile when viewed from the sea aboard a kayak. Most hotels rent open-top kayaks (from 300B per day) that are convenient for near-shore outings and non-committal kayakers. For more serious paddlers, **Kayak-Chang** (☎08 7673 1923; www.kayakchang.com; Amari Emerald Cove Resort, Khlong Phrao) rents closed-top kayaks (from 1000B per day) and leads day and multiday trips.

On the east side of the island, explore the mangrove swamps of Ao Salak Kok while supporting an award-winning eco-tour program. The **Salak Kok Kayak Station** (☎08 1919 3995; kayak rentals 100B per hr) rents self-guided kayaks and is a village-work project designed to protect the traditional way of life. The kayak station can also arrange hiking tours.

The **dive sites** near Ko Chang offer a variety of coral, fish and beginner-friendly shallow waters on par with other Gulf of Thailand dive sites.

## Sleeping

Accommodation prices on Ko Chang are higher than quality because of the package-

tour industry. Prices and crowds increase around the Christmas holiday period.

### Independent Bo's

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎08 5283 5581; Hat Sai Khao; r 350-550B) A colourful place that clambers up the jungle hillside, Bo's keeps the northern end of Hat Sai Khao firmly rooted in backpacker ways – lots of cheap chillaxin; first come, first served.

### Blue Lagoon Resort

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎08 6330 0094; Ao Khlong Prao; r 600-1000B; ☹) Rustic bungalows overlook a serene lagoon in this shady grove of a guesthouse. A wooden walkway leads to the beach. There are also exceedingly friendly Thai cooking classes.

### Tiger Huts

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎08 1762 3710; Ao Khlong Prao; r 600B) The only thing that separates these wooden huts from labourer shanties is indoor plumbing. They are low on comfort and hospitality, but high on location, claiming the widest and prettiest part of the beach. The neighbouring resorts must be very jealous.

## GETTING TO CAMBODIA: COASTAL BORDERS

### Hat Lek to Cham Yeam

This is the most convenient border crossing between Ko Chang and Sihanoukville in coastal Cambodia.

**Getting to the border** Take a minivan from Trat's bus station to the border at Hat Lek (120B to 150B, one hour, departs when full, more frequently in the morning).

**At the border** Cambodian tourist visas are available at the border for 1200B; payment is only accepted in baht at this border. Bring a passport photo and avoid the runner boys who want to issue a health certificate or other 'medical' paperwork.

**Moving on** From the Cambodian border, take a taxi (US\$10) or moto (US\$3) to Koh Kong where you can catch onward transport to Sihanoukville and Phnom Penh; arriving in the morning ensures more onward transport options.

For information on making this crossing in the other direction, see p110.

### Ban Pakard to Psar Pruhm

If you're heading to Siem Reap (or Battambang) from Ko Chang, you don't have to schlep up to Aranya Prathet-Poipet border crossing. This crossing isn't crowded and shaves off some travel time.

**Getting to the border** Take a minibus from Chanthaburi to Ban Pakard/Pong Nam Ron (150B, one to two hours; three times daily); the Chanthaburi minibus stop is across the river from River Guesthouse.

**At the border** Cross the border with the usual formalities (a passport photo and US\$20 visa fee) to Psar Pruhm.

**Moving on** From the border, arrange a share taxi to Pailin, which has connections to Battambang and from there to Siem Reap.

See p103 for information on crossing in the other direction.

**Buzza's Bungalows**

(☎08 7823 6674; Hat Kaibae; r from 400B; 🍷🍷) Solid concrete bungalows with porches create a laid-back travellers ambience. It's a short and hassle-free stroll to the beach.

GUESTHOUSE \$

**Porn's Bungalows**

(☎08 9251 9233; Hat Kaibae; www.pornsbungalows-kohchang.com; r from 800-900B) Kaibae's resident rasta scene hangs out in a shady coconut grove beside the beach; wooden fan bungalows with hot-water showers. First come, first served.

GUESTHOUSE \$

**Oasis Bungalows**

(☎08 1721 2547; Lonely Beach; www.oasis-khochang.com; r from 350B; 🍷) Sitting at the end of an interior *soi*, Oasis has basic wooden bungalows in a pretty fruit and flower garden. You'll have to walk through the village and down the main road to get to the beach. If Oasis is full, this *soi* is filled with comparable options.

GUESTHOUSE \$

**Jungle Way**

(☎08 9247 3161; Khlong Son Valley; www.jungleway.com; r 200-400B) Ko Chang's unsung attribute is its jungle interior and the English-speaking guides who grew up playing in it. Lek, a local guide, and his family run this friendly guesthouse, deep in the woods and beside a babbling brook. Bungalows are simple but adequate and the on-site restaurant will keep you well fed. Free pier pick-up.

GUESTHOUSE \$

**Treehouse Lodge**

(☎08 1847 8215; Hat Yao; r 300B) The namesake of a once great backpacker crash pad, the new Treehouse resides on remote Hat Yao (Long Beach), in the far southeastern peninsula. Basic huts (with basic bathrooms) chill along a hillside, looking down to a softly sanded slice of beach. The road to Hat Yao is well-sealed to the lookout point but poorly maintained past that, so plan on staying awhile. Inquire in Trat about a taxi service that goes all the way to Long Beach.

GUESTHOUSE \$

**Eating****KaTi Culinary**

(☎08 1903 0408; Ao Khlong Prao; dishes 60-150B; 🍷lunch & dinner) Across the road from Blue Lagoon Resort, KaTi is a popular Thai kitchen and cooking school.

THAI \$

**Nid's Kitchen**

(Hat Kaibae; dishes 30-80B; 🍷lunch & dinner) A sweaty little restaurant north of GajaPuri Resort, Auntie Nid's does all the Thai

THAI \$

standards like a wok wizard. Plus the beers are cold.

**Magic Garden**

(☎0 3955 8027; Lonely Beach; dishes 60-120B; 🍷dinner) Magic Garden is a pagoda to Lonely Beach's special variety of relaxing. Grab some grub, polish off some Beer Changs and then wander down to the beach for some DJ beats.

THAI \$\$

**Ruan Thai**

(☎08 7000 162; Ban Bang Bao; dishes 100-300B; 🍷lunch & dinner) It's about as fresh as it gets (note your future dinner greeting you in tanks as you enter) and the portions are large. The dotting service is beyond excellent – they'll even help you crack your crabs.

SEAFOOD \$\$

**i Information**

Internet cafes and banks with ATMs are plentiful on the island, especially in Hat Sai Khao.

**Ko Chang Hospital** (☎0 3952 1657; Ban Dan Mai) Near the police headquarters.

**Police** (☎0 3958 6191; Ban Dan Mai)

**Post office** (☎0 3955 1240; Hat Sai Khao)

**Tourist police office** (☎1155) Based north of Ban Khlong Prao. Also has smaller police boxes in Hat Sai Khao and Hat Kaibae.

**i Getting There & Around**

Beware of the cheap minibus tickets from Siem Reap to Ko Chang; these usually involve some sort of time- and money-wasting commission scam.

Ko Chang-bound boats depart from the mainland piers collectively referred to as Laem Ngop, southwest of Trat. You'll arrive in Ko Chang at either Tha Sapparat or Tha Centrepoint, depending on which pier and boat company you used on the mainland.

Tha Sapparat is the closest to the west coast beaches and receives vehicle ferries from the mainland pier of Tha Thammachat. **Koh Chang Ferry** (☎0 3955 5188; one way 80B; 30 min; 🍷hourly 6.30am-7pm) runs this service.

At the time of writing, the car ferry associated with Tha Centrepoint was competing aggressively for business by offering cheaper prices, more commissions and a Bangkok-Laem Ngop bus service. You cut out some of the land transfers with the new bus service but Tha Centrepoint (on Ko Chang) is further from the west coast beaches, so the time-saving is negligible. **Centrepoint Ferry** (☎0 3953 8196; one way/return 80/100B; 45 min; 🍷hourly 6am-7.30pm) runs this service. Weekend service in high season runs until 9pm.

There is also a new bus route directly from Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi (airport) station to Ko Chang (308B, six hours) via the car ferry with stops on the mainland at Trat and Chanthaburi. The bus

leaves Suvarnabhumi at 7.30am and departs from Khlong San area of Ko Chang at 1.30pm.

Another option is a minivan service from Bangkok's Victory Monument that goes all the way to Ko Chang's Tha Sapparot (one-way 300B; four hours; hourly departures).

Sörnrgtāou on the island will shuttle you from the pier to the various beaches (50B to 200B).

It is not recommended to drive a motorcycle between Ban Khlong Son south to Hat Sai Khao as the road is steep and treacherous with several hairpin turns and occasional mudslides during storms. If you do rent a motorbike, stick to the west coast beaches. Wear protective clothing when riding a motorcycle to reduce injury.

## SOUTHERN GULF COAST

Palm-fringed beaches, warm lazy days, jewel-toned seas: the southern gulf coast pours an intoxicating draught of paradise that attracts a steady crowd of sun worshippers. Most are bound for one or more of the offshore islands: resorty Ko Samui, hippie Ko Pha-Ngan and dive-centric Ko Tao.

If the Vitamin D treatments have you recharged, stop off en route at a few of the mild-mannered provincial capitals that live and work by the sea for a glimpse at the rhythms of coastal Thailand. Even further south, Thailand starts to merge with Malaysia: onion-domed mosques peep over the treeline; the diction is fast and furious as southern Thais are legendary speed talkers; and a roti seller can be found on every corner.

The best time to visit Thailand's southern reaches is from March to May, when the rest of the country is practically melting from the angry sun.

### Hua Hin

POP 42,000

Within reach of Bangkok, Hua Hin is considered the elegant alternative to seedy Pattaya. It is a city by the sea long favoured by older Europeans and hi-so Bangkok Thais, and oft neglected by backpackers searching for rustic island living. But as the bamboo beach hut goes the way of the do-do bird, it is time to reconsider Hua Hin and its old fishing port charm, lively seafood night market and long silky sand beaches.

Hua Hin's best **beaches** are south of town heading towards Khao Takiab (Chopstick Mountain; accessible by green sörnrgtāou leaving from the market) and Khao Tao

(Turtle Mountain; accessible by Pranburi bus, transfer to motorcycle taxi).

### Sleeping

Most of the budget options are in town, an atmospheric location but you'll have to 'commute' to the beach.

#### Pattana Guest House

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎ 0 3251 3393; 52 Th Naresdamri; r 350-550B; ☹) Tucked away down a *soi*, this simple teak house has a lovely nook-filled garden. The rooms are small and basic but adequate and the family who runs it is friendly and artistic.

#### Tong-Mee House

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎ 0 3253 0725; 1 Soi Raumpown, Th Naebkhardt; r 450-550B; ☹@) Down a quiet residential *soi*, this smart guesthouse is the best value in town. The rooms are small but well kept and have balconies.

#### Euro-Hua Hin City Hotel YHA

HOSTEL \$

(☎ 0 3251 3130; 5/15 Th Sasong; r 250-800B; ☹) Just like any large hostel, this place feels both comfortable and institutional. All rooms have air-con, even the somewhat cramped dormitories. Add 50B to these prices if you don't belong to HI.

#### Rahmahyah Hotel

GUESTHOUSE \$\$

(☎ 0 3253 2106; 113/10 Soi Hua Hin 67, Th Phetkasem, South Hua Hin; r from 1000B; ☹☹☹) Across the street from Market Village, about 1km south of town, is a small guesthouse enclave tucked between the high-end resorts and with beach access. Rahmahyah is the best of the bunch, with professional staff and clean, functional rooms.

### Eating

#### Night Market

SEAFOOD \$\$

(Th Dechanuchit btwn Th Phetkasem & Th Sasong; dishes from 60B; ☉5pm-midnight) An attraction that rivals the beach, Hua Hin's night market tops locals' lists of favourite spots to eat. Ice-packed displays of spiny lobsters and king prawns appeal to the big-spenders but the simple stir-fry stalls are just as tasty.

#### Th Chomsin Food Stalls

THAI \$

(cnr Th Chomsin & Th Naebkhardt; dishes from 30B; ☉lunch & dinner) If you're after authentic eats, check out the food stalls that congregate at this popular lunch corner.

#### Chatchai Market

THAI \$

(Th Phetkasem; ☉dishes from 30B; daylight hours) The city's day market resides in an



historic building. There are the usual market refreshments: morning vendors selling *bah-tòrng-gõh* (Chinese-style doughnuts) and *gah-faa boran* (ancient-style coffee spiked with sweetened condensed milk); as well as all-day noodles with freshly made wontons; and the full assortment of tropical fruit.

## **i** Information

**Hospital San Paolo** (☎0 3253 2576; 222 Th Phetkasem) Just south of town with emergency facilities.

**Municipal Tourist Information Office** (☎0 3251 1047; cnr Th Phetkasem & Th Damnoen Kasem; ☎8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri) Provides maps and information about Hua Hin. There's another branch (☎0 3252 2797; Th Naebkehardt; 9am-7.30pm Mon-Fri, 9.30am-5pm Sat & Sun) near the clock tower.

**Tourist police** (☎0 3251 5995; Th Damnoen Kasem)

## **i** Getting There & Around

Hua Hin's long-distance **bus station** (Th Phetkasem btw Soi Hua Hin 94 & 98) is south of town and serves the following destinations:

**Prachuap Khiri Khan** 65B; 1½ hours.

**Phuket** 856B; nine hours; one nightly departure.

**Surat Thani** 480B; seven hours; two daily departures.

**Ubon Ratchathani** 1200B; 13 hours; one daily departure.

**Chiang Mai** 785B; 12 hours; three daily departures.

Bangkok buses (160B, three hours, every two hours from 8am-9pm) leave from an in-town **office** (Th Sasong), near the Night Market. Minivans to Bangkok's Sai Tai Mai (Southern) bus station and Victory Monument (180B, three hours, every 30 minutes from 4am-8pm) leave from an office on Th Naebkehardt.

**Lomprayah** (☎0 3253 3739; Th Narasdamri) offers a bus-boat combination from Hua Hin to Ko Tao (1000B, 8½ hours; one morning and night departure).

There are frequent **trains** running to/from Bangkok's Hualamphong station (2nd class 212B to 302B, 3rd class 94B to 154B, four hours) and other stations on the southern railway line.

Green *sòrngtáaou* depart from the corner of Th Sasong and Th Dechanuchit, near the Night Market and travel south on Th Phetkasem to Khao Takiab (20B). Pranburi-bound buses depart from the same stop. *Túk-túk* fares in Hua Hin are outrageous (starting at 100B). Motorcycle taxis are much more reasonable (40B to 50B) for short hops.

## Prachuap Khiri Khan

POP 86,870

A prettier-than-average seaside town, Prachuap Khiri Khan is relaxed and untouristed with only a few minor attractions, a draw in itself if you're looking to escape 'Khao San' culture.

The bus dumps you off in the centre of town – not a pushy motorcycle taxi in sight. At the base of town is a sparkling blue bay sprinkled with brightly coloured fishing boats. To the north is **Khao Chong Krajok** (Mirror Tunnel Mountain), topped by a wat with spectacular views; the hill is claimed by a clan of monkeys who supposedly hitched a ride into town on a bus from Bangkok to pick up some mangoes. There isn't much else to do except walk along the waterfront promenade or rent a motorcycle and explore the northern bays, fishing villages and the cave temple at **Wat Ao Noi**. You'll find a swimming beach at **Ao Manao**, 6km south of the city within the grounds of a Thai air-force base. It is popular with local Thais who swim fully clothed.

## Sleeping & Eating

You can always find a place to stay near the sea as many of the oceanfront residences rent out rooms. In recent years, Prachuap has gained a small guesthouse scene.

**Maggie's Homestay** GUESTHOUSE \$  
(☎08 7597 9720; 5 Soi Tampramuk; r 150-600B; ☎@) In the old-fashioned backpacker tradition, lovely owner Maggie oversees an eclectic collection of travellers who call her house home. Simple rooms occupy a converted house with a shady garden and shared kitchen facilities.

**Yuttichai Hotel** GUESTHOUSE \$  
(☎0 3261 1055; 115 Th Kong Kiat; r 160-400B; ☎@) One of Prachuap's original guesthouses, Yuttichai has simple budget rooms (cold-water showers) close to the train station. The cheapest rooms share baths. If you don't stay here, at least stop by their old-style Thai-Chinese café, popular with the 'men in brown' (police).

**Happy Inn** GUESTHOUSE \$  
(☎0 3260 2082; 149-151 Th Suanson; r 250-500B) North of town, these simple bungalows (with cold-water showers) face each other along a brick drive that ends next to a pleasant forested canal. You are right across the road from Ao Prachuap's beach and the staff are sweet and soft spoken.

## BEACH TIME MACHINE

Bang Saphan Yai, 100km south of Prachuap Khiri Khan, fits that most famous beach cliché: it is Thailand 15 years ago before pool villas and package tourists pushed out all the beach bums. Once you settle into a simple beachfront hut, you probably won't need shoes and the days will just melt away.

The easiest way to get to Bang Saphan Yai is by train. There are several daily options but the sprinter train (special express No 43) is one of the fastest. It leaves Bangkok's Hualamphong station at 8am and arrives in Bang Saphan Yai (450B) at 1pm. When you decide to leave, you can hop on an afternoon train to Chumphon with plenty of time to spare before the ferry to Ko Tao. From the train station, take a motorcycle taxi to the beach (70B).

### Ma Prow

INTERNATIONAL \$\$

(48 Th Chai Thaleh; dishes 80-200B; ☺lunch & dinner) An airy wooden pavilion across from the beach, Ma Prow cooks up excellent *blah sām-lee dàat dee-o* (a local speciality of whole sun-dried cotton fish that is fried and served with mango salad). The tamarind fish dish is another favourite.

### Suan Krua

VEGETARIAN \$

(Soi Tampramuk; dishes 30-60B; ☺lunch; ☑) Next door to Maggie's Homestay, this vegetarian restaurant cooks fast and furiously for a limited time only and then it closes until the next day. Be here promptly and hungrily.

### Night market

THAI \$

(Th Kong Kiat; ☺5-9pm) Smallish market serving standard evening meals.

## **i** Getting There & Away

There are hourly air-con buses that leave from Th Phitak Chat to the following destinations:

**BANGKOK** (170B, five hours)

**HUA HIN** (100B, 1½ hours)

Minivans leave from the corner of Th Thetsabamrung and Th Phitak Chat to the following destinations:

**BANGKOK** (250B)

**HUA HIN** (80B)

**BANG SAPHAN YAI** (80B, 1½ hours)

**CHUMPHON** (180B, 3½ hours)

Long-distance buses to southern destinations (like Phuket and Krabi) stop at the new bus station, 2km northwest of town on the main highway; motorcycle taxis will take you for 40B to 50B.

The train station is on Th Maharat; there are frequent services to/from Bangkok (1st class 768B, 2nd class 210B to 425B, 3rd class 168B; six hours).

## Chumphon

POP 55,835

Chumphon is a jumping-off point for boats to Ko Tao. The transition from bus to boat is fairly painless and travel agencies can help with onward travel to the Andaman coast. The tourist businesses are used to people hanging around waiting to leave and provide all sorts of day-use amenities (such as luggage storage, shower and toilet).

**Suda Guest House** (☎0 7750 4366; 8 Soi Bangkok Bank; r 230-500B; ☹) keeps prices low but standards high. If Suda is full, try **San Tavee New Rest House** (☎0 7750 2147; 4 Soi Bangkok Bank; r 200-300B) two doors down. The four rooms are small but clean and have fans and shared bathroom.

You can stock up on food supplies for the slow boat at the small **night market** (Th Krom Luang Chumphon). **Fame Restaurant** (188/20 Th Sala Daeng; dishes 80-220B; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner) is a long-running *faràng* depot that does a little bit of everything: cooks up Western breakfasts, books ferry tickets and rents out day-use showers.

## **i** Getting There & Away

### Boat

You have many boat options to Ko Tao, though departure times are limited to mainly morning and night. Most ticket prices include pier transfer. If you buy a combination ticket, make sure you have a ticket for both the bus and the boat.

**SLOW BOAT** (250B, six hours, departs midnight) The cheapest, slowest and most romantic option as everyone stretches out on the open deck of the fishing boat with the stars twinkling overhead. This boat doesn't run in rough seas or inclement weather.

**CAR FERRY** (350B, six hours, departs 11pm daily) A more comfortable ride with bunk or mattress options available on board.

**SONGSERM EXPRESS BOAT** (450B, three hours, departs 7am) Faster, morning option leaving from Tha Talaysub, 10km from town.

**LOMPRAYAH CATAMARAN** (600B, 1¼ hours, departs 7am and 1pm) A popular bus-boat combination leaving from Tha Tummakam, 25km from town; ticket office is beside Chumphon train station.

### Bus

The main **bus terminal** is on the highway, an inconvenient 16km from Chumphon. To get there you can catch a *sōrngtāaou* (50B) from Th Nawamin Ruamjai. You'll have to haggle with the taxi drivers for night transit to/from the station; it shouldn't cost more than 200B.

There are several in-town bus stops. **Choke Anan Tour** (☎ 0 7751 1757; soi off Th Pracha Uthit), in the centre of town, has departures to the following destinations:

**Bangkok's Southern (Sai Tai Mai) station** 375B to 550B; eight hours; five daily.

**Hat Yai** 370B; seven hours; four departures.

**Phuket** 320B; 3½ hours; four departures.

**Suwannatee Tour** (☎ 0 7750 4901), 700m southeast of train station road, serves the following destinations:

**Bangkok's Southern (Sai Tai Mai) station** 2nd class and VIP buses; 270B to 405B; three daily.

**Prachuap Khiri Khan** 120B.

**Hua Hin** 170B.

Minivan companies are numerous and depart from individual offices throughout town:

**Surat Thani** (170B, three hours, hourly), departs from an unnamed *soi* on Th Krom Luang Chumphon; the *soi* is east of an optical shop.

**Bang Saphan Yai** (120B, two hours, two after-noon departures) departs from Th Poramin Mankha, near the hospital.

### Train

The **train station** (Th Krom Luang Chumphon) is within walking distance of the centre of town. There are frequent services to/from Bangkok (2nd class 292B to 382B, 3rd class 235B, 7½ hours). Overnight sleepers range from 440B to 770B. Southbound rapid and express trains – the only trains with 1st and 2nd class cars – are less frequent and can be difficult to book out of Chumphon from November to February.

## Ko Samui

POP 40,230

One of the original islands that started the backpacker migration to Thailand, Ko Samui has matured into an all-purpose beach resort. The hotels have international standards, the guests are mainly pack-

age tourists and the transition from home to deck chair involves little culture shock. Families and honeymooners put Ko Samui at the top of their lists for its conveniences and impressive stoles of sand.

But for all the 'too-touristy' talk, Samui is underappreciated for its size and variety of beaches: with one cab ride you can travel from brash and beautiful to sleepy and rustic. Plus there is a thriving Thai community on the island where you can nosh at roadside curry shacks or grab a cup of thick coffee at the morning market with the gossiping vendors. Samui is a unique hybrid for beach people who also want to see Thailand.

### Sights

Ko Samui is quite large – the island's ring road is almost 100km in total. **Chaweng** is the most popular spot – it's the longest and most beautiful beach on the island. At the south end of **Lamai**, the second-largest beach, you'll find the infamous **Hin-Ta** and **Hin-Yai** stone formations providing endless mirth to giggling Thai tourists. **Hua Thanon**, just beyond, is home to a vibrant Muslim community, and their anchorage of high-bowed fishing vessels is a veritable gallery of intricate designs.

Although the **northern beaches** have coarser sand and aren't as striking as the beaches in the east, they have a laid-back vibe and stellar views of Ko Pha-Ngan. **Bo Phut** stands out with its charming Fisherman's Village.

At 30m, **Na Tok Na Muang** is the tallest waterfall on Samui. It lies in the centre of the island about 12km from Na Thon. For temple enthusiasts, **Wat Laem Sor**, at the southern end of Samui near Ban Phang Ka, has an interesting, highly venerated old Srivijaya-style stupa. At Samui's northern end, on a small rocky island linked by a causeway, is **Wat Phra Yai** (Temple of the Big Buddha). Nearby, a new temple, **Wat Plai Laem**, features an enormous 18-armed Buddha.

### Courses

**Samui Institute of Thai Culinary Arts**

COOKING

(SITCA; ☎ 0 7741 3434; www.sitca.net; Hat Chaweng) Lunchtime classes begin at 11am, while dinner starts at 4pm; both cost 1950B for a three-hour course with three or more dishes. Included is an excellent tutorial about procuring ingredients in your home country.

# Ko Samui



## Sleeping

### CHAWENG

#### **Jungle Club**

BUNGALOWS \$\$

(☎08 1894 2327; www.jungleclubsamui.com/bungalows 800-4500B; 📞📧📅) The perilous drive up the slithering dirt road is totally worthwhile once you get a load of the incredible views from the top. There's a relaxed back-to-nature vibe – guests chill around the stunning horizon pool or tuck themselves away for a catnap under the canopied roofs of an open-air *sāh-lah* (shelter). Call ahead for a pick up.

#### **Ark Bar**

RESORT \$\$

(☎08 7742 2047; www.ark-bar.com; bungalows 1500B; 📞📧📅) You'll find two of every creature at Ark Bar – hardcore partiers, chilled hippies, teenagers, forty-somethings, even Canadians. Lately, the perennially popular resort has started to shift gears – higher-end digs is now the name of the game.

#### **Loft Samui**

HOSTEL \$

(☎0 7741 3420; www.theloftsamui.com; r from 590B; 📞📧📅) A newer budget operation in Chaweng, the Loft is giving has-beens like Wave a run for their money with cheap digs furnished by a couple of quirky details like adobe styling and savvy built-ins.

#### **Akwa**

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎08 4660 0551; www.akwaguesthouse.com; r from 700B; 📞📧📅) A charming B&B-style sleeping spot, Akwa has a few funky rooms decorated with bright colours. Expect teddy bears adorning each bed, quirky bookshelves stocked with DVDs and cartoon paintings all over.

#### **Samui Hostel**

HOSTEL \$

(☎08 9874 3737; dm 180B; 📞📧) It doesn't look like much from the front, but the dorm rooms here are surprisingly spic and span. It's a great place for solo travellers on a tight budget.

## DON'T MISS: ANG THONG MARINE NATIONAL PARK

The 40-some jagged jungle islands of Ang Thong Marine National Park stretch across the cerulean sea like a shattered emerald necklace – each piece a virgin realm featuring sheer limestone cliffs, hidden lagoons and perfect peach-coloured sands. These dream-inducing islets inspired Alex Garland's cult classic *The Beach*, about dope-dabbling backpackers.

The best way to reach the park is to catch a private day-tour from Ko Samui, like **Blue Stars** (☎ 0 7741 3231; www.bluestars.info; trips 2600B). Although the islands sit between Samui and the mainland pier at Don Sak, there are no ferries that stop off along the way. The park officially has an admission fee (400B), although it should be included in the price of every tour (ask your operator if you are unsure). Private boat charters are another possibility, although high gas prices will make the trip quite expensive.

February, March and April are the best months to visit this ethereal preserve of greens and blues; crashing monsoon waves means that the park is almost always closed during November and December.

### LAMAI

Pinch-a-penny digs can be scouted at **Beer's House** (☎ 0 7723 0467; Lamai North; bungalows 200-550B) and **New Hut** (☎ 0 7723 0437; newhut@hotmail.com; Lamai North; huts 200-500B) in North Lamai.

### Spa Resort

BUNGALOWS \$\$

(☎ 0 7723 0855; www.spasamui.com; Lamai North; bungalows 800-2800B; ☎☎) This health spa has a bevy of therapeutic programs on offer, and no one seems to mind that the lodging is cheap by Lamai's standards. Programs include colonics, massage, aqua detox, hypnotherapy and yoga, just to name a few. The bathrooms leave a bit to be desired, but who needs a toilet when you're doing a weeklong fast?

### iBed

HOSTEL \$

(☎ 0 7745 8760; www.ibedsamui.com; dm/s 550/1100B) The sleekest hostel on the island (if not all of Thailand), iBed has all the accoutrements of an Apple-sponsored space station: personal TVs at each bed, smooth coats of paint, bleach-white linens, and plenty of polished concrete. The wide verandas and mod kitchen foster a sociable vibe during the busier months.

### Amarina Residence

GUESTHOUSE \$

(www.amarinaresidence.com; r 900-1200B) Although the lobby is unusually dark compared to most tropical foyers, the rooms upstairs are sun-drenched and sport tasteful light wood furnishing.

### NORTHERN BEACHES

#### BIG BUDDHA BEACH (BANG RAK)

### Samui Mermaid

RESORT \$

(☎ 0 7742 7547; www.samui-mermaid.info; r 400-2500B; ☎@☎☎) Samui Mermaid is a great

choice in the budget category because it feels like a full-fledged resort. There are two large swimming pools, copious beach chairs, two lively restaurants and every room has cable TV. The landing strip at Samui's airport is only a couple of kilometres away, so sometimes there's noise, but free airport transfers sweeten the deal.

### Shambala

BUNGALOWS \$

(☎ 0 7742 5330; www.samui-shambala.com; bungalows 600-1000B; ☎☎) While surrounding establishments answer the call of upmarket travellers, this laid-back, English-run place is a backpacking stalwart with a subtle hippie feel. There's plenty of communal cushion seating, a great wooden sun-deck, and the bungalows are bright and roomy. Staff dole out travel tips and smiles in equal measure.

### BO PHUT & MAE NAM

#### TOP CHOICE L'Hacienda

GUESTHOUSE \$\$

(☎ 0 7724 5943; www.samui-hacienda.com; r 1400-3500B; ☎☎☎) Polished terracotta and rounded archways give the entrance a Spanish mission motif. Similar decor permeates the eight adorable rooms, which sport loads of personal touches such as pebbled bathroom walls and translucent bamboo lamps. There's a charming surprise waiting for you on the roof, and we're pretty sure you'll love it as much as we did.

### Shangrilah

BUNGALOWS \$

(☎ 0 7742 5189; bungalows 300-2000B; ☎) A backpackers' Shangri La indeed – these are some of the cheapest huts around and they're in decent condition.

**Khuntai**

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎0 7724 5118; r 400-850B; 🏠) This clunky orange guesthouse is as cheap as decent rooms get on Samui. A block away from the beach, on the outskirts of Fisherman's Village, Khuntai's 2nd-floor rooms are drenched in afternoon sunshine and feature outdoor lounging spots.

**Eating & Drinking****CHAWENG**

Dozens of the restaurants on the 'strip' serve a mixed bag of local bites, international cuisine and greasy fast food. For the best ambience, get off the road and head to the beach, where many bungalow operators set up tables on the sand and have glittery fairy lights at night. Market oglers should not miss the opportunity to check out **Laem Din** (dishes from 30B; ☺4am-6pm, night market 6pm-2am).

**Gringo's Cantina**

MEXICAN \$\$

(dishes 140-280B; ☺dinner) Wash down a Tex-Mex classic with a jug of sangria or a frozen margarita. We liked the *chimichangas* (mostly because we like saying '*chimi-changa*'). There are burgers, pizzas and veggie options too, for those who don't want to go 'south of the border'.

**Wave Samui**

INTERNATIONAL \$

(dishes from 60B; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner) Everyone says that Samui is going up-market, but the most crowded restaurants at dinnertime are still the old-fashioned budget spots, like this one. This jack-of-all trades (guesthouse-bar-restaurant) serves honest food at honest prices and fosters a travellers ambience with an in-house library and a popular happy hour (3pm to 7pm).

**Bar Solo**

BAR

(Hat Chaweng) A sign of things to come, Bar Solo has future-fitted Chaweng's outdoor beer halls into an urban setting with sleek cubist decor and a cocktail list that doesn't scream holiday hayseed. The evening drink specials lure in the front-loaders preparing for a late, late night at the dance clubs on Soi Solo and Soi Green Mango.

**Green Mango**

BAR

(Hat Chaweng) This place is so popular it has an entire *soi* named after it. Samui's favourite power drinking house is very big, very loud and very *faràng*. Green Mango has blazing lights, expensive drinks and masses of sweaty bodies swaying to dance music.

**Reggae Pub**

BAR

(Hat Chaweng) This fortress of fun sports an open-air dance floor with music spun by foreign DJs. It's a towering two-storey affair with long bars, pool tables, and a live-music stage. The whole place doubles as a shrine to Bob Marley.

**LAMAI**

Most visitors dine wherever they're staying. The **Tesco Lotus** is a great place to pick up snacks for a beachside picnic, or try the Thai equivalent of a grocery store at the **Lamai Day Market** (dishes from 30B; ☺6am-8pm) or the Muslim **Hua Thanon Market** (dishes from 30B; ☺6am-6pm). Class things up at **Beach Republic** ([www.beachrepublic.com](http://www.beachrepublic.com)), which is recognised by the yawning thatch-patched awnings. There's an inviting wading pool, comfy lounge chairs and an endless cocktail list.

**NORTHERN BEACHES****Karma Sutra**

INTERNATIONAL \$\$

(Bo Phut; mains 130-260B; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner) A haze of purples and pillows, this charming chow spot in the heart of Bo Phut's Fisherman's Village serves up international and Thai eats listed on colourful chalkboards. Karma Sutra doubles as a clothing boutique.

**Starfish & Coffee**

THAI \$\$

(Bo Phut; mains 130-180B; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner) This streamer-clad eatery was probably named after the Prince song, since we couldn't find any starfish on the menu (there's loads of coffee though). Evenings feature standard Thai fare and sunset views of rugged Ko Pha-Ngan.

**Woo Bar**

LOUNGE

(Mae Nam) The W Retreat's signature lobby bar gives the word 'swish' a whole new meaning with cushion-clad pods of seating plunked in the middle of an expansive infinity pool that stretches out over the infinite horizon. This is, without a doubt, the best place on Samui for a sunset cocktail.

**WEST COAST**

The quiet west coast features some of the best seafood on Samui. Na Thon has a giant **day market** on Th Thawi Ratchaphakdi – it's worth stopping by to grab some snacks before your ferry ride.

**About Art & Craft Café**

VEGETARIAN \$\$

(Na Thon; dishes 80-180B; ☺breakfast & lunch; 🍷) An artistic oasis in the midst of hurried Na Thon, this cafe serves an eclectic assortment of healthy and wholesome food, gourmet

## SPLURGE: FIVE ISLANDS

([www.thefiveislands.com](http://www.thefiveislands.com); Taling Ngam; dishes 150-500B, tours 3000-6500B; ☺lunch & dinner) Five Islands offers the most unique eating experience on the island. Before your meal, a traditional longtail boat will take you out into the turquoise sea to visit the haunting Five Sister Islands where you'll learn about the ancient and little-known art of harvesting bird nests to make bird's nest soup, a Chinese delicacy. The lunch tour departs around 10am, and the dinner program leaves around 3pm.

coffee, and, as the name states, art and craft, made by the owner and her friends. Relaxed and friendly, this is also a gathering place for Samui's dwindling population of bohemians and artists.

### Nikki Beach

LOUNGE

([www.nikkibeach.com/kohsamui](http://www.nikkibeach.com/kohsamui); Lipa Noi) The acclaimed luxury brand has brought their international *savoir faire* to the secluded west coast of Ko Samui. Expect everything you would find from a chic address in St Barts or St Tropez: haute cuisine, chic decor and gaggles of jetsetters. Themed brunch and dinner specials keep the masses coming throughout the week.

## i Information

**Bangkok Samui Hospital** (☎0 7742 9500, emergency 0 7742 9555) Your best bet for just about any medical problem.

**Hyperbaric Chamber** (☎0 7742 7427; Big Buddha Beach) The island's dive medicine specialists.

**Immigration Office** (☎0 7742 1069; Na Thon; ☺8.30am-noon & 1-4.30pm Mon-Fri) Expect extensions to take the entire afternoon.

**Main post office** (Na Thon) Near the TAT office.

**TAT office** (☎0 7742 0504; Na Thon; ☺8.30am-4.30pm) At the northern end of Na Thon; this office is friendly, helpful and has handy brochures and maps – although travel agents throughout the island can provide similar information.

**Tourist police** (☎0 7742 1281, emergency 1155) Based at the south end of Na Thon.

## i Getting There & Away

### Air

Samui's airport is located in the northeast of the island near Big Buddha Beach. **Bangkok Airways**

([www.bangkokair.com](http://www.bangkokair.com)) operates flights roughly every 30 minutes between Samui and Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi Airport (50 minutes). Bangkok Air also flies direct from Samui to Phuket, Chiang Mai, Singapore and Hong Kong. **Firefly** ([www.fireflyz.com.my](http://www.fireflyz.com.my)) operates direct flights from Samui to Kuala Lumpur's Subang airport.

### Boat

To reach Samui, of the four main piers on the mainland, Tha Thong (in central Surat) and Don Sak are the most common. On Samui, the three oft-used ports are Na Thon, Mae Nam and Big Buddha. Expect complimentary taxi transfers with high-speed ferry services.

There are frequent boat departures between Samui and Surat Thani. The hourly Seatran ferry is a common option. The slow night boat to Samui leaves from central Surat Thani at 11pm, reaching Na Thon around 5am. It returns from Na Thon at 9pm, arriving at around 3am.

There are almost a dozen daily departures between Samui and Ko Pha-Ngan. These leave either from the Na Thon, Mae Nam or Big Buddha piers and take from 20 minutes to one hour. Most boats continue on to Ko Tao.

### Bus & Train

A bus/ferry combo is more convenient than a train/ferry package for getting to Ko Samui because you don't have to switch transport in Phun Phin. However, the trains are much more comfortable and spacious – especially at night. If you prefer the train, you can get off at Chumphon and catch the Lomprayah catamaran service the rest of the way.

## i Getting Around

**MOTORBIKES** You can rent motorcycles (and bicycles) from almost every resort on the island. The going rate is 200B per day.

**SÖRNGTÁOU** These vehicles run regularly during daylight hours. It's about 50B to travel between beaches, and no more than 100B to travel halfway across the island.

**TAXIS** Taxis typically charge around 500B for an airport transfer. Some Chaweng travel agencies can arrange minibus taxis for less.

## Ko Pha-Ngan

POP 11,000

Swaying coconut trees, brooding mountains, ribbons of turquoise water: Ko Pha-Ngan has held fast to its title as favourite backpacker idyll. Despite some modernisation during the upscale push of the early 2000s, Ko Pha-Ngan is still rustic and remote, it doesn't have an airport (yet) and there are still some cheap beachfront bungalows





**Eco Nature Tour**

(☎08 4850 6273) The exceedingly popular 'best of' tour includes elephant trekking, snorkelling, a visit to the Chinese temple, and a stop at a stunning viewpoint. The day trip, which costs 1500B, departs at 9am and returns around 3pm. Bookings can be made at its office in Thong Sala or at the Backpackers Information Centre.

TOUR

**Sleeping****HAT RIN**

During Full Moon events, bungalow operations expect you to stay for a minimum number of days (around four or five). We strongly suggest booking a room in advance.

**Pha-Ngan Bayshore Resort**

RESORT \$\$

(☎0 7737 5227; www.phanganbayshore.com; Hat Rin Nok; r 1700-3200B; 🍷🍷🍷) After a much-needed overhaul in 2009, this hotel-style operation has primed itself for the ever-increasing influx of flashpackers in Hat Rin. Sweeping beach views and a giant swimming pool make Pha-Ngan Bayshore one of the top addresses on Sunrise Beach.

**Seaview Sunrise**

BUNGALOWS \$

(www.seaviewsunrise.com; Hat Rin Nok; r 500-800B; 🍷🍷) As far as budget digs are con-

cerned, this is the only solid option for Full Moon revellers who want a sleeping spot within inches of the tide. Huts are sturdy and perfectly utilitarian. The polished wooden interiors are splashed with the occasional burst of neon paint from the ghosts of parties past.

**Coral Bungalows**

RESORT \$

(☎0 7737 5023; www.coralhaadrin.com; Hat Rin Nai; bungalows 500-1000B; 🍷🍷🍷) This party-centric paradise has firmly planted its flag in 'Backpackerland' as the go-to spot for a booze-added rompfest. By day, sun-worshippers straddle beachside chaises. Then, by night, like a vampire, Coral transforms into a sinister pool party machine fuelled by one too many vodka Red Bulls.

**Paradise Bungalows**

BUNGALOWS \$

(☎0 7737 5244; Hat Rin Nok; bungalows 300-1200B; 🍷) The world-famous Full Moon Party was hatched at this scruffy batch of bungalows, and the place has been living on its name fame ever since. The backpackers keep on coming to wax nostalgic, although the grounds are starting to look more like a junkyard now that the family has divvied up the land into several small 'resorts'. Paradise lost.

**THE TEN COMMANDMENTS OF FULL MOON FUN**

On the eve of every full moon, thousands of bodies converge on the kerosene-soaked sands of Sunrise Beach for an epic trance-a-thon fuelled by adrenaline and a couple other substances.

Some critics claim that the party is losing its carefree flavour, especially since the island's government is trying to charge a 100B entrance fee to partygoers. Despite the disheartening schemes hatched by money-hungry locals, the night of the Full Moon is still the ultimate partying experience, so long as one follows the unofficial Ten Commandments of Full Moon fun:

- » Thou shalt arrive in Hat Rin at least three days early to nail down accommodation during the pre-Full Moon rush of backpackers.
- » Thou shalt double-check the party dates as sometimes they coincide with Buddhist holidays and are rescheduled.
- » Thou shalt secure all valuables, especially when staying in budget bungalows.
- » Thou shalt savour some delicious fried fare in Chicken Corner before the revelry begins.
- » Thou shalt wear protective shoes during the sandy celebration, unless ye want a tetanus shot.
- » Thou shalt cover thyself with swirling patterns of neon body paint.
- » Thou shalt visit Magic Mountain or The Rock for killer views of the heathens below.
- » Thou shalt not sample the drug buffet, nor shalt thou swim in the ocean under the influence of alcohol.
- » Thou shalt stay in a group of two or more people, especially if thou art a woman.
- » Thou shalt party until the sun comes up and have a great time.

## SPLURGE: SARIKANTANG

(☎ 07737 5055; www.sarikantang.com; Hat Seekantang; bungalows 1400-6200B; ☎☎☎) Don't get too strung out over trying to pronounce the resort's name – you can simply call this place 'heaven'. Cream-coloured cabins, framed with teak posts and lintels, are sprinkled among swaying palms and crumbling winged statuettes. Inside, the rooms look like the set of a photo shoot for an interior design magazine.

### SOUTHERN BEACHES

The waters along the south coast tend to be shallow and opaque, especially during low season, but lodging options are well-priced compared to other parts of the island, and you're not too far from Hat Rin.



#### Coco Garden

BUNGALOWS \$

(☎ 07737 7721, 08 6073 1147; www.cocogardens.com; bungalows 450-1250B; ☎☎) The best budget spot along the southern coast, Coco Garden one-ups the nearby resorts with well-manicured grounds and sparkling bungalows that are almost pathologically clean.

#### Boom's Cafe Bungalows

BUNGALOWS \$

(☎ 07723 8318; www.boomscafe.com; bungalows 400-1000B; ☎) Staying at Boom's is like visiting the Thai family you never knew you had. The friendly owners lovingly tend their sandy acreage and dote on the contented clientele. No one seems to mind that there's no swimming pool, since the curling tide rolls right up to your doorstep. Boom's is located at the far eastern corner of Ban Khai, near Hat Rin.

### WEST COAST BEACHES

Now that there are two smooth roads between Thong Sala and Chalok Lam, the west coast has seen more development. The atmosphere is a pleasant mix between the east coast's quiet seclusion and Hat Rin's sociable vibe.



#### Chills Resort

RESORT \$\$

(☎ 08 9875 2100; www.chillsresort.com; Ao Srithanu; r from 1200B; ☎☎☎) Set along a stunning and secluded stretch of stony outcrops, Chills' cluster of delightfully simple-but-modern rooms all have peaceful ocean views letting in plenty of sunlight and sea breezes. The natural rock-pool perched along the break-

ers is the perfect place to swig an afternoon cocktail while watching the sunset.



#### Shambhala Bungalow Village

BUNGALOWS \$

(☎ 08 9875 2100; www.shambhala-phangan.com; Ao Nai Wok; bungalows 600-1200B; ☎☎) Rather than bulldozing tired old beachside bungalows, the owners of Shambhala have lovingly restored a batch of huts and added loads of personal touches that make this not only a memorable place to stay, but also a very comfortable one for those with small coffers. Expect fresh linen, carved wood, artistic lighting, and neatly designed bathrooms.

#### Cookies Salad

RESORT \$\$

(☎ 07734 9125, 08 3181 7125; www.cookies-phangan.com; bungalows 1500-3000B; ☎) The resort with a tasty name has delicious Balinese-styled bungalows orbiting a two-tiered lap pool tiled in various shades of blue. Shaggy thatching and dense tropical foliage gives the realm a certain rustic quality, although you won't want for creature comforts.

#### Shiralea

BUNGALOWS \$

(☎ 08 0719 9256; www.shiralea.com; Hat Yao; bungalows 500B; ☎☎☎) Although this batch of fresh-faced poolside bungalows is not right on the beach (about 100m away), you'll be hard-pressed to find a better deal on the island. Reefers, the on-site dive outfit offers world-class diving at your doorstep, and don't forget to ask the friendly owner where the name Shiralea comes from – we're pretty sure you'll be quite surprised.

### NORTHERN BEACHES

Stretching from Chalok Lam to Thong Nai Pan, the dramatic northern coast is a wild jungle with several stunning and secluded beaches – it's the most scenic coast on the island.

#### Bottle Beach II

BUNGALOWS \$

(☎ 07744 5156; Hat Khuat; bungalows 350-500B) At the far eastern corner of the beach, this is the spot where penny pinchers can live out their castaway fantasies. Grab a long-tail taxi boat from Chalok Lam for 50B to 120B (depending on the boat's occupancy).

#### Dolphin

BUNGALOWS \$

(Thong Nai Pan; bungalows 500-1400B; ☎☎) This hidden retreat gives yuppie travellers a chance to rough it in style, while granola-types will soak up every inch of the laid-back charm. Quiet afternoons are spent lounging on comfy cushions in one of the

small pagodas hidden throughout the jungle. Lodging is available on a first-come basis.

### Longtail Beach Resort

BUNGALOWS \$

(☎0 7744 5018; www.longtailbeachresort.com; Thong Nai Pan; 390-1150B; 🏠📶) Effortlessly adorable, and one of the last remaining batches of beach bungalows in the area, Longtail offers backpackers a taste of Pha-Ngan's past with its charming thatch-and-bamboo abodes.

### EAST COAST BEACHES

Robinson Crusoe, eat your heart out! For the most part, you'll have to hire a boat to get to these beaches; water taxis are available in Hat Rin and Chalok Lam.



### Sanctuary

BUNGALOWS \$\$

(☎08 1271 3614; www.thesanctuarythailand.com; Hat Thian; dm 200B, bungalows 450-5450B) If you're looking for Alex Garland's mythical beach, this is about as close as it gets. A friendly enclave promoting relaxation, The Sanctuary is an inviting haven offering splendid lodging while also functioning as a holistic retreat (think yoga classes to detox sessions). Accommodation, in various manifestations of twigs, is scattered around the resort, married to the natural surroundings.

### Mai Pen Rai

BUNGALOWS \$

(☎0 7744 5090; www.thansadet.com; Than Sadet; bungalows 600B; @) 'Mai pen rai' is the Thai equivalent of 'don't worry, be happy', which isn't too surprising since this bay elicits nothing but sedate smiles. Bungalows sit on the hilly headland, and sport panels of straw weaving with gabled roofs.



### Eating

Ko Pha-Ngan is no culinary capital, especially since most visitors quickly absorb the lazy lifestyle and wind up eating at their accommodation.

### HAT RIN

The infamous **Chicken Corner** is a popular intersection stocked with several faves such as **Mr K Thai Food** (Ban Hat Rin; dishes 30-80B) and **Mama Schnitzel** (Ban Hat Rin; dishes 40-100B) who promise to cure any case of the munchies, be it noon or midnight.

### Lazy House

INTERNATIONAL \$\$

(Hat Rin Nai; dishes 90-270B; ☺lunch & dinner) Back in the day, this joint was the owner's apartment – everyone liked his cooking so much that he decided to turn the place into a restaur-

rant and hang-out spot. Today, Lazy House is easily one of Hat Rin's best places to veg out in front of a movie with a shepherd's pie.

### Little Home

THAI \$

(Ban Hat Rin; mains from 40B; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner) With no design aesthetic whatsoever, Little Home woos the masses with cheap, flavourful Thai grub that's gobbled up with alacrity among wooden tables and flimsy plastic chairs.

### SOUTHERN BEACHES

#### Night Market

MARKET \$

(Thong Sala; dishes 25-180B; ☺dinner) A heady mix of steam and snacking locals, Thong Sala's night market is a must for those looking for a dose of culture while nibbling on a low-priced snack. Banana pancakes and fruit smoothies abound for dessert.

#### Kaito

JAPANESE \$\$

(Thong Sala; dishes from 130B; ☺dinner Thu-Mon) Authentic Japanese imports are the speciality here – slurp an Asahi while savouring your tangy seaweed salad and *tonkatsu* (pork cutlet). The upstairs level has cosy cushion sitting while the main sitting area is flanked with *manga* and pocket-sized Japanese novels.

### OTHER BEACHES



### Sanctuary

HEALTH FOOD \$\$

(Hat Thian; mains from 130B) Forget what you know about health food – sanctuary's restaurant proves that wholesome eats can also be delicious. Enjoy a tasty parade of plates – from Indian pakoras to crunchy Vietnamese spring rolls – as an endless playlist of music (undoubtedly the island's best) wafts overhead.

### Cucina Italiana

ITALIAN \$\$

(Jenny's; Chalok Lam; pizza 180B; ☺dinner) Cucina Italiana has a cult following on Ko Pha-Ngan. The friendly Italian chef is passionate about his food, and creates all of his dishes from scratch. On Thursday and Sunday, you can order unlimited toppings on your oven-roasted pizza for only 180B.



### Drinking

Hat Rin is the beating heart of the legendary Full Moon fun, and the area can get pretty wound up even without the influence of lunar phases. The following party venues flank Hat Rin's infamous Sunrise Beach from south to north:

**Rock**

BAR/CLUB

(Hat Rin Nok) Great views of the party from the elevated terrace on the far south side of the beach.

**Club Paradise**

BAR/CLUB

(Hat Rin Nok) Paradise basks in its celebrity status as the genesis of the lunar *loco*-motion.

**Drop-In Bar**

BAR/CLUB

(Hat Rin Nok) This dance shack blasts the chart toppers that we all secretly love. The other nights of the year are equally as boisterous.

**Zoom/Vinyl**

BAR/CLUB

(Hat Rin Nok) An ear-popping trance venue.

**Cactus Bar**

BAR/CLUB

(Hat Rin Nok) Smack in the centre of Hat Rin Nok, Cactus pumps out a healthy mix of old school tunes, hip hop and R&B.

**Sunrise**

BAR/CLUB

(Hat Rin Nok) A newer spot on the sand where trance beats shake the graffiti-ed walls.

**Tommy**

BAR/CLUB

(Hat Rin Nok) One of Hat Rin's largest venues lures the masses with black lights and trance music blaring on the sound system. Drinks are dispensed from a large ark-like bar.

**Mellow Mountain**

BAR/CLUB

(Hat Rin Nok) Also called 'Mushy Mountain' (you'll know why when you get there), this trippy hang-out sits at the northern edge of Hat Rin Nok delivering stellar views of the shenanigans below.

**i Information**

Check out the pocket-sized **Phangan Info** ([www.phangan.info](http://www.phangan.info)) for comprehensive information about the island.

**Main police station** (☎0 7737 7114, 191) Located about 2km north of Thong Sala. The police station in Hat Rin (near Hat Rin school) will not let you file a report; to do so you must go to Thong Sala.

**Backpackers Information Centre** (☎0 7737 5535; [www.backpackersthailand.com](http://www.backpackersthailand.com); Hat Rin) A must for travellers looking to book high-quality tours (diving, live-aboards, jungle safaris etc) and transport. Run by friendly expats.

**Ko Pha-Ngan Hospital** (☎0 7737 7034; Thong Sala; ☺24hr) About 2.5km north of Thong Sala; offers 24-hour emergency services.

**Main post office** (☺8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat) In Thong Sala; there's a smaller office right near the pier in Hat Rin.

**Dangers & Annoyances**

As tempting as it may be to dabble with local herb we strongly suggest that you abstain. Local police are not shy about tossing drug users in jail. Also note that your travel insurance does not cover any drug-related injury or treatment.

Solo female travellers should be extra careful. We've received many reports about drug- and alcohol-related rape (and these situations are not limited to Full Moon parties).

Ko Pha-Ngan has more motorcycle accidents than injuries incurred from Full-Moon tomfoolery. Simply put: don't rent a bike.

**i Getting There & Away**  
**Bangkok, Hua Hin & Chumphon**

The Lomprayah and Seatran services have bus/boat combination packages that depart from Bangkok and pass through Hua Hin and Chumphon. It is also quite hassle-free to take the train from Bangkok to Chumphon and switch to a ferry service.

**Ko Samui & Ko Tao**

There are around a dozen daily departures between Ko Pha-Ngan and Ko Samui. These boats leave throughout the day from 7am to 6pm and take from 20 minutes to an hour. Most boats leave from Thong Sala. The *Haad Rin Queen* goes back and forth between Hat Rin and Big Buddha Beach on Samui.

All boats to Ko Tao leave from Thong Sala. Lomprayah ferries depart at 8.30am and 1pm (arriving at 9.45am and 2.15pm respectively). Seatran operates on a similar schedule. The cheaper-but-slower Songserm leaves Ko Pha-Ngan at 12.30pm and alights at 2.30pm.

**Surat Thani & The Andaman Coast**

Combination boat/bus tickets are available at any travel agency; simply tell them your desired destination and they will sell you the necessary links in the transport chain. Most travellers will pass through Surat Thani as they swap coasts. There are approximately six daily departures from Ko Pha-Ngan on the Raja Car Ferry, Songserm or Seatran. These boats leave from Thong Sala throughout the day from 7am to 8pm. Every evening a night boat runs from Surat, departing at 11pm. Boats in the opposite direction leave Ko Pha-Ngan at 10pm.

**i Getting Around**

**MOTORBIKE** You can rent motorcycles all over the island for 150B to 250B per day. Always wear a helmet – it's the law on Ko Pha-Ngan, and local policemen enforce it.

**SÖRNGTĀOU** Pick-up trucks and sörngtāou chug along the island's major roads and the riding rates double after sunset. Ask your

accommodation about free or discount transfers when you leave the island. The trip from Thong Sala to Hat Rin is 100B.

**WATER TAXI** Long-tail boats depart from Thong Sala, Chalok Lam and Hat Rin, heading to a variety of far-flung destinations such as Hat Khuat (Bottle Beach). Expect to pay anywhere from 50B to 300B.

## Ko Tao

POP 1382

First there was Ko Samui, then Ko Pha-Ngan; now, the cult of Ko Tao ('Ko Taoism' perhaps?) has emerged along Thailand's crystalline gulf coast. Today, thousands of visitors come to worship the turquoise waters offshore, and quite often they stay.

Many years have passed since the first backpacker came to the scrubby island and planted a flag in the name of self-respecting shoestring scuba-holics everywhere (hello pizza parlours and ladyboy shows), but fret not, there's still plenty of time to join the tribe.

## Sights & Activities

### Diving

Never been diving before? Ko Tao is *the* place to lose your scuba virginity. The shallow bays scalloping the island are the perfect spot for newbie divers to take their first stab at scuba. On shore, over 40 dive centres are ready to saddle you up with some gear and teach you the ropes in a three-and-a-half-day Open Water certification course. We know, we know, homework on a holiday sucks, but the intense competition among scuba schools means that certification prices are unbeatably low, and the standards of service are top notch, as dozens of dive shops vie for your baht.

A **PADI** ([www.padi.com](http://www.padi.com)) Open Water certification course costs 9800B; an **SSI** ([www.ssi-thailand.com](http://www.ssi-thailand.com)) Open Water Certification is slightly less (9000B, because you do not have to pay for instructional materials). An Advanced Open Water certification will set you back 8500B. Fun divers should expect to pay roughly 1000B per dive, or around 7000B for a 10-dive package. Discounts are usually given if you bring your own equipment.

Expect large crowds and booked-out beds throughout the months of December, January, June, July and August, and a monthly glut of wannabe divers after every Full Moon Party on Ko Pha-Ngan next door.

### Ban's Diving School

DIVING

(Map p746; ☎ 0 7745 6466; [www.amazingkohtao.com](http://www.amazingkohtao.com); Sairee Beach) A well-oiled diving machine and relentlessly expanding conglomerate, Ban's certifies more divers per year than any other scuba school in the world and refurbishments in 2009 have given it a five-star feel.

### Big Blue Diving

DIVING

(Map p746; ☎ 0 7745 6415, 0 7745 6772; [www.bigbluediving.com](http://www.bigbluediving.com); Sairee Beach) If Goldilocks were picking a dive school, she'd probably pick Big Blue – not too big, not too small, this operation gets props for fostering a sociable vibe while maintaining a high standard of service.

### Buddha View

DIVING

(Map p745; ☎ 0 7745 6074; [www.buddhaview-diving.com](http://www.buddhaview-diving.com); Chalok Ban Kao) Another big dive operation on Ko Tao, Buddha View offers the standard fare of certification and special programs for technical diving (venturing beyond the usual parameters of recreational underwater exploration).

### Crystal

DIVING

(Map p746; ☎ 0 7745 6107; [www.crystaldive.com](http://www.crystaldive.com); Mae Hat) Crystal is the Meryl Streep of dive operators, winning all the awards for best performance. It's one of the largest schools on the island (and around the world), although high-quality instructors and intimate classes keep the school feeling quite personal.

### Snorkelling

Most snorkel enthusiasts opt for the do-it-yourself approach on Ko Tao, which involves swimming out into the offshore bays or hiring a longtail boat to putter around further out. Orchestrating your own snorkelling adventure is simple, since the bays on the east coast have small bungalow operations offering equipment rental for 100B to 200B per day.

### Freediving

Over the last couple of years freediving (exploring the sea using breath-holding techniques rather than scuba gear) has grown rapidly in popularity.

Freediving prices are standardised across the island as well – a two-and-a-half-day SSI beginner course costs 5500B.

### Apnea Total

FREEDIVING

(Map p746; ☎ 08 7183 2321; [www.apnea-total.com](http://www.apnea-total.com); Sairee Beach)

### Blue Immersion

FREEDIVING

(Map p746; ☎ 08 7682 1886; [www.blue-immersion.com](http://www.blue-immersion.com); Sairee Beach)

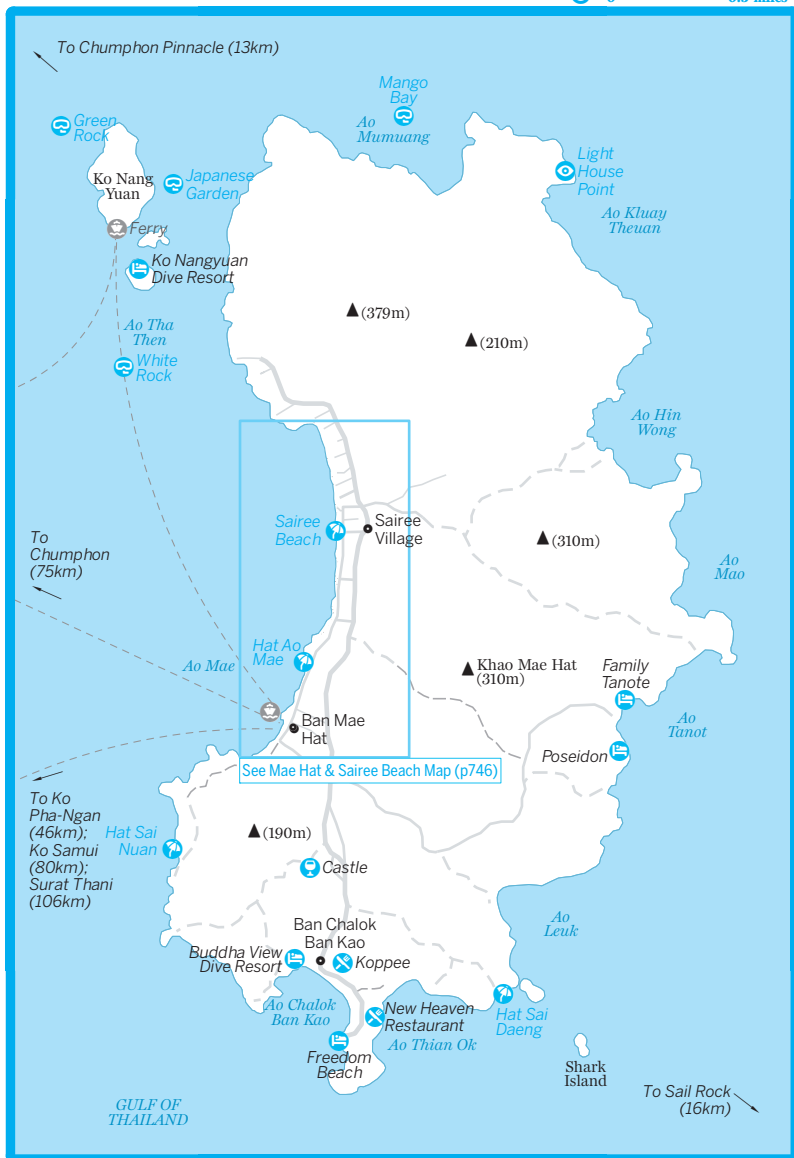
## Other Activities

**TOP CHOICE** **Flying Trapeze Adventures** ACROBATICS  
 (Map p746; FTA; ☎08 0696 9269; www.flyingtrapezeadventure.com; Sairee Beach; ☀4-8pm)  
 Find out if you're a great catch while

donning a pair of hot pink tights during a one-hour group trapeze lesson (950B).

**Goodtime Adventures** TOURS  
 (Map p746; ☎08 7275 3604; www.gtadventures.com; Sairee Beach, ☀noon-late) Goodtime offers a wide variety of land- and sea-based activities

## Ko Tao



to get the adrenaline pumping, like abseiling, rockclimbing and cliff jumping.

## Sleeping

If you are planning to dive while visiting Ko Tao, your scuba operator will probably offer you free or discounted accommodation to sweeten the deal.

### SAIREE BEACH

#### Blue Wind

BUNGALOWS \$

(Map p746; ☎ 0 7745 6116; bluewind\_wa@yahoo.com; bungalows 300-1000B; 🏠📶) Blue Wind offers a breath of fresh air from the high-intensity dive resorts strung along Sairee Beach. Sturdy bamboo huts are peppered along a dirt trail behind the beachside bakery. Large, tiled air-conditioned cabins are also available, boasting hot showers and TVs.

#### Ban's Diving Resort

RESORT \$\$

(Map p746; ☎ 0 7745 6466; www.amazingkohtao.com; r 500-2500; 🏠📶📶) This dive-centric

party palace offers a wide range of quality accommodation from basic backpacker digs to sleek hillside villas. Post-scuba chill sessions happen on Ban's prime slice of beach, or at one of the swimming pools out back.

#### Bow Thong

BUNGALOWS \$

(Map p746; ☎ 0 7745 6266; bungalows from 600B; 🏠📶📶) A member of the quieter northern section of silky Sairee Beach, Bow Thong has a cluster of comfortable bungalows if you're looking to be near the waves and aren't affiliated with a dive school.

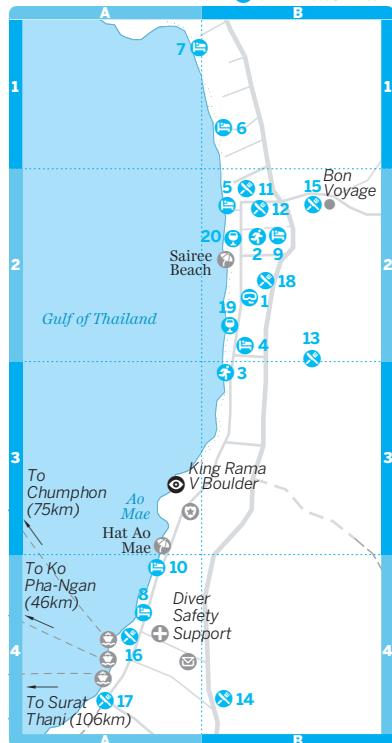
#### Big Blue Resort

BUNGALOWS \$

(Map p746; ☎ 0 7745 6050; www.bigbluediving.com; r 400-1000B; 🏠📶) This scuba-centric resort has a summer camp vibe – diving classes dominate the daytime, while evenings are spent en masse, grabbing dinner or watching fire twirling.

## Mae Hat & Sairee Beach

0 — 200 m  
0 — 0.08 miles



## Mae Hat & Sairee Beach

### Activities, Courses & Tours

- 1 Apnea Total .....B2  
Ban's Diving School.....(see 4)  
Big Blue Diving .....(see 5)  
Blue Immersion.....(see 3)  
Crystal.....(see 8)
- 2 Flying Trapeze Adventures .....B2
- 3 Goodtime Adventures.....B3

### Sleeping

- 4 Ban's Diving Resort .....B2
- 5 Big Blue Resort .....B2
- 6 Blue Wind.....B1
- 7 Bow Thong.....A1
- 8 Crystal Resort .....A4
- 9 Koh Tao Backpackers .....B2
- 10 Mr J Bungalow.....A4

### Eating

- 11 Café Corner .....B2
- 12 Chopper's Bar & Grill.....B2
- 13 Darawan .....B2
- 14 Food Centre.....B4
- 15 Kanya.....B2  
Pranee's Kitchen.....(see 8)
- 16 Safety Stop Pub .....A4
- 17 Whitening.....A4
- 18 ZanziBar .....B2

### Drinking

- Crystal Bar .....(see 8)  
19 Fish Bowl.....B2  
20 Lotus Bar.....B2

**Koh Tao Backpackers**

HOSTEL \$

(Map p746; ☎08 8447 7921; www.kohtaobackpackers.com; dm 300B; 🚻🚰) No frills bunk beds for serious penny pinchers.

**MAE HAT****Crystal Resort**

BUNGALOWS \$

(Map p746; ☎0 7745 6107; www.crystaldive.com; bungalows 800-1500B; 🚻🚰) The bungalow and motel-style accommodation at Crystal is reserved for its divers, and prices drop significantly for those taking courses. Guests can take a dip in the refreshing pool when it isn't overflowing with bubble-blowing newbie divers.

**Mr J Bungalow**

BUNGALOWS \$

(Map p746; ☎0 7745 6066; bungalows 250-1000B) Even though Mr J tried to charge us 50B for his business card, we still think he's well worth the visit. The eccentric owner entangles guests in a philosophical web while tending to his flock of decent bungalows.

**CHALOK BAN KAO****Buddha View Dive Resort**

BUNGALOWS \$

(Map p745; ☎0 7745 6074; www.buddhaview-diving.com; r 300-1500B; 🚻) Like the other large diving operations on the island, Buddha View offers its divers discounted on-site digs in a super-social atmosphere. If you plan on staying a while, ask about the 'Divers Village' across the street, which offers basic accommodation from around 4000B per month.

**Freedom Beach**

BUNGALOWS \$

(Map p745; ☎0 7745 6596; bungalows 400-1500B; 🚻) On its own secluded beach at the eastern end of Ao Chalok, Freedom feels like a classic backpacker haunt, although there's a variety of accommodation to suit various humble budgets. The string of bungalows (from wooden shacks to sturdier huts with air-con) links the breezy seaside bar to the resort's restaurant high on the cliff.

**EAST COAST BEACHES****Poseidon**

BUNGALOWS \$

(Map p745; ☎0 7745 6735; poseidonkohtao@hotmail.com; Tanote Bay; bungalows from 300B) Poseidon keeps the tradition of the budget bamboo bungalow alive with a dozen basic-but-sleepable huts scattered near the sand.

**Family Tanote**

BUNGALOWS \$\$

(Map p745; ☎0 7745 6757; Tanote Bay; bungalows 700-3500B) As the name suggests, this scatter of hillside bungalows is run by a local family who take pride in providing comfy digs

to solitude seekers. Strap on a snorkel mask and swim around with the fish at your doorstep, or climb up to the restaurant for a tasty meal and pleasant views of the bay.

**KO NANG YUAN**

Photogenic Ko Nang Yuan, just off the coast of Ko Tao, is easily accessible by the Lomprayah catamaran, and by water taxis that depart from Mae Hat and Sairee.

**Ko Nangyuan Dive Resort**

BUNGALOWS \$\$\$

(Map p745; ☎0 7745 6088; www.nangyuan.com; bungalows 1200-9000B; 🚻🚰) Although the obligatory 100B tax to access the island is a bit off-putting, Nangyuan Dive Resort is nonetheless a charming place. The rugged collection of wood and aluminium bungalows winds its way across three coolie-hat-like islands connected by an idyllic sandbar.

**Eating****SAIREE BEACH****Darawan**

INTERNATIONAL \$\$

(Map p746; mains 160-400B; ☺lunch & dinner) Like a top-end dining venue plucked from the posh shores of nearby Samui, regal Darawan is the island's newest place to take a date. Designer lighting, efficient waiters and a tasty 'wagyu' burger seal the deal.

**ZanziBar**

SANDWICHES \$

(Map p746; sandwiches 90-140B; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner) The island's outpost of sandwich yuppie-dom slathers a mix of unpronounceable condiments betwixt two slices of whole-grain bread.

**Chopper's Bar & Grill**

INTERNATIONAL \$\$

(Map p746; dishes 60-200B; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner) So popular that it's become a local landmark, Chopper's is a two-storey hang-out where divers and tourists can widen their beer belly. There's live music, sports on the big-screen TVs, billiards and a cinema room.

**Kanya**

THAI \$

(Map p746; mains 60-130B; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner) Tucked at back of Sairee Village on the road to Hin Wong, four-table Kanya serves an assortment of international dishes, but you'll be missing out if you stray from the delectable array of homecooked Thai classics – the *tom yam plaas* is divine.

**Café Corner**

CAFE \$

(Map p746; snacks & mains 30-120B; ☺breakfast & lunch) Prime real estate, mod furnishings, and tasty iced coffees have made Café



Corner a Sairee staple over the last few years. Scrumptious baked breads are buy-one-get-one-free before being tossed at sunset.

## MAE HAT

**TOP CHOICE** **Whitening** INTERNATIONAL \$\$ (Map p746; mains 160-300B; ☺dinner) Although it looks like a pile of forgotten driftwood during the day, this beachy spot falls somewhere between a restaurant and chic seaside bar. Dine amid dangling white Christmas lights while keeping your bare feet tucked into the sand.

**Safety Stop Pub** INTERNATIONAL \$ (Map p746; mains 60-250B; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner; ☺) A haven for homesick Brits, this pier-side restaurant and bar feels like a tropical beer garden. Stop by on Sundays to stuff your face with an endless supply of bar-bequed goodness, and surprisingly the Thai dishes aren't half bad!

**Pranee's Kitchen** THAI \$ (Map p746; mains 50-120B; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner; ☺) An old Mae Hat fave, Pranee's serves scrumptious curries and other Thai treats in an open-air pavilion sprinkled with lounging pillows, wooden tables and TVs. English movies (with hilariously incorrect subtitles) are shown nightly at 6pm.

**Food Centre** THAI \$ (Map p746; mains from 30B; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner) An unceremonious gathering of hot tin food stalls, Food Centre – as it's come to be known – lures lunching locals with veritable smoke signals rising up from the concrete parking lot abutting Mae Hat's petrol station. You'll find some of the island's best papaya salad here.

**CHALOK BAN KAO**  
**New Heaven Restaurant** INTERNATIONAL \$\$ (Map p745; mains 60-350B; ☺lunch & dinner) The best part about New Heaven Restaurant is the awe-inducing view of Shark Bay (Ao Thian Ok) under the lazy afternoon moon. The menu is largely international, and there are nap-worthy cushions tucked under each low-rise table.

**Koppee** CAFE \$\$ (Map p745; mains 60-180B; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner) A clone of some of the sleeker cafes in Mae Hat and Sairee, white-washed Koppee serves scrumptious international fare including a variety of home-baked desserts.

## Drinking & Entertainment

After diving, Ko Tao's favourite pastime is drinking, and there's definitely no shortage of places to get tanked. In fact, the island's three biggest dive centres each have bumpin' bars – **Fish Bowl** (Map p746) in Sairee, **Crystal Bar** (Map p746) in Mae Hat and **Buddha On The Beach** (Map p745) in Chalok Ban Kao – that attract swarms of travellers and expats alike. It's well worth stopping by even if you aren't a diver.

**Castle** CLUB (Map p745; www.thecastlekohtao.com; Mae Hat) Located along the main road between Mae Hat and Chalok Ban Kao, the Castle has quickly positioned itself at the most loved party venue on the island, luring an array of local and international DJs to its triad of parties each month.

**Lotus Bar** BAR (Map p746; Sairee Beach) Lotus is the de facto late-night hang-out spot along the northern end of Sairee. Muscular fire twirlers toss around flaming batons, and the drinks are so large there should be a lifeguard on duty.

## Information

The ubiquitous **Koh Tao Info** (www.kohtaoonline.com) booklet lists loads of businesses on the island and goes into some detail about the island's history, culture and social issues.

**Bon Voyage** (Map p746; Sairee Beach) Run by the kind Ms Jai, a native Ko Taoian, Bon Voyage is a great place to make your transport connections. It's located along the road connecting Sairee Beach and Hin Wong.

**Diver Safety Support** (Map p746; Mae Hat; ☺on call 24hr) Has a temporary hyperbaric chamber and offers emergency evacuation services.

**Police station** (Map p746; ☎0 7745 6631) Between Mae Hat and Sairee Beach along the ratty portion of the beachside road.

**Post office** (Map p746; ☎0 7745 6170; ☺9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat) A 10- to 15-minute walk from the pier; at the corner of Ko Tao's main inner-island road and Mae Hat's 'down road'.

## Getting There & Away

**Bangkok, Hua Hin & Chumphon**  
Lomprayah's new air service – **Solar Air** (www.lomprayah.com) jets passengers from Bangkok's Don Mueang airport to Chumphon once daily in each direction from Monday to Saturday. Upon arriving in Chumphon, travellers can make a seamless transfer to the catamaran service

bound for Ko Tao. Buses from Bangkok and Hua Hin follow the same route on the ground.

If you are planning to travel through the night, the train's couchettes are a much more comfortable option than the bus.

From Ko Tao, the high-speed catamaran departs for Chumphon at 10.15am and 2.45pm (1½ hours), the Seatran leaves the island at 4pm (two hours), and a Songserm boat makes the same journey at 2.30pm (three hours). There's also a midnight boat from Chumphon arriving early in the morning. It returns from Ko Tao at 11pm.

### Ko Pha-Ngan & Ko Samui

The Lomprayah Catamaran offers twice daily service, leaving Ko Tao at 9.30am and 3pm and arriving on Ko Pha-Ngan around 10.50am and 4.10pm, and Ko Samui at 11.30am and 4.40pm. The Seatran Discovery Ferry offers an identical service. The Songserm Express Boat departs daily at 10am and arrives on Ko Pan-Ngan at 11.30am and Ko Samui at 12.45pm. Hotel pickups are included in the price.

### Surat Thani & The Andaman Coast

There are two direct routes from Ko Tao to the Andaman coast. The first is through Surat Thani – board any Surat-bound boat then transfer to a bus upon arrival. The night boat leaves Ko Tao at 8.30pm.

The second option is to take a ferry to Chumphon on the mainland and then switch to a bus or train bound for the provinces further south.

## i Getting Around

**SÖRNGTĀOU** Sörngtāou, pick-up trucks and motorbikes crowd around the pier in Mae Hat as passengers alight. If you're a solo traveller, you will pay 100B to get to Sairee Beach or Chalok Ban Kao. Groups of two or more will pay 50B each. These prices are rarely negotiable. Many dive schools offer free pick ups and transfers as well.

**MOTORBIKE** Renting a motorcycle is a dangerous endeavour if you're not sticking to the main, well-paved roads. Daily rental rates begin at 150B for a scooter.

**WATER TAXI** Boat taxis depart from Mae Hat, Chalok Ban Kao and the northern part of Sairee Beach. Long-tail boats can be chartered for around 1500B per day.

## Surat Thani

POP 128,990

Known in Thai as 'City of Good People', Surat Thani was once the seat of the ancient Srivijaya empire. Today, this busy junction has become a transport hub that indiscriminately moves cargo and people around the country. Travellers rarely linger here as they

make their way to the deservedly popular islands of Ko Samui, Ko Pha-Ngan and Ko Tao.

If you need to spend the night in Surat, hop on a sörngtāou heading towards the Phang-Nga district. Tell the driver 'Tesco-Lotus', and you'll be taken about 3km out of town to a large shopping centre. A handful of reasonable hotel options orbit the mall including **100 Islands Resort & Spa** (☎0 7720 1150; www.roikoh.com; 19/6 Moo 3, Bypass Rd; r 590-1200B; 🍷🍷🍷) – this is as good as it gets in Thailand for under 600B.

Go to the **night market** (Sarn Chao Ma; Th Ton Pho) for fried, steamed, grilled or sautéed delicacies. There are additional evening food stalls near the departure docks for the daily night boats to the islands, a seafood market at **Pak Nam Tapi**, and an afternoon **Sunday market** (☎4-9pm) near the TAT office. During the day many food stalls near the downtown bus terminal sell *kōw gāi òp* (marinated baked chicken on rice).

## i Information

Th Na Meuang has a bank on virtually every corner in the heart of downtown. If you're staying near the 'suburbs', the Tesco-Lotus has ATMs as well.

**Boss Computer** (per hr 20B; ☎9am-midnight) The cheapest internet connection around. Located near the post office.

**Siam City Bank** (Th Chonkasem) Has a Western Union office.

**Taksin Hospital** (☎0 7727 3239; Th Talat Mai) The most professional of Surat's three hospitals. Just beyond the Talat Mai Market in the northeast part of downtown.

**TAT office** (☎0 7728 8817; tatsurat@samart.co.th; 5 Th Talat Mai; ☎8.30am-4.30pm) Friendly office southwest of town. Distributes plenty of useful brochures and maps, and staff speak English very well.

## i Getting There & Away

In general, if you are departing Bangkok or Hua Hin for Ko Pha-Ngan or Ko Tao, consider taking the train or a bus/boat package that goes through Chumphon rather than Surat. If you require any travel services, try **Holiday Travel** (Th Na Meuang) or **Pranhip Co** (Th Talat Mai) – both are reliable and English is spoken.

## Air

Although flights from Bangkok to Surat Thani are cheaper than the flights to Samui, it takes a significant amount of time to reach the gulf islands from the airport. If you want to fly through Surat, there are daily shuttles to Bangkok on

**Thai Airways International** (THAI; ☎ 0 7727 2610; 3/27-28 Th Karunarat).

### Boat

Most boats – such as the Raja and Seatran services – leave from Don Sak (about one hour from Surat; bus transfers are included in the ferry ticket) although the Songserm leaves from the heart of Surat town. The boat trip usually takes around 90 minutes to Ko Samui and 2½ hours to Ko Pha-Ngan, although oftentimes the captain will cut the engines to half propulsion, slowing the journey down.

From the centre of Surat there are nightly ferries to Ko Tao (eight hours, departs 10pm), Ko Pha-Ngan (seven hours, departs 10pm) and Ko Samui (six hours, departs 11pm). These are cargo ships, not luxury boats, so bring food and water and watch your bags.

### Bus & Minivan

The most convenient way to travel around the south, frequent buses and minivans depart from two main locations in town. Talat Kaset 1, on the north side of Th Talat Mai (the city's main drag) offers speedy service to Nakhon. At Talat Kaset 2, on the south side of Th Talat Mai, you'll find frequent transport to Hat Yai and minibuses to Nakhon, Trang, Khanom and Krabi. Andaman-bound buses (usually destined for Phuket) depart every hour from 7am to 3.30pm. The 'new' bus terminal (which is actually a few years old now, but still referred to as 'new' by locals) is located 7km south of town.

### Train

When arriving by train you'll actually pull into Phun Phin, 14km west of Surat. From Phun Phin, it is possible to reach Phuket, Phang-Nga and Krabi by bus – some via Takua Pa, the stopping point for Khao Sok National Park.

Trains passing through Surat stop in Chumphon and Hua Hin on their way up to the capital, and in the other direction you'll call at Trang, Hat Yai and Sungai Kolok before hopping the border.

## i Getting Around

Air-conditioned vans to/from the Surat Thani airport cost around 70B per person and they'll drop you off at your hotel.

To travel around town, sǒrngtǎaou cost 10B to 30B (it's 15B to reach Tesco-Lotus from the city centre), while sǎhmlǒr (three-wheeled vehicles) charge 20B to 40B.

Fan-cooled orange buses run from Phun Phin train station to Surat Thani every 10 minutes (15B, 25 minutes). For this ride, taxis charge 200B for a maximum of four people, while share-taxis charge 100B per person.

## Hat Yai

POP 157,400

Welcome to backcountry Thailand's version of big city livin'. Songkhla Province's liveliest town has long been a favourite stop for Malaysian men on their weekend hooker tours. These days Hat Yai gladly shakes hands with globalisation – Western-style shopping malls stretch across the city, providing local teenagers with a spot to loiter and middle-aged ladies with a place to do their cardio.

Hat Yai has dozens of hotels within walking distance of the train station. The city is the unofficial capital of southern Thailand's cuisine, offering Muslim roti and curries, Chinese noodles and dim sum, and fresh Thai-style seafood from both the Gulf and Andaman coasts.

## i Information

**Immigration Office** (Th Phetkasem) Near the railway bridge, it handles visa extensions.

**TAT Office** (tatsgkhla@tat.or.th; 1/1 Soi 2, Th Niphath Uthit 3) Very helpful staff here speak excellent English and have loads of info on the entire region.

**Tourist police** (Th Niphath Uthit 3; ☎24hr) Near the TAT office.

## i Getting There & Away

### Air

**Thai Airways International** (THAI; 182 Th Niphath Uthit 1) operates eight flights daily between Hat Yai and Bangkok.

Nearly all of the low-cost airlines now operate flights to/from Bangkok:

**Air Asia** (www.airasia.com) Daily flights from Hat Yai to Bangkok and Kuala Lumpur.

**Nok Air** (www.nokair.com) Daily flights between Hat Yai and Bangkok's Don Meuang Airport.

### Bus

Most inter-provincial buses and south-bound minivans leave from the bus terminal 2km south-east of the town centre, while most north-bound minivans now leave from a minivan terminal 5km west of town at Talat Kaset, a 60B tǔk-tǔk ride from the centre of town. Buses link Hat Yai to almost any location in southern Thailand.

**Prasert Tour** (Th Niphath Uthit 1) has minibuses to Surat Thani (4½ hours, 8am to 5pm), and **Cathay Tour** (93/1 Th Niphath Uthit 2) can also arrange minivans to many destinations in the south.

### Train

There are four overnight trains to/from Bangkok each day, and the trip takes at least 16 hours. There are also seven trains daily that run along

the east coast to Sungai Kolok and two daily trains running west to Butterworth and Padang Besar, both in Malaysia.

## **i** Getting Around

**Airport Taxi Service** (☎0 7423 8452; 182 Th Niphat Uthit 1) makes the run to the airport four times daily (80B per person). A private taxi for this run costs 280B.

Sōrngtāou run along Th Phetkasem (10B per person). Tūk-túk and motorcycle taxis around town cost 20B to 40B per person.

## THE ANDAMAN COAST

The Andaman is Thailand's turquoise coast, that place on a 'Travel to Paradise' poster that makes you want to leave your job and live in flipflops...forever. And for once, the beauty exceeds the hype. White beaches, cathedral-like limestone cliffs, neon corals and hundreds of jungle-covered isles extend down the Andaman Sea from the border of Myanmar to Malaysia. Photographs haven't yet fully captured the array of blues and greens, let alone the soft fingers of humidity on the skin or the feel of the world's softest sands between your toes. For this, you'll need to visit.

### Ranong

POP 24,500

On the eastern bank of the Sompae River's turbid, tea-brown estuary, the frontier town of Ranong is a short boat ride – or a filthy swim – from Myanmar. This border town *par excellence* (shabby, frenetic, slightly

seedy) has a thriving Burmese population (keep an eye out for men wearing traditional *longyi*; Burmese sarong), a clutch of **hot springs** (Th Petchkasem; admission free; ☀8am–5pm) and some tremendous street food.

Today the town is basking in the transit tourism to Ko Phayam more than the visa runs it was once known for (visas given at the border are only valid for two weeks now). Meanwhile, more and more dive operators specialising in live-aboard trips to the Surin or Similan Islands and Burma Banks are establishing themselves here, adding a pinch of an expat feel. Try **A-One-Diving** (☎0 7783 2984; www.a-one-diving.com; 256 Th Ruangrat; 4-night packages from 15,900B) or **Andaman International Dive Center** (☎0 7783 4824; www.aicdive.com; Th Petchkasem), located at the bus station.

### Sleeping & Eating

If you are doing a visa run through an agency, they'll ship you in and out of town without having to sleep over. If you decide to spend the night, try **Dhala House** (☎0 7781 2959; http://dahla.siam2web.com; 323/5 Th Ruangrat; r 400–500B; ☑☑), which has cute, concrete bungalows with tiled floors and pebbled tile bathrooms; the bungalows line a garden and are set off the main drag.

For some grub, there's a **night market** not far from Hwy 4 that sells great Thai dishes at low prices. The **day market** on Th Ruangrat offers inexpensive Thai and Burmese meals. Expats hang out at **Sophon's Hideaway** (☎0 7783 2730; Th Ruangrat; mains 80–250B; ☺lunch & dinner; ☑), which has a bit

## GETTING TO MALAYSIA: KANGAR TO PADANG BESAR OR SADAO TO BUKIT KAYU HITAM

**Getting to the border** The best way to get to Malaysia from the Gulf is to pop over the border at Sadao (road crossing) or Kangar (road and rail crossing), which are a stone's throw from the southern hub of Hat Yai. There is a well-trodden taxi route from Hat Yai down to the border crossing at Sadao for around 2000B in a private taxi (one hour). Share minivans ply this route as well. There's also a bus that takes passengers from Hat Yai to Penang, Malaysia – any travel agent in Hat Yai can make this booking. If you are on the train from Hat Yai, you will cross the border at the Kangar–Padang Besar border crossing and continue on to Butterworth. The road crossing at Kangar–Padang Besar is not recommended as it is a less fluid border crossing than Sadao and has fewer transfers available.

**At the border** Most tourists come here to extend their visas. Running the border by yourself is rare and ill-advised, but 'tour' visa runs can be sorted from Hat Yai and this is the most stress-free solution. You'll be paying about the same if you were to do it solo.

**Moving on** Once through the border, you can take a bus to Alor Setar. Keep in mind that Malaysia is one hour ahead of Thai time. See p413 for details on doing the trip in reverse.

of everything, including a free pool table, a pizza oven and rattan furnishings aplenty.

## **i** Information

Internet can be found along Th Ruangrat for 20B per hour and there's a cluster of ATMs at the Th Tha Meuang and Th Ruangrat intersection.

**Main post office** (Th Chonrao; ☎9am-4pm Mon-Fri, to noon Sat)

**Pon's Place** (☎08 1597 4549; www.ponplace-ranong.com; Th Ruangrat; ☎7.30am-midnight) The go-to spot in Ranong for transportation tickets and local info.

## **i** Getting There & Away

### Air

**Ranong Air** (☎0 7783 2222; www.ranongair.com) runs four flights per week between Ranong and Bangkok (one way 2800B), Phuket (one way 2300B) and Hat Yai (one way 2800B).

### Bus

The bus terminal is on Th Petchkasem 1km from town, though some Bangkok-bound buses stop at the main market.

Minivans head to Surat Thani (250B, 3½ hours, four times daily) and Chumphon (120B, three hours, hourly from 6am to 5pm).

## **i** Getting Around

Motorcycle taxis will take you almost anywhere in town for 20B, to the hotels along Th Petchkasem for 25B and to the pier (for 50B) for boats to Ko Chang, Ko Phayam and Myanmar.

## Ko Chang

If you're looking for the big Ko Chang, you've come to the wrong place. But if your suitcase is overflowing with novels and you're seeking a silent stretch of sand on which to read them, then welcome! Unlike most of the Andaman's

islands, Ko Chang enjoys its back-to-basics lifestyle – there are no ATMs here.

**Aladdin Dive Cruise** (☎0 7782 0472; www.aladdindivecruise.de) runs PADI courses and offers a range of live-aboard dive safaris.

## **i** Sleeping & Eating

### Crocodile Rock

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎08 0533 4138; tonn1970@yahoo.com; Ao Yai; bungalows 250-450B) Outstanding bamboo bungalows hover on Ao Yai's serene southern headland with superb bay views through gentle foliage. Its classy kitchen turns out homemade yoghurt, breads, cookies, good espresso and a variety of veggie and seafood dishes.

### Sawasdee

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎08 6906 0900; www.sawadeekohchang.com; Ao Yai; bungalows 350-600B) The A-frame wooden bungalows have vented walls to keep things cool. Every option has sunken bathrooms painted bright colours, and hammocks on the terraces.

## **i** Getting There & Away

From central Ranong Town, take a sǒrngtǎaou (25B) or a shuttle run by most guesthouses (50B) to Saphan Plaa. Three long-tail boats (150B) and two speedboats (350B) leave daily from mid-October to May. All stop on the island's west coast beaches.

A taxi boat service connecting Ko Chang and Ko Phayam runs on weekdays from Koh Chang Resort on Ao Yai (150B, one hour).

## Ko Phayam

Technically part of Laem Son National Park, little Ko Phayam is a beach-laden isle that – for now – is managing to go mainstream while still holding onto its soul. Spectacular beaches are dotted with beach bungalows

### BUSES FROM RANONG

DESTINATION	PRICE	DURATION (HR)
Bangkok	240-680B	10
Chumphon	100B	3
Hat Yai	410B	5
Khao Lak	150B	3½
Krabi	200-300B	6
Phuket	240B	5-6
Surat Thani	100-180B	4-5

## GETTING TO MYANMAR: RANONG TO KAWTHOUNG (VICTORIA POINT)

The dusty, tumbledown port at the southernmost tip of mainland Myanmar is known as Kawthoung. The easiest way to renew your Thai visa is to opt for one of the 'visa trips' (from 1000B per person including visa fees) offered by travel agencies in Ranong. All-inclusive trips from Phuket or Ko Samui are also a possibility.

If you perform the renewal yourself you can take a boat from Saphan Plaa, 5km from Ranong. Stop at the immigration window at the pier to stamp out, then take a boat (per person one way/return 100/200B) over to Myanmar. At the checkpoint, you must inform the authorities that you're a day visitor – in which case you will pay a fee of US\$10 (or 500B) with a new, unblemished bill.

The whole process will take a minimum of two hours. Bear in mind when you are returning to Thailand that Myanmar's time is 30 minutes behind Thailand's, so leave plenty of time to return to Thailand before 4.30pm when the border closes.

For more information about Kawthoung, see p505.

and the wooded interior has some rudimentary concrete motorbike paths.

The main drawback of Ko Phayam is that the snorkelling isn't great, but the Surin Islands are relatively close by. For dive trips and PADI courses try **Phayam Divers** (☎08 6995 2598; www.phayamlodge.com; Ao Yai).

### Sleeping & Eating

#### **PP Land**

HOTEL \$

(☎08 1678 4310; www.payampplandbeach.com; Ao Hin-Khow; bungalows 650B) This is a stunning ecolodge, north of the pier on the little-visited windward side of the island. The stylish concrete bungalows are powered by the wind and sun, and have terraces that overlook the sea.

#### **Starlight Bungalows**

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎08 1978 5301; http://sites.google.com/site/starlightbungalows; Ao Khao Kwai; bungalows 500-650B) American-Thai run, choose from high-ceiling spacious wooden huts or small bamboo ones further back in the trees. The social vibe here is as fab as the food – Pom the cook regularly wins local Thai food cook-offs.

### Getting There & Around

There are daily ferries from Ranong's Saphan Plaa to Ko Phayam's main pier (150B, 1½ to two hours) at 9am and 2pm, and speedboats (350B, 45 minutes) at 10am and 2.30pm. From Ko Phayam back to Ranong the boats run at 9am and 1pm. Long-tail boat charters to Ko Chang are 1200B, or you can take the taxi boat (150B, one hour) that departs from the main pier at 4pm on weekdays only.

A motorcycle taxi from the pier to the main beaches costs 50B to 80B per person each way depending on the beach. Motorbike and bicycle

rentals are available in the village, and from most of the larger resorts.

## Khao Sok National Park

If your leg muscles have atrophied after one too many days of beach-bumming, consider venturing inland to the wondrous Khao Sok National Park. Many believe this lowland jungle – the wettest spot in Thailand – to be over 160 million years old, making it one of the oldest rainforests on the globe. It features dramatic limestone formations and waterfalls that cascade through juicy thickets drenched with rain. A network of dirt trails snakes through the quiet park, allowing visitors to spy on the exciting array of indigenous creatures.

### Sleeping

We recommend the two-day, one-night trips (2500B per person) to Chiaw Lan, where you sleep in floating huts on the lake and go on a variety of canoeing excursions.

#### **Art's Riverview Jungle Lodge**

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎08 6470 3234; http://krabidir.com/artsriverviewlodge; bungalows 650B) In a monkey-filled jungle bordering a river with a natural limestone cliff-framed swimming hole, this is the prettiest location in Khao Sok. Wood bungalows are simple but big; all have river views.

#### **Jungle Huts**

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎0 7739 5160; www.khao-sok-junglehuts.com; huts 300-1200B) Basic but good-value huts sit in a forest of fruit trees near a river or high up on stilts connected by a vertiginous walkway.

## **i** Information

The **park headquarters** (☎ 0 7739 5025; www.khaosok.com; park admission 200B) and visitors centre are 1.8km off Rte 401, close to the Km 109 marker.

There's an ATM outside the Morning Mist Mini-Mart and internet is available near the park entrance for 2B per minute.

## **i** Getting There & Around

Minivans to/from Surat Thani (250B, one hour), Krabi (300B, two hours) and a handful of other destinations leave daily from the park. Otherwise, from Surat catch a bus going towards Takua Pa, or from the Andaman coast take a Surat Thani-bound bus. Buses drop you off along the highway (Rte 401), 1.8km from the visitors centre. If guesthouse touts don't meet you, you'll have to walk to your chosen nest (from 50m to 2km).

To explore Chiaw Lan lake on your own, charter a long-tail (2000B per day) at the dam's entrance.

## Khao Lak & Around

Hat Khao Lak is a beach for folks who shun the glitz of Phuket's bigger resort towns, but still crave comfort, shopping and plenty of facilities. With warm waves to frolic in, long stretches of golden sand backed by forested hills, and easy day trips to the Similan and Surin Islands, Khao Sok and Khao Lak/Lam Ru National Parks or even Phuket, the area is a central base for exploring the North Andaman – above and below the water.

## **🏊** Activities

### Diving & Snorkelling

Diving or snorkelling day excursions to the Similan and Surin islands are immensely popular, but if you can, opt for a live-aboard trip. Since the islands are around 60km from the mainland (about three hours by boat), if you do opt for a live-aboard you'll have a more relaxing trip and experience the islands sans day-trippers. All dive shops offer live-aboard trips from around 10,000/19,000B for two-/three-day packages and day trips for 4900B to 6500B.

### Similan Diving Safaris

DIVING

(☎ 0 7648 5470; www.similan-diving-safaris.com) The speciality here is the high-quality four-day live-aboard that regularly attracts return customers – this is the best bang for your baht. Day trips are also available.

### Wicked Diving

DIVING

(☎ 0 7648 5868; www.wickeddiving.com) An exceptionally well-run and environmentally conscious outfit that offers a wide range of diving and snorkelling live-aboard trips in conjunction with **Ecocean** (www.whaleshark.org).

### Sea Dragon Dive Centre

DIVING

(☎ 0 7648 5420; www.seadragondivecenter.com; Th Phetkasem) One of the older operations in Khao Lak, Sea Dragon has maintained high standards throughout the years.

## **🛏** Sleeping

For the cheapest sleeps in town, head to Sea Dragon Dive Center and ask about the dorm beds at Tiffany's Café, which go for 180B per night.

### Greenbeach

HOTEL \$\$

(☎ 0 7648 5845; greenbeach\_th@yahoo.com; bungalows 1300-2300B; 🍷) On an excellent stretch of Khao Lak beach and extending back into a garden, this place has a warm, family-style soul. The wooden bungalows have glass doors, air-con and fan, shady terraces and views of a towering, ancient banyan tree.

### Fasai House

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎ 0 7648 5867; r 500-700B; 🍷🍷) The best budget choice in Khao Lak, Fasai has immaculate motel-style rooms and smiling staff members.

### Khaolak Banana Bungalows

BUNGALOWS \$

(☎ 0 7648 5889; www.khaolakbanana.com; r 500-1200B; 🍷🍷) These adorable little bungalows have swirls painted on the cement floors and sun-filled indoor-outdoor bathrooms. A cute pool with deckchairs sweetens the deal.

## **🍴** Eating & Drinking

Early-morning divers will be hard-pressed to find a place to grab a bite before 8.30am.

### Mama's Restaurant

SEAFOOD \$

(Th Petchkasem; dishes 60-300B) Nobody does seafood better than Mama's, across from Boat 813.

### Phu Khao Lak

THAI \$

(Th Petchkasem; dishes 80-240B; 🍷breakfast, lunch & dinner) This is place for a tasty assortment of Thai and international faves.

### Happy Snapper

BAR

(Th Petchkasem) Happy Snapper has a fully stocked bar and a house band during high season.

## **i** Information

For diving-related emergencies, call the **SSS Ambulance** (☎08 1081 9444), which rushes injured persons down to Phuket.

There are numerous travel agencies scattered about – the best is **Khao Lak Land Discoveries** (☎0 7648 5411; www.khaolaklanddiscovery.com; Th Phetkasem).

## **i** Getting There & Away

Any bus running along Hwy 4 between Takua Pa (50B, 45 minutes) and Phuket (100B, two hours) will stop at Hat Khao Lak if you ask the driver.

Khao Lak Discoveries runs hourly minibuses to/from Phuket International Airport (600B, 1½ hours). Alternatively you can take a taxi (1200B) or tell a Phuket-bound bus driver to let you off at the 'airport' – you'll get let off at an intersection where motorcycle taxis to the airport (10 minutes) cost 100B.

## Surin Islands Marine National Park

The five gorgeous islands that make up this **national park** (www.dnp.go.th; admission 400B; ☀mid-Nov–mid-May) sit about 60km offshore, a measly 5km from the Thai-Burma marine border. Healthy rainforest, pockets of white-sand beach in sheltered bays and rocky headlands that jut into the ocean characterise these granite-outcrop islands. The clearest of water makes for great marine life, with underwater visibility often up to 35m. Park headquarters and all visitor facilities are at Ao Chong Khad on Ko Surin Nuea, near the jetty.

Khuraburi, on the mainland, is the jumping-off point for the park. The pier is 9km north of town, as is the **national park office** (☎0 7649 1378; ☀8am–5pm), with good information, maps and helpful staff.

## **👁** Sights & Activities

Dive sites in the park include **Ko Surin Tai** and **HQ Channel** between the two main islands. **Richelieu Rock** (a seamount 14km southeast) is also technically in the park and happens to be one of the best, if not the best, dive sites on the Andaman coast. There's no dive facility in the park itself, so dive trips (four-day live-aboards around 20,000B) must be booked from the mainland.

**Ban Moken** at Ao Bon on the South Island welcomes visitors. Post-tsunami, Moken have settled in this one sheltered bay where a major ancestral worship ceremony (Loi Reua)

takes place in April. The national park offers a **Moken Village Tour** (per person 300B).

## **🛏** Sleeping & Eating

Park accommodation is decent, but because of the island's short, narrow beaches it can feel seriously crowded when full (around 300 people). Book online at www.dnp.go.th or with the mainland **national park office** (☎0 7649 1378; ☀8am–5pm) in Khuraburi.

## **i** Getting There & Away

Tour operators use speedboats (return 1600B, one hour) that leave around 9am.

Several tour operators run day trips from Khao Lak and Khuraburi (2900B including food and park lodging) to the park; try **Greenview** (☎0 7640 1400; Khuraburi pier). The Surin Islands are also accessible via live-aboard; the best of which depart from Khao Lak.

## Similan Islands Marine National Park

Known to divers the world over, beautiful **Similan Islands Marine National Park** (www.dnp.go.th; admission 400B; ☀Nov–May) is 60km offshore. Its smooth granite islands are as impressive above water as below, topped with rainforest, edged with white-sand beaches and fringed with coral reefs.

Two of the nine islands, Island 4 (Ko Miang) and Island 8 (Ko Similan), have ranger stations and accommodation; park headquarters and most visitor activity centres are on Island 4. Recently, the park was expanded to include Ko Bon and Ko Tachai.

Khao Lak is the jumping-off point for the park. The pier is at Thap Lamu, about 10km south of town.

## **👁** Sights & Activities

The Similans offer diving for all levels of experience, at depths from 2m to 30m. There are dive sites at each of the six islands north of Ko Miang; the southern part of the park (Islands 1, 2 and 3) is off-limits to divers and is a turtle nesting ground. No facilities for divers exist in the national park itself, so you'll need to take a dive tour.

You can hire snorkelling gear (per day 100B) from the park headquarters. Day trippers from Khao Lak usually visit three or four different snorkelling sites (trips from 3000B).

The islands also have some lovely walking trails where you can spot a variety of bird life.



## Sleeping & Eating

Book online at [www.dnp.go.th](http://www.dnp.go.th) or with the mainland **national park office** (☎0 7645 3272) at Khao Lak. Tour agents in Khao Lak also arrange overnight to multiday trips that include transport, food and lodging at the park. Longhouse and bungalow accommodation is available on Ko Miang from 1000B. There's electricity from 6pm to 6am.

## Getting There & Away

There's no public transport to the park but theoretically independent travellers can book a speedboat transfer (return 1700B, 1½ hours one way) with a Khao Lak snorkelling operator, though they much prefer that you join the snorkelling tour and generally discourage independent travel. The most common way to visit is on a multiday live-aboard trip from Khao Lak.

## Phuket

POP 83,800

The island of Phuket has long been misunderstood. First of all, the 'h' is silent. Ahem. And second, Phuket doesn't feel like an island at all. It's so huge (the biggest in the country) that one can never really get the sense that they're surrounded by water, which is probably the reason why the 'Ko' (meaning 'island') was dropped from its name. Dubbed the 'pearl of the Andaman' by savvy marketing execs, this is Thailand's original flavour of tailor-made fun in the sun.

Phuket's beating heart can be found in Patong. Located halfway down the western coast, Thailand's 'sin city' is the ultimate gong show where podgy beachaholics sizzle like rotisserie chickens and gogo girls play ping-pong – without paddles...

These days, however, Phuket's affinity for luxury far outshines any of the island's other stereotypes; jetsetters come through in droves, getting pummelled during swanky spa sessions, and swigging sundowners at one of the many fashion-forward nightspots. But you don't have to be an heiress or an Oscar-winner to tap into Phuket's trendy to-do list. There's deep-sea diving, high-end dining, soda-white beaches that beckon your book and blanket – whatever your heart desires. Visitors never say *phuket* to Phuket.

## Sights

Phuket's stunning west coast, scalloped by sandy bays, faces the crystal Andaman Sea. **Patong** is the eye of the tourist storm, with

**Kata** and **Karon** – Patong's little brothers – to the south. The island's quieter east coast features gnarled mangroves rather than silky sand. **Phuket Town**, in the southeast, is the provincial capital and home to most of the island's locals.

## Big Buddha

SHRINE

Set on a hilltop just northwest of Chalong circle and visible from almost half of the island, Big Buddha sits at the best viewpoint in Phuket. To get here follow the red signs from the main highway (Hwy 402) and wind up a country road, passing terraced banana groves, and tangles of jungle. Of course, you'll be forgiven if you disregard the view for a few minutes to watch local craftsmen put the finishing touches on their 60 million baht Buddha, dressed in Burmese alabaster.

## Phuket Town

NEIGHBOURHOOD

Phuket has an interest collection of Sino-Portuguese architecture. The most magnificent examples are the **Standard Chartered Bank** (Th Phang-Nga), the **THAI office** (Th Ranong); and the **old post office building**, which now houses the **Phuket Philatelic Museum** (Th Montri; admission free; ☎9.30am-5.30pm). Check out the **Shrine of the Serene Light** (Saan Jao Sang Tham; ☎8.30am-noon & 1.30-5.30pm), which injects some added colour to the neighbourhood.

## Phuket Gibbon Rehabilitation Centre

ANIMAL SHELTER

(☎0 7626 0492; [www.gibbonproject.org](http://www.gibbonproject.org); Khao Phra Taew Royal Wildlife & Forest Reserve; donations encouraged; ☎9am-4pm) Financed by donations, the centre adopts gibbons that have been kept in captivity in the hopes they can be reintroduced to the wild. The centre also has volunteer opportunities.

## Cable Jungle Adventure Phuket

ZIP LINES

(☎08 1977 4904; 232/17 Moo 8, Th Bansuan-neramit, Khao Phra Taew Royal Wildlife & Forest Reserve; per person 1950B; ☎9am-6pm) If you're the thrill-seeking sort, harness up at this maze of eight zip lines, linking cliffs to ancient trees tucked away in hills.

## Thalang District

NEIGHBOURHOOD

A few hundred metres northeast of the famous **Heroines Monument** is **Thalang National Museum** (☎0 7631 1426; admission 30B; ☎8.30am-4pm). The museum contains five exhibition halls chronicling southern themes such as the history of Thalang-



Phuket, and the colonisation of the Andaman Coast. Also in Thalang District, about 5km north of the crossroads near Thalang town, is **Wat Phra Thong** (admission by donation; ☺dawn-dusk), Phuket's 'Temple of the Gold Buddha'.



## Activities

### Sea Kayaking



#### **John Gray's Seacanoë** SEA KAYAKING

(☎ 7625 4505-7; www.johngray-seacanoë.com; 124 Soi 1, Th Yaowarat) The original, still the most reputable and by far the most ecologically sensitive sea kayaking company on the island. Like any good brand in Thailand, his 'Seacanoë' name and itineraries have been frequently copied. He's north of Phuket Town.

### Paddle Asia

SEA KAYAKING

(☎ 7621 6145; www.paddleasia.com; 9/71 Moo 3, Th Radanusorn, Ban Kuku) Offers several day and multiday trips to Ao Phang-Nga and Khao Sok National Park on classic kayaks.

### Surfing

Both Hat Kata Yai and Hat Kata Noi offer decent surfing from April to November. Board rental costs 300B to 600B for the day. Try **Phuket Surf** (☎08 7889 7308; www.phuketsurf.com; Hat Kata Yai) or **Phuket Surfing** (☎ 7628 4183; www.phuketsurfing.com; Hat Kata Yai).

### Kiteboarding

Both of Phuket's two kiteboarding operators – **Kiteboarding Asia** (☎08 1591 4594; www.kiteboardingasia.com; lessons from 4000B) and **Kite Zone** (☎0833 952 005; www.kitesurfingphuket.com; beginner lessons from 1100B) – are affiliated with the International Kiteboarding Organization.

### Muay Thai Boxing

Phuket has quite the reputation for Thai boxing camps. Try **Rawai Muay Thai** (☎08 1476 9377; www.rawaimuaythai.com; 43/42 Moo 7, Th Sai Yuan) or **Promthep Muay Thai Camp** (☎08 5786 2414; www.promthepmuaythai.com; 91 Moo 6, Soi Yanui).



## Tours

### Amazing Bike Tours

CYCLING

(☎ 7628 3436; www.amazingbiketoursthailand.asia; 32/4 Moo 9, Th Chaofa, Chalong; day trips from 1600B) Bike tours through the region's forest reserves.



## Sleeping

### NORTHERN BEACHES

#### Capri Hotel

HOTEL \$

(☎ 7627 0597; www.phukethotelcapri.com; Hat Surin; r 900-1500B; ☹☹) Here's your slice of Italy with pillars everywhere and Mediterranean-style painted archways over the bathrooms in the cute, bright rooms. The best nests have pink-painted wrought-iron balconies overlooking a not-very-European, but quiet street. Add the Italian bistro downstairs and it's a fantastic bargain.

#### Sirinat National Park

CAMPING, BUNGALOWS \$

(☎ 7632 7152; reserve@dnpg.go.th; campsites 30B, bungalows 1000-2000B) There are campsites (bring your own tent) and large, concrete bungalows at the park headquarters on a gorgeous, shady, white-sand bluff. Check in at the visitors centre or book online.

#### Rimlay Bungalows

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎08 9646 0239; andaman-car@hotmail.com; 90 Moo 5 Nai Yang, Hat Nai Yang; bungalow 500B, r 800-1800B) Spread over two properties, the bamboo bungalows are minuscule and basic fan-cooled or air-conditioned rooms are tiled, have attached hot-water bathrooms and are great value.

#### Clear House

HOTEL \$

(☎ 7638 5401; www.clearhousephuket.com; Hat Kamala; r 1300B; ☹☹) Shabby chic with a mod twist, white-washed rooms have pink feature walls, plush duvets, flat screen TVs, wi-fi and huge pebbled baths. This place just feels good.

### PATONG

Phuket's Costa Del Soul-less is a seething beachside city that crams thousands of hotel rooms between its craggy headlands. It's getting difficult to find anything in Patong under 1000B from November to April, but outside this time rates drop by 50%.



#### Baipho, Baithong &

#### Saladee

GUESTHOUSE \$\$

(☎ 7629 2074, 0 7629 2738; www.baipho.com, www.baithong.com, www.saladee.com; 205/12-13 & 205/14-15 Th Rat Uthit 200 Pee; r 1800-3300B; ☹☹) These three arty guesthouses are all on the same little *soi* under the same friendly and organised management. Rooms and common areas are filled with Buddha imagery and Zen-spa-type trimmings mingling with modern art and urban touches. The dimly lit, nest-like rooms are all unique so ask to see a few if possible.

**Baan Pronphateep**

(☎ 0 7634 3037; [baanpronphateep.com](http://baanpronphateep.com); 168/1 Th Thawiwong; r 1600-2100B; ☹) Banyan tree shaded and nestled down a secluded little *soi*, this is a quiet and simple three-star choice. Rooms are spacious and come with a full-sized fridge and a private patio.

HOTEL \$\$

**Casa Jip**

(☎ 0 7634 3019; [www.casajip.com](http://www.casajip.com); 207/10 Th Rat Uthit; r from 700B; ☹) Italian run and great value, this place has very big, if simple, rooms with comfy beds and a taste of Thai style. You get cable TV and there's even a breakfast room service.

GUESTHOUSE \$

**Patong Backpacker Hostel**

(☎ 0 7625 6680; [www.phuketbackpacker.com](http://www.phuketbackpacker.com); 167 Th Ranong; dm 300-450B, r 1200B; ☹☺) This is a great location near the beach and the owner offers info on all the best, cheapest places to eat in town. Dorm prices vary depending on the number of beds in the room (three to 10). The top floor is the brightest but dorm rooms on the lower floors each have their own attached bathrooms.

HOSTEL \$

**SOUTHERN BEACHES****Caffe@Caffe**

(☎ 0 7628 4005; [www.caffeatcaffe.com](http://www.caffeatcaffe.com); 100/60-61 Th Kata, Kata; r 1800B; ☹☺) Tiled rooms with gold-coloured wallpaper alternated with white painted walls, striped duvets, minibalconies, fridges and TVs make this place as comfy as it is hip. It's in a three-storey building with a modern cafe downstairs.

GUESTHOUSE \$\$

**Ao Sane Bungalows**

(☎ 0 7628 8306; 11/2 Moo 1, Th Viset, Hat Nai Han; bungalows 600-850B; ☹) The rickety cold-water, fan-cooled wooden bungalows are on a secluded beach, with million-dollar views of Ao Sane and Ao Nai Han. There's a beachside restaurant, dive centre and an old-hippie vibe. To reach the 'resort', follow the narrow road past the yacht club.

BUNGALOW \$

**Fantasy Hill Bungalow**

(☎ 0 7633 0106; [fantasyhill@hotmail.com](mailto:fantasyhill@hotmail.com); 8/1 Th Patak, Kata; r with fan/air-con 450/800B; ☹) Sitting in a lush garden on a hill, the older but well-maintained bungalows here are great value. The place is peaceful but central and the staff super sweet. Angle for a corner room with air-con and a view.

HOTEL \$

**Kangaroo Guesthouse**

(☎ 0 7639 6517; 269/6-9 Karon Plaza, Karon; r 800B; ☹☺) Basic, but very clean, sunny tiled rooms with hot water; air-con, a cute break-

GUESTHOUSE \$

fast nook, and balconies overlooking a narrow, slightly seedy *soi*.

**PHUKET TOWN**

Phuket Town has a healthy assortment of budget-friendly lodging options, but it's nowhere near the beach.

**Phuket 346**

(☎ 08 7281 1898; [www.phuket346.com](http://www.phuket346.com); 15 Soi Romanee; r 1300B; ☹) On charming Soi Romanee, this romantic old shophouse has been exquisitely restored to look like a cosy art gallery. Rooms have white-patterned wallpaper and the occasional bright-coloured wall decorated with modern art.

GUESTHOUSE \$

**Casa 104**

(☎ 0 7622 1268; 104 Th Yaowarat; r from 1000B; ☹☺) This is a stunning renovation of a 100-year-old shophouse with burgundy walls, gangling chandeliers, bouquets of bamboo and peacock feathers, and early days swing on the sound system. And that's just the lobby bar. Guestrooms are more sparse and windowless, but still elegant with white concrete floors, rain showers and original art nouveau fixtures.

GUESTHOUSE \$\$

**Sleep Sheep Phuket Hostel**

(☎ 0 7621 6464; [www.sleepsheepphuket.com](http://www.sleepsheepphuket.com); 243-245 Soi Dtac Shop; r 650B; ☹☺) In an alleyway off Th Thalang, this relatively modern place has big, brightly painted rooms with hot-water bathrooms and uncommonly friendly staff; plus it smells like freshly laundered sheets.

HOSTEL \$

**Eating****NORTHERN BEACHES****TOP CHOICE Taste**

(Hat Surin; tapas 160-225B) The best of a new breed of urban-meets-surf eateries along the beach. Dine indoors or al fresco on meal-sized salads, perfectly cooked fillet mignon or a variety of Thai-Mediterranean starters and mains. Service is outstanding and there's an enticing attached gallery selling Tibetan, Nepali and local jewellery and art.

FUSION \$\$

**Rockfish**

(33/6 Th Kamala Beach, Hat Kamala; dishes 150-1000B; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner) Perched above the river mouth and the bobbing long-tails, with beach, bay and mountain views, is Kamala's best dining room. It rolls out gems such as braised duck breast with kale, and prosciutto-wrapped scallops.

FUSION \$\$

**PATONG**

Bargain seafood and noodle stalls pop up across town at night – try the lanes on and around Th Bangla, or venture over to the **Patong Food Park** (Th Rat Uthit; ☎4pm-midnight) once the sun drops.

**Mengrai Seafood**

SEAFOOD \$\$

(Soi Tun; meals 120-300B) Located down a (sweet, dark *soi* off Th Bangla is a wonderful food court serving fresh, local food. The stalls towards the end of the *soi* serve daily curries that local expats swear by. This restaurant specialises in (very) fresh fish, prawns and mussels.

**Chicken Rice Briley**

THAI \$

(Patong Food Park, Th Rat Uthit; meals 35-45B; ☎breakfast & lunch) The only diner in the Patong Food Park to offer sustenance when the sun shines. Steamed chicken breast is served on a bed of rice with a bowl of chicken broth with crumbled bits of meat and bone, along with roast pork. Dip in the fantastic chilli sauce. There's a reason it's forever packed with locals.

**SOUTHERN BEACHES****TOP CHOICE Pad Thai Shop**

THAI \$

(Th Patak East; dishes 40B; ☎breakfast, lunch & dinner) On the busy main road behind Karon, just north of the tacky Ping Pong Bar, is this glorified food stand where you can find rich and savoury chicken stew (worthy of rave reviews in its own right), and the best *pât tai* on planet earth. Spicy and sweet, packed with prawns, tofu, egg and peanuts, and wrapped in a fresh banana leaf, you will be grateful. It closes at around 7pm.

**Capannina**

ITALIAN \$\$

(☎0 7628 4318; capannina@fastmail.fm; 30/9 Moo 2, Th Kata; mains 200-700B) Everything here – from the pastas to the sauces – are made fresh and you can taste it. The ravioli and gnocchi are memorable, the risotto comes highly recommended, and it does great pizzas, calzones and veal Milanese, too. It gets crowded during the high season, so you may want to reserve ahead.

**Thai Kitchen**

THAI \$

(Th Thai Na; meals 80B; ☎breakfast, lunch & dinner) Good rule of thumb: if a humble, roadside cafe is packed with Thai people, you can be certain that the food will rock. Its green curry (warning: your nose will run) and glass-noodle dishes are superb. It's just down the road from, ahem, 'Pussy Bar'.

**PHUKET TOWN**

There's good food in Phuket Town, and meals here cost a lot less than those at the beach.

**TOP CHOICE Cook**

ITALIAN THAI \$

(101 Th Phang-Nga; dishes 60-120B) The Thai owner-chef used to cook Italian at a mega-resort, so when he opened this ludicrously inexpensive Old Town cafe he fused the two cultures. So, order the sensational green curry pizza with chicken, or the pork curry coconut-milk pizza, and fall in love.

**China Inn**

THAI FUSION \$\$

(Th Thalang; dishes 80-250B) The organics movement meets Phuket cuisine at this turn-of-the-century shophouse. There's red curry with crab, a host of veggie options, homemade yoghurt and fruit smoothies with organic honey. There's also a gallery here with textiles, carvings and clothes from Myanmar and Laos.

**Uptown Restaurant**

THAI \$

(Th Tilok Uthit; dishes 30-60B; ☎10am-9pm) This classic, breezy Chinese-style cafe may not look fancy, but look around and you'll notice mounted photos of Thai celebrities who have stopped by to slurp the spectacular noodles.

**Drinking & Entertainment**

Th Bangla is Patong's beer and bar-girl mecca and features a number of spectacular gogo extravaganzas, where you can expect the usual mix of gyrating Thai girls and often red-faced Western men. There are plenty of more subdued options in Phuket Town.

**Two Black Sheep**

PUB

(www.twoblacksheep.net; 172 Th Rat Uthit, Patong; ☎11am-2am) Owned by a fun Aussie couple (he's a musician, she's a chef), this old-school pub is a great find. It has good grub and live music nightly. From 8pm to 10pm there's an acoustic set, then Chilli Jam, the house band, gets up and rocks till the last call.

**Sound Phuket**

CLUB

(www.soundphuket.com; Jung Ceylon complex, Unit 2303, 193 Th Rat Uthit, Patong; ☎10pm-4am) When internationally renowned DJs come to Phuket these days, they are usually gigging amid the rounded, futuristic environs of Patong's hottest (and least sleazy) nightclub. If top-shelf DJs are on the decks, expect to pay up to 300B entry fee.

## Phuket Simon Cabaret

CABARET

(www.phuket-simoncabaret.com; Th Sirirach, Patong; admission 700-800B; ☎performances 7.30 & 9.30pm nightly) About 300m south of town, this cabaret offers entertaining transvestite shows. The 600-seat theatre is grand, the costumes are gorgeous and the ladyboys (*gâ-teu-i*) are convincing. The house is often full – book ahead.

## Bangla Boxing Stadium

THAI BOXING

(Th Phisit Karani, Patong; tickets 1000-1500B; ☎9-11.30pm Tue, Wed, Fri & Sun) Old name, new stadium, same game: a packed line-up of competitive *muay thai* (Thai boxing) bouts.

## i Information

The weekly English-language *Phuket Gazette* (www.phuketgazette.net) publishes information on activities, events, dining and entertainment around the island, as well as the latest scandals.

**Main post office** (Th Montri, Phuket Town; ☎8.30am-4pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat)

**Phuket International Hospital** (☎0 7624 9400; www.phuketinternationalhospital.com; Th Chalermprakiat) International doctors rate this hospital as the best on the island.

**TAT office** (☎0 7621 2213; www.tat.or.th; 73-75 Th Phuket, Phuket Town; ☎8.30am-4.30pm) Has maps, information brochures, a list of standard *sörngtâou* fares out to the various beaches, and the recommended charter costs for a vehicle.

**Tourist police** (☎1699; cnr Th Thawiwong & Th Bangla, Patong)

## i Getting There & Away

### Air

**Phuket International Airport** (☎0 7632 7230) is 30km northwest of Phuket Town; it takes around 45 minutes to an hour to reach the southern beaches from here.

Some regional airline carriers:

**Air Asia** (www.airasia.com) In addition to several daily flights to Bangkok (around 1480B), it also flies direct to Hong Kong (5000B), Chiang Mai (1600B), Singapore (1400B), Bali (2730B) and other destinations.

**Bangkok Airways** (☎0 7622 5033; www.bangkokair.com; 58/2-3 Th Yaowarat) Daily flights to Ko Samui, Bangkok and more.

**Nok Air** (www.nokair.com) Links Phuket to Bangkok.

**THAI** (☎0 7621 1195; www.thaiairways.com; 78/1 Th Ranong, Phuket Town) Operates around seven daily flights to Bangkok with connections to/from several other destinations.

### Boat

Tha Rasada, north of Phuket Town, is the main pier for boats to Ko Phi-Phi with connections to Krabi, Ko Lanta, the Trang Islands, Ko Lipe and even as far as Langkawi Island in Malaysia (where there are further ferry connections to Penang). For quicker service to Krabi and Ao Nang via the Ko Yao Islands, boats leave from Tha Bang Bong north of Tha Rasada.

### Bus

You'll find the **bus terminal** (☎0 7621 1977) just to the east of Phuket Town's centre, within walking distance of the many hotels. Services from here are shown in the table below.

## i Getting Around

A bright orange **government airport bus** (www.airportbusphuket.com; tickets 85B) runs between the airport and Phuket Town via the Heroines Monument about every hour between 6am and 7pm. Services to Patong, Kata and Karon beaches cost 180B if there are enough passengers.

Local transport around Phuket can be frustrating. Large bus-sized *sörngtâou* run regularly from Th Ranong near Phuket Town's day market to the various west coast beaches (25B to 40B per person) These run from around 7am to 5pm.

## BUSES FROM PHUKET

DESTINATION	BUS TYPE	FARE	DURATION (HR)
Bangkok	2nd class	487B	15
	VIP	974B	13
Hat Yai	air-con	556B	6-7
Ko Samui	air-con	430B	8 (bus/boat)
Krabi	ordinary	95B	4
Ranong	ordinary	209B	6
Surat Thani	ordinary	195B	6
Trang	air-con	240B	5

Túk-túk circulate around Patong for 50B to 100B per ride. There are numerous places to rent 125cc motorbikes and jeeps.

## Krabi Town

POP 27,500

Krabi Town is majestically situated among impossibly angular limestone karsts jutting from the mangroves, but midcity you're more likely to be awe-struck by the sheer volume of guesthouses and travel agencies packed into this compact, quirky little town.

**Wat Tham Seu** (Tiger Cave Temple) is a sprawling hill and cave temple complex 8km northwest of Krabi that's a worthwhile day trip from town.

For local sea-kayaking tours, try **Sea Kayak Krabi** (☎ 7563 0270; www.seakayak-krabi.com; 40 Th Ruen Rudee).

### Sleeping

Krabi has an exceptional and ever-improving guesthouse scene; flashpackers should head to Ao Nang.

#### **Pak-up Hostel**

HOSTEL \$

(☎ 0 5611 955; www.pakuphostel.com; 87 Th Utrakit; dm 180-200B, d 600B; 🚻📶) This snazzy hostel features several uberhip 10-bed dorms with big wooden bunks built into the wall, each equipped with personal lockers. Modern shared bathrooms have cold-water stalls as well as a few hot-water rain showers.

#### **Chan Cha Lay**

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎ 0 7562 0952; www.chanchalay.com; 55 Th Utrakit; r 400-700B, r without bathroom 250B; 🚻) The rooms here, with en suite and decorated in gorgeous Mediterranean blues with polished-concrete semi-outdoor bathrooms, are Krabi's most stylish and comfortable. The shared-bathroom, fan-only rooms are plain, but spotless with firm beds.

### Eating

Krabi Town offers a great opportunity for market eats. Try the **night market** (Th Khong Kha; meals 20-50B) near the Khong Kha pier for authentic papaya salad, fried noodles, *dôm yam gung* (prawn and lemon grass soup) and sweet milky Thai desserts. The **day market** (Th Sukhon; meals 20-60B) serves up a bounty of tropical fruits, simmering curry pots, and banquet trays of steaming noodles.

## Information

**Immigration office** (☎ 0 7561 1350; Th Chamai Anuson; ☎ 8.30am-4pm Mon-Fri) Handles visa extensions.

**Krabi Hospital** (☎ 0 7561 1210; Th Utrakit) About 1km north of town.

**Post office** (Th Utrakit) Just south of the turn-off to Khong Kha pier.

## Getting There & Away

### Air

Most domestic carriers offer flights between Bangkok and Krabi International Airport (one way around 4400B, 1¼ hours). **Bangkok Air** (www.bangkokair.com) has a daily service to Ko Samui for around 3800B.

### Boat

Boats to Ko Phi-Phi and Ko Lanta leave from the passenger pier at Khlong Chilat, about 4km southwest of Krabi. Travel agencies will arrange free transfers.

The largest boat operator is **PP Family Co** (☎ 0 7561 2463; www.pphfamily.com; Th Khong Kha), which has a ticket office right beside the pier in town. In high season there are boats to Ko Phi-Phi (300B, 1½ hours) at 9am, 10.30am, 1.30pm and 3pm while in low season the schedule is reduced to two boats per day.

From November to May, there is daily boat service to Ko Lanta (350B, two hours) leaving Krabi's Khlon Chilat pier at 11.30am.

For Railway, take a long-tail boat from Krabi's Khong Kha pier (150B, 45 minutes) from 7.45am to 6pm.

### Bus

The **Krabi bus terminal** (☎ 0 7561 1804; cnr Th Utrakit & Hwy 4) is in nearby Talat Kao, about 4km north of Krabi. Air-conditioned government buses leave for Bangkok (720B, 12 hours) at 7am, 4pm and 5.30pm. The VIP bus to Bangkok (1100B) leaves at 5.30pm daily. Regular, air-conditioned government buses from Talat Kao also service Hat Yai (170B, three hours), Phuket (145B, 3½ hours), Surat Thani (140B, 2½ hours) and Trang (90B, two hours).

### Minivan

Minivans are booked through travel agencies in town. Some sample fares are Ko Lanta (350B, 1½ hours) and Phuket (350B, three hours).

### Sörnrgtāou

Sörnrgtāou run from the bus station to central Krabi and on to Hat Noppharat Thara (40B), Ao Nang (60B) and the Shell Cemetery at Ao Nam Mao. There are services from 6am to 6.30pm. In the high season there are more frequent services until 10pm for a 10B surcharge.

## **i** Getting Around

Central Krabi is easy to explore on foot, but the bus terminal and airport are both a long way from the town centre. A taxi from the airport to town will cost 400B. In the reverse direction, taxis cost 350B. Agencies in town can arrange seats on the airport bus for 120B. Sörngtāaou between the bus terminal and central Krabi cost 40B.

Motorbikes are available at most guesthouses for around 200B per day.

## Ao Nang

POP 12,400

Ao Nang provides 'civilisation' instead of scenery. It's convenient for a 'night out' but not the tropical hideaway that most people are looking for.

Activities and tours abound – from mangrove kayaking trips to bike trips – and travel agents are very willing to saddle you up with a variety of options. For the popular island tours try **Ao Nang Long-tail Boat Service** (☎ 7569 5313; www.aonangboatco-op.com). Day trips to Ko Phi-Phi on the **Ao Nang Princess** (tickets 1400B) are also possible.

Budgetarians should try **Dream Garden** (☎ 7563 7338; r 950-1200B; 📞) or **J Hotel** (☎ 7563 7878; j\_hotelo@hotmail.com; r from 800B; 📞) for a place to crash. If you want to class things up a bit go for **Somkiet Buri Resort** (☎ 7563 7320; www.somkietburi.com; r 1700-6200B; 📞).

Ao Nang is full of mediocre fare. Walk along **Soi Sunset** (☎ 7569 5260; Soi Sunset; dishes 60-400B; 🍽️ lunch & dinner) – a narrow pedestrian-only alley housing several seafood joints – to find the best catch of the day.

If you get tired of the beach bars and video movies on the strip, the **Aonang Krabi Muay Thai Stadium** (☎ 7562 1042; admission 800B, ringside 1200B) has boisterous *muay thai* bouts two days a week.

## **i** Getting There & Around

### Bus, Car & Minivan

Sörngtāaou run to/from Krabi (50B, 20 minutes). Airport buses to and from Ao Nang cost 80B to 100B. Minibuses go to Phuket (350B, 3½ hours), Pak Bara (300B, 3½ hours) and Ko Lanta (400B, two hours)

### Boat

The 15-minute boat ride to Railay's Hat Railay West is run by **Ao Nang Long-tail Boat Service**

(☎ 7569 5313; www.aonangboatco-op.com). Rates are 80B per person from 7.30am to 6pm.

## Railay

Krabi's fairytale limestone crags come to a dramatic climax at Railay, the ultimate jungle gym for rock-climbing fanatics. This quiet slice of paradise fills in the sandy gaps between each craggy flourish, and although it's just around the bend from chaotic tourist hustle in Ao Nang, the atmosphere here is nothing short of laid-back, Rasta-Thai heaven.

## **👁️** Sights

At the eastern end of Hat Phra Nang is **Tham Phra Nang** (Princess Cave), an important shrine for local fishermen. About halfway along the path from Hat Railay East to Hat Phra Nang, a crude path leads up the jungle-cloaked cliff wall to a hidden lagoon known as **Sa Phra Nang** (Holy Princess Pool) with a killer viewpoint.

## **🚶** Activities

With nearly 500 bolted routes, ranging from beginner to challenging advanced climbs, all with unparalleled cliff-top vistas, it's no surprise that Railay is among the top rock climbing spots in the world.

The going rate for climbing courses is 800B to 1000B for a half-day and 1500B to 2000B for a full day. Recommended climbing shops:

**Highland Rock Climbing** ROCK CLIMBING  
(☎ 08 0693 0374; chaow\_9@yahoo.com; Hat Railay East)

**Hot Rock** ROCK CLIMBING  
(☎ 7562 1771; www.railayadventure.com; Hat Railay West)

**King Climbers** ROCK CLIMBING  
(☎ 07563 7125; www.railay.com; Hat Railay East)

**Wee's Climbing School** ROCK CLIMBING  
(☎ 08 1149 9745; www.tonsai basecamp; Hat Ton Sai)

## **🍴** Sleeping & Eating

### RAILAY

Railay West is beautiful and developers know it – you'll only find midrange and top-end resorts around here. Rates drop by 30% in the low season. You can't go wrong with any of the resorts' restaurants.



**Railay Phutawan Resort**

HOTEL \$\$

(☎08 4060 0550, 0 7581 9478; www.phuritvalleyresort.com; Railay Highlands; bungalows 1140-1940B, r 1640B; @☎) The best options here are the super-spacious polished cement bungalows highlighted with creamy yellow walls, big rain shower bathrooms and all the trimmings of a high-end resort.

**Railay Cabana**

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎0 7562 1733, 08 4057 7167; Railay Highlands; bungalows 350-600B) Superbly located high in the hills in a bowl of karst cliffs, this is your hippie tropical mountain hideaway. Simple, clean thatched-bamboo bungalows are surrounded by mango, mangosteen, banana and guava groves.

**HAT TON SAI****Paasook**

HOTEL \$

(☎08 9645 3013; bungalows 300-800B) The most stylish budget establishment on Ton Sai: wooden bungalows have elongated floor-to-ceiling windows and concrete floors. The gardens are lush, management is friendly and there's a rustic-chic outdoor restaurant, perfect for steamy evenings.

**Countryside Resort**

HOTEL \$

(☎08 5473 9648; countryside-resort.com; cabins 850B; ☎@☎) This is a UK-owned property with attractive solar-powered cabins. There are high ceilings, lace curtains and ceiling fans. Top-row nests have insane karst views, and you'll love Ewok-faced Ollie, the property mascot.

**Drinking**

There's a bunch of places on the beaches where you can unwind and get nicely inebriated, including **Chillout Bar** (Hat Ton Sai), **Highland Rock Climbing** (Railay Headlands) and **Ya-ya Bar** (Railay Headlands).

**Getting There & Around**

Long-tail boats to Railay run from Khong Kha pier in Krabi and from the seafronts of Ao Nang and Ao Nam Mao. Boats between Krabi and Hat Railay East leave every 1½ hours from 7.45am to 6pm (150B, 45 minutes).

Boats to Hat Railay West or Hat Ton Sai from Ao Nang cost 80B (15 minutes) from 7.30am to 6pm or 150B at other times.

From October to May the *Ao Nang Princess* runs from Hat Noppharat Thara National Park headquarters to Ko Phi-Phi with a stop at Hat Railay West.

The fare to Ko Phi-Phi from Railay is 350B.

**Ko Phi-Phi**

Oh, how beauty can be a burden. Like Marilyn Monroe, Phi-Phi Don's stunning looks have become its own demise. Everyone wants a piece of her. This is Thailand's Shangri-la: a hedonistic paradise where tourists cavort in azure seas and snap pictures of long-tails pattering between craggy cliffs.

With its flashy, curvy, blonde beaches and bodacious jungles it's no wonder that Phi-Phi has become the darling of the Andaman coast. And, like any good starlet, this island can party hard all night and still look like a million bucks the next morning.

**Diving**

Crystal-clear Andaman water and abundant marine life make the perfect recipe for top-notch scuba. An Open Water certification course costs around 12,900B, while the standard two-dive trips cost from 3200B.

**Adventure Club**

DIVING

(Map p766; ☎08 1970 0314; www.phi-phi-adventures.com) Our favourite diving operation on the island runs an excellent assortment of educational, ecofocused diving, hiking and snorkelling tours.

**Blue View Divers**

DIVING

(Map p765; ☎0 7581 9395; www.blueviewdivers.com) Focuses on community involvement and beach clean-ups (its latest effort cleared up 700 tonnes of rubbish) and is the only shop to offer dives from a long-tail.

**Snorkelling**

A popular snorkelling destination is **Ko Mai Phai** (Bamboo Island), located just 5km north of Phi-Phi Don. There's a shallow area here where you may be able to see small sharks.

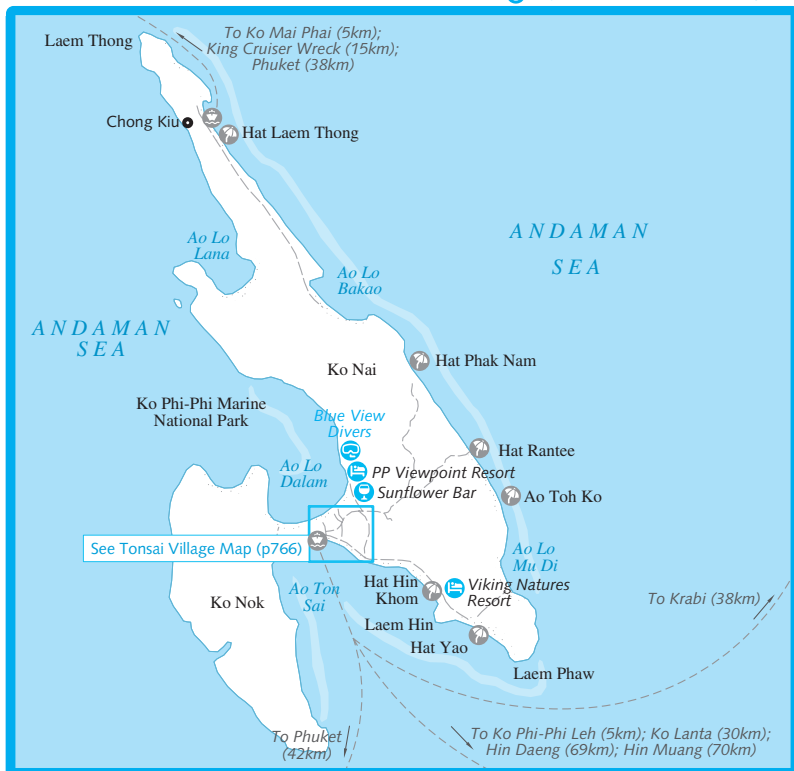
Snorkelling trips cost between 600B and 2400B, depending on whether you travel by long-tail or motorboat. Most bungalows and resorts rent out equipment for 150B to 200B per day.

**Rock Climbing**

There are some good rock climbing outfitters on the island, with most places charging around 1000B for a half-day of climbing.

Try **Spider Monkey** (Map p766; ☎0 7581 9384; www.spidermonkeyclimbing.com) or **Cat's Climbing Shop** (Map p766; ☎08 1787 5101; www.catclimbingshop.com).

## Ko Phi-Phi



### Courses

#### **Pum Restaurant & Cooking School**

COOKING

(Map p766; ☎08 1521 8904; www.pumthaifoodchain.com; classes 450-4650B) Try a cooking class with Pum Restaurant in the tourist village. You'll learn to make some of the excellent dishes that are served in its restaurant and go home with a great cookbook.

### Tours

Ever since Leo smoked a spliff in Alex Garland's *The Beach*, **Ko Phi-Phi Leh** has become somewhat of a pilgrimage site. Tours last about half a day and include snorkelling stops at various points around the island, with detours to Viking Cave and Ao Maya. Long-tail trips cost 800B; by motorboat you'll pay around 2400B. Expect to pay a 400B national-park day-use fee upon landing. It is possible to camp on Phi-Phi Leh through **Maya Bay Camping**

(☎08 6944 1623; www.mayabaycamping.com; per person 2100B).

### Sleeping

Simply put: Phi Phi's prices are higher than the surrounding islands. Be sure to book your room in advance. The following options are in and around Ton Sai Village.

#### **PP Viewpoint Resort**

HOTEL \$\$

(Map p765; ☎0 7560 1200, 0 7561 8111; www.phiphiviewpoint.com; bungalows 1700-3500B; 🚰🚰) At the far northeastern end of Ao Lo Dalam, wooden bungalows sit high on stilts and enjoy awesome views. There is a small swimming pool that practically drops into the ocean below and a glass-walled tower with 360-degree views.

#### **The White**

GUESTHOUSE \$\$

(Map p766; ☎0 7560 1300; www.whitephifi.com; r 1500-1800B; 🚰🚰🚰) Geared towards the 'flash-packer' crowd, The White has two comfy and

## Tonsai Village



surprisingly quiet locations in Tonsai Village – the better being The White 2 that has a few rooftop suites with patios.

### Oasis Guesthouse

**GUESTHOUSE \$**  
(Map p766; ☎0 7560 1207; r 900B; 🏠) It's worth the walk up the side road east of the village centre to find this cute guesthouse with wooden shutters and surrounded by trees. The innkeeper can be surly, but freshly painted rooms have sparkling bathrooms. It's first come, first served only.

### Viking Natures Resort

**HOTEL \$\$**  
(Map p765; ☎08 3649 9492; www.vikingnaturesresort.com; bungalows 1000-6500B; 🏠) OK it's funky, but the wood, thatch and bamboo bungalows here are dreamily creative and stylish with lots of driftwood, shell mobiles and hammock-decked lounging spaces with outrageous views of Ko Phi-Phi Leh.

### Rock Backpacker

**HOSTEL \$**  
(Map p766; ☎08 1607 3897; dm 300B, r 400-600B) A proper hostel on the village hill, with clean dorms lined with bunk beds, tiny private rooms, and an inviting restaurant-bar.



## Eating & Drinking

All of your partying needs will be met at **Reggae Bar** (Map p766), **Slinky Bar** (Map

p766), or the mellower **Sunflower Bar** (Map p765).

### Local Food Market

**THAI \$**  
(Map p766; Ao Ton Sai; 🍳breakfast, lunch & dinner) The cheapest and most authentic eats are at the market. A handful of local stalls huddle on the narrowest sliver of the isthmus and serve up scrumptious *pât tai*, fried rice, *sôm-dam* (spicy green papaya salad) and smoked catfish.

### Unni's

**INTERNATIONAL \$\$**  
(Map p766; mains around 120B; 🍳breakfast, lunch & dinner) Come here for lunch to dine on homemade bagels topped with everything from smoked salmon to meatballs. There are also massive salads, Mexican food, tapas, cocktails and more.

### Garlic Restaurant

**THAI \$**  
(Map p766; ☎08 3502 1426; dishes 45-95B; 🍳breakfast, lunch & dinner) A bright shack-like place that's always packed with happy travellers chowing terrific, not-too-spicy Thai food.

## Getting There & Away

Ko Phi-Phi can be reached from Krabi, Phuket, Ao Nang, Railay and Ko Lanta. Most boats moor at Ao Ton Sai. The Phuket and Krabi boats

operate year-round, while the Ko Lanta and Ao Nang boats only run between October to April.

Boats depart from Krabi for Ko Phi-Phi (300B, 1½ hours) at 9am and 3.30pm, while from Ao Nang (350B, 1½ hours) there's one boat at 3.30pm each day. From Phuket, boats leave at 9am, 2.30pm and 3pm and return from Ko Phi-Phi at 9am, 1.30pm and 3pm (400B, 1¾ to two hours). Trips to Ko Lanta leave Phi-Phi at 11.30am and 2pm and return from Ko Lanta at 8am and 1pm (300B, 1½ hours).

## Getting Around

There are no roads on Phi-Phi Don so transport on the island is mostly by foot. Long-tails can be chartered from Ao Ton Sai pier to Hat Yao (100B to 150B), Laem Thong (800B) and Hat Rantee (500B).

## Ko Lanta

POP 20,000

Long and thin, and covered in bleach-blond tresses, Ko Lanta is Krabi's sexy beach babe. The largest of the 50-plus islands in the local archipelago, this relaxing paradise effortlessly caters to all budget types with its west-coast parade of peach sand. Ko Lanta is relatively flat compared to the karst formations of its neighbours, so the island can be easily explored by motorbike. A quick trip around reveals a colourful crucible of cultures – fried-chicken stalls sit below slender minarets, creaking *chow lair* villages dangle off the island's side, and small Thai wat hide within green-brown tangles of curling mangroves.

Don't miss a visit to **Ban Ko Lanta** (Old Town), which was the original port and commercial centre for the island. Stop by **Hammock House** (☎0 4847 2012; www.jumbohammock.com; ☺10am-5pm) and pick up their fabulous *Lanta Biker's Map*, full of off-the-beaten-path recommendations.

Also worth a look is **Ko Lanta Marine National Park** (admission 400B) – which protects 15 islands in the Ko Lanta group – and the **Tham Khao Maikaeo** cave hidden deep within the interior jungle.

## Activities

Some of Thailand's top diving and snorkelling spots are within arm's reach of Ko Lanta. The best diving can be found at the undersea pinnacles called **Hin Muang** and **Hin Daeng**, about 45 minutes away by speedboat.

The sites around **Ko Haa** have consistently good visibility, with depths of 18m to

34m, plenty of marine life and a cave known as 'the Cathedral'.

Trips out to Hin Daeng/Hin Muang cost around 5000B to 6000B, while trips to Ko Haa tend to be around 3500B to 4500B.

## Scubafish

DIVING

(☎0 7566 5095; www.scuba-fish.com) One of the best dive operations on the island is located at Baan Laanta Resort on Ao Kantiang. A 'Liquid Lense' underwater photography program is available as well.

## Courses

### Time for Lime

COOKING

(☎0 7568 4590; www.timeforlime.net) On Hat Khlong Dao, this place has a huge, professional kitchen with plenty of room to run amok. It offers cooking courses with a slightly more exciting selection of dishes than most cookery schools in Thailand; five-hour courses cost 1800B.

## Sleeping

Some resorts close down for the May-to-October low season, while others drop their rates by 50% or more.



### Bee Bee Bungalows

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎08 1537 9932; www.beebeebungalows; Hat Khlong Khong; bungalows 400-800B; ☺☺☺) One of the best budget spots on the island, Bee Bee's super-friendly staff care for a dozen creative bamboo cabins – every one is unique and a few are up on stilts in the trees.

### Relax Bay

HOTEL \$\$

(☎0 7568 4194; www.relaxbay.com; Ao Phra Ae; bungalows 1200-2500B; ☺☺) This gorgeous French-run place is spread out over a tree-covered headland near a small beach. Its wooden bungalows sit on stilts with large decks, or for a more unique experience, sleep in a seaview luxury tent.

### Sanctuary

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎08 1891 3055; sanctuary\_93@yahoo.com; Ao Phra Ae; bungalows 600-1200B) The original Phra Ae resort is still a delightful place to stay. There are artistically designed wood-and-thatch bungalows with lots of grass and a hippie-ish atmosphere that's low-key and friendly.

### Lanta Darawadee

HOTEL \$

(☎0 7566 7094; www.lantadarawadee.com; Hat Khlong Khong; bungalows 1000-1600B; ☺☺☺) If you're digging the Hat Khlong Khong scene but can't live without air-con, here's

a great-value option right on the beach. It's bland but the new, clean rooms have good beds, terraces, minifridges and TVs.

## Mu Ko Lanta Marine National Park

### Headquarters

CAMPING \$

(📍 in Bangkok 0 2561 4292; Laem Tanod; camping with own tent per person 30B, with tent hire 300-400B) The secluded jungle grounds of the national park headquarters are a wonderfully serene and wild place to camp. There are toilets and running water, but you should bring your own food.



### Eating

Ban Sala Dan has plenty of restaurants and minimarts. Don't miss the seafood restaurants along the northern edge of the village, like **Lanta Seafood** (☎ 0 7566 8411; Ban Sala Dan). With tables on verandahs over water, they offer fresh seafood sold by weight (which includes cooking costs). In Old Town try **Beautiful Restaurant** (☎ 0 7569 7062; Ban Ko Lanta; mains 100-200B). Tables are scattered on four piers that extend into the sea. The fish is fresh and exquisitely prepared.



### Drinking & Entertainment

If you're looking for roaring discotheques, pick another island. If you want a more low-key bar scene with music wafting well into the night, then head to Ao Phra Ae, where you'll find a cluster of fun spots such as **Opium**, **Earth Bar** and **Reggae House**.



### Information

Ban Sala Dan village has a number of internet cafes (1B per minute), travel agencies, dive shops and motorcycle rental joints. There are five 7-Elevens spread along the island's west coast – each one has an ATM.

**Ko Lanta Hospital** (☎ 0 7569 7085) It's 1km south of Ban Ko Lanta (Old Town).

**Police station** (☎ 0 7569 7017) North of Ban Ko Lanta.



### Getting There & Away

#### Boat

There are two piers at Ban Sala Dan. The passenger jetty is about 300m from the main strip of shops; vehicle ferries leave from a second jetty several kilometres further east.

There is one passenger ferry connecting Krabi's Khlong Chilat pier with Ko Lanta, departing from Ko Lanta at 8am (400B, two hours).

Boats between Ko Lanta and Ko Phi-Phi technically run year-round, although service can

peter out in the low season if there are too few passengers. Ferries usually leave Ko Lanta at 8am and 1pm (300B, 1½ hours).

**Tigerline** (☎ 08 1092 8800; www.tigerline-travel.com), a high-speed ferry, runs between Ban Sala Dan and Ko Lipe (1400B, four to five hours), stopping in the Trang Islands. The service leaves at 1pm. The next day the same boat makes the return trip from Ko Lipe departing at 9am. The **Satun-Pak Bara Speedboat Club** (☎ 0 7475 0389, 08 2433 0114; www.tarutaolipe-island.com) runs a similar service.

### Minivan

Minivans run year-round and are your best option from the mainland. Daily minivans to Krabi airport (280B, 1½ hours) and Krabi Town (250B, 1½ hours) leave hourly between 7am and 3.30pm. From Krabi, minivans depart hourly from 8am till 4pm. Minivans to Phuket (350B, four hours) leave Ko Lanta every two hours or so, but are more frequent in the high season. There are also several daily air-conditioned minivans to Trang (250B, 2½ hours) and less frequent services to Khao Lak (650B, six hours) and Ko Samui (650B including boat ticket).



### Getting Around

Most resorts send vehicles to meet the ferries – a free ride to your resort. In the opposite direction expect to pay 80B to 250B. Alternatively, you can take a motorcycle taxi from opposite the 7-Eleven in Ban Sala Dan; fares vary from 50B to 250B depending on distance.

Motorcycles (250B per day) can be rented all over the island.

## Trang

POP 64,700

Most visitors to Trang are in transit to nearby islands, but if you're an aficionado of culture, Thai food or markets, plan to stay a day or more. It's an easy-to-manage town where you can get lost in wet markets by day and hawker markets and late-night Chinese coffee shops by night; at nearly any time of the year, there's likely to be some minor festival that oozes local colour.

Most of the tourist facilities lie along the main drag, Th Praram VI, between the clock tower and the train station. For a place to crash, try the renovated **Sri Trang Hotel** (☎ 0 7521 8122; www.sritrang.com; 22-26 Th Praram VI; r 450-690B; 🍷🍷).

Don't miss the best **night market** (btwn Th Praram VI & Th Ratchadumnoen; meals around 30B; 🍷 dinner) on the Andaman coast – it will have you salivating over bubbling curries,

fried chicken and fish, *pàt tai* and an array of Thai desserts. Go with an empty stomach and a sense of adventure.

## **i** Information

You'll find several internet cafes and various banks with ATMs and foreign-exchange booths on Th Praram VI.

**My Friend** (☎ 0 7522 5984; 25/17-20 Th Sathani; per hr 30B) Has the best 24hr internet cafe in town.

**Post office** (cnr Th Praram VI & Th Kantang) Also sells CAT cards for international phone calls.

## **i** Getting There & Away

### Air

**Nok Air** (www.nokair.com) and **Orient Thai Airways** (www.orient-thai.com) operate daily flights from Bangkok (Don Muang airport) to Trang (around 1500B one-way). The airport is 4km south of Trang.

### Bus

Buses leave from the Trang **bus terminal** (Th Huay Yot). Air-conditioned buses from Trang to Bangkok cost 600B to 680B (12 hours, morning and afternoon). VIP 24-seater buses leave at 5pm and 5.30pm (1050B).

Other services:

**Hat Yai** 110B, three hours, frequent departures.

**Krabi** 115B, two hours, frequent departures.

**Phang-Nga** 180B, 3½ hours, hourly.

**Phuket** 240B, five hours, hourly.

### Minivan & Share Taxi

Hourly vans heading to Surat Thani (180B, 2½ hours), with connections to Ko Samui and Ko Pha-Ngan, leave from a **depot** (Th Tha Klang) just before Th Tha Klang crosses the railway tracks. Several daily air-conditioned minivans between Trang and Ko Lanta (250B, 2½ hours) leave from the travel agents across from the train station. There are shared taxis to Krabi (180B, two hours) and air-conditioned minivans to Hat Yai (160B, two hours) from offices just west of the Trang bus terminal.

Minivans leave regularly from the depot on Th Tha Klang for Pak Meng (70B, 45 minutes), Hat Chao Mai (80B, one hour) and Kuantungku pier (100B, one hour) for onward boat travel.

### Train

Only two trains go all the way from Bangkok to Trang: the express 83 and the rapid 167, which both leave from Bangkok's Hua Lamphong station in the afternoon and arrive in Trang the next morning. From Trang, trains leave in the early and late afternoon.

## Trang Islands

The mythical Trang Islands are the last iteration of the Andaman's iconic limestone peaks before they tumble into the sea like sleeping giants. Shrouded in mystery and steeped in local legend, these stunning island Edens are home to roving *chow lair* (sea gypsies) and technicolour reefs.

**Ko Ngai** (often called Ko Hai) is the northernmost island, offering shallow sandy bays that end at reef drop-offs with excellent snorkelling. **Ko Muk**, to the south, is perhaps the most famous for its Emerald Cave – a limestone tunnel that leads 80m to a mint-green lagoon at the centre of the island (pirates once hid treasure here). The island also features a sugary white sandbar known as Hat Sivalai dotted with spiky palms. **Ko Kradan**, next door, features bathtub-warm shallows and jaw-dropping limestone karst views. Mangroves – home to the rare sea dugong – cloak the shores of **Ko Libong**, and a large Muslim settlement sits atop of the quiet crag of **Ko Sukorn**.

## Sleeping

### KO NGAI

The boat pier is at Koh Ngai Resort, but if you book ahead resorts on the other beaches will arrange transfers.

### Ko Hai Seafood

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎ 08 1367 8497; r 1200B; ☎@☎) These solid bamboo bungalows are easily the most charming budget choice on the beach. The owners are happy, fun and laid-back, plus they have one of the best kitchens on the island.

### Ko Hai Camping

CAMPING \$

(☎ 08 1970 9804; seamoth2004@yahoo.com; tents 600B) Big, clean fan-cooled tentalos on the beach have shared bathrooms and are run by friendly Tu, who also manages the adjacent Sea Moth Dive Center.

### KO MUK

#### Sawasdee Resort

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎ 08 1508 0432; www.kohmook-sawadeeresort.com; Hat Farang; bungalows 800B) Unremarkable wooden bungalows with terraces are right on the quiet shady north end of Hat Farang. You're paying for the location – which is sublime.

### Ko Mook Garden Resort

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎ 08 1748 384; Hat Lodung; bungalows 300B, r 500B) The wooden rooms here are large

while the bamboo bungalows are small and basic. Staying here means you're with a local family who take guests snorkelling, lend out bikes and give out detailed maps of all the island's secret spots.

## OTHER ISLANDS

### Sukorn Beach Bungalows

HOTEL \$\$

(☎ 0 7520 7707, 08 1647 5550; www.sukorn-island-trang.com; Ko Sukorn; bungalows 1000-2500B; 🏠📶) Easily the most professionally run place on Ko Sukorn, the concrete-and-wood bungalows all have comfy verandahs and a long swimming beach out the front from which you can watch the sun set over outlying islands. Oh, and the food (mains 180B to 300B) is the best in the Trang Islands.

### Libong Beach Resort

HOTEL \$

(☎ 0 7522 5205; www.libongbeachresort.com; Ko Libong; bungalows 500-800B; 🏠📶) This is the only place on Ko Libong that's open year-round – rates drop considerably in the low season. There are several options from bland slap-up shacks behind a murky stream to beachfront – and very comfortable – varnished wood-and-thatch chalets.

### Paradise Lost

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎ 08 9587 2409; www.kokradan.wordpress.com; Ko Kradan; dm 250B, bungalows 900-1600B, with shared bathrooms 700B) One of the first places built on Kradan and still one of the best, this groovy, inland US-owned bungalow property has easy access to the island's more remote beaches.

## **i** Getting There & Away

In the high season, the **Tigerline** (☎ 08 1092 8800; www.tigerlinetravel.com) high-speed

ferry runs between Ko Lanta and Ko Lipe, stopping at Ko Muk, Ko Kradan, Hat Yao (on the mainland) and Ko Lao Liang. The entire journey takes five hours. **Satun Pakbara Speed Boat Club** (☎ 0 7475 0389; www.tarutaolipeisland.com) follows a similar route between Ko Lanta and Ko Lipe, stopping on Ko Ngai and Ko Muk only. Prices range from 750B to 1400B depending on the length of your journey.

Boats from Kuantungku on the mainland depart every other hour throughout the morning and early afternoon for Ko Muk and Ko Kradan (100B to 450B; 30 minutes to one hour). Chartered longtails from Kuantungku cost 600B to 800B. Daily boats from Hat Pak Meng stop on Ko Ngai (400B, 1½ hours). Chartered longtails from Hat Pak Meng cost 1200B to Ko Ngai, and 1500B to Ko Kradan. Visitors to Ko Sukorn can charter a boat (1750B) from Ko Lao Liang after taking one of the speed ferries, or hire a longtail from the mainland (around 1000B).

Longtails between the islands can also be arranged. The journey from Ko Muk to Ko Kradan, for example, costs 600B and takes roughly 30 minutes.

## Ko Lipe

Ko Lipe is this decade's poster child for untamed development in the Thai Islands. Blessed with two wide white-sand beaches separated by jungled hills, and within spitting distance of protected coral reefs, the island was once only spoken about in secretive whispers. The whispers quickly became gossip, which turned into a roar – you know, the kind generally associated with bulldozers. Although the island may be going the way of Ko Phi-Phi there's still plenty to love about little Lipe.

## GETTING TO MALAYSIA: SATUN TO KUALA PERLIS OR PULAU LANGKAWI

**Getting to the border** An interprovincial bus services the route from Hat Yai to Satun route. The mainland town of Satun provides boat links to Malaysia's mainland and to the island resort of Langkawi. Boats to Malaysia leave from Tammalang pier, 7km south of Satun. Large longtail boats run to Kuala Perlis in Malaysia (300B one-way, one hour), mainly for travellers on visa tours. For Pulau Langkawi boats (300B, 1½ hours) leave at 9.30am, 1.30pm and 4.30pm daily in high season or 9.30am/12pm/4pm during the low season. If you're island-hopping it is easier to make the leap from Ko Lipe.

**At the border** Boats only run when the immigration offices are open, so there shouldn't be any problems as all passengers are funnelled through border control.

**Moving on** Onward transport from Kuala Perlis is not efficient, meaning this crossing is best suited to short visa runs. Onward transport is easier from Langkawi.

See p413 and p414 for details on making the crossing in the opposite direction. Keep in mind that Malaysia is one hour ahead of Thai time.

## GETTING TO MALAYSIA: KO LIPE TO PULAU LANGKAWI

This is a popular west coast crossing for Andaman island hoppers.

**Getting to the border** Both of Ko Lipe's speedboat companies offer daily trips to Pulau Langkawi (1200B, one hour) in Malaysia; departures are at 7.30am, 10.30am and 4pm.

**At the border** Be at the immigration office at the Bundhaya Resort early to get stamped out.

**Moving on** See p414 for travel from Langkawi to other parts of Malaysia. Note that Thailand and Malaysia are in different time zones.

There are no banks or ATMs on the island, though several of the bigger resorts can change travellers cheques, cash or give advances on credit cards – all for a hefty fee.



### Activities

There's good coral all along the southern coast and around **Ko Kra**. Most resorts rent out mask and snorkel sets and fins for 50B each, and can arrange four-point longtail snorkel trips to must-see **Ko Adang** and other coral-fringed islands for around 1500B.

Diving is also an option, though visibility can be pretty hit-and-miss. Figure 2700B for a two-dive excursion.

#### Forra Diving

DIVING

(☎08 4407 5691; www.forradiving.com) Friendly French-run school with an office on both Sunrise and Pattaya beaches. Offers good accommodation too.

#### Ocean Pro

DIVING

(☎08 9733 8068; www.oceanprodivers.net) Professional and knowledgeable staff run a seamless operation.



### Sleeping

Most, but not all, resorts on Ko Lipe close from May to October. For ultra-cheap digs, try **South Sea** (☎08 0544 0063; Sunset Beach; bungalows 350B) just inland from Sunset Beach.

#### Daya Resort

HOTEL \$\$

(☎0 7472 8030; Hat Pattaya; bungalows 500-1000B) One of the few places that's still locally run, the striped bungalows here are your standard slap-up wooden affairs but the beach is fantastic, the flowery back garden charming, and the restaurant has the absolute best and cheapest seafood grill on the island...and that's saying something.

#### Blue Tribes

HOTEL \$\$

(☎08 6285 2153; www.bluetribeslipe.com; Hat Pattaya; bungalows 1200-1700B; 🍷🍷) One of

Pattaya's more attractive small resorts, its best nests are the two-storey thatched wooden bungalows with downstairs living rooms and top-floor bedrooms that have sliding doors opening to sea views.



### Eating & Drinking

Hat Pattaya's resorts put on nightly fresh seafood barbecues and Daya's is arguably the best.

#### Nong Bank Restaurant

RESTAURANT \$\$

(Hat Pattaya; dishes 80-120B; ☺breakfast, lunch & dinner) This place serves point-and-grill seafood and a superb yellow curry with crab (120B), with a half-dozen tables scattered beneath a tree on the white sand.

#### Pooh's Bar

RESTAURANT, BAR \$

(☎0 7472 8019; www.poohlipe.com) This massive complex was built by a Lipe pioneer and includes bungalows, a dive shop and several restaurants. It's a very popular local expat hang-out, especially in the low season. Each night it projects films onto its big screen.

### Getting There & Away

From 21 October through the end of May, speedboats run from Pak Bara to Ko Lipe at 9.30am, 11am, 12.30pm and 2pm (550B to 650B, 1½ hours). A boat charter to Ko Lipe from Pak Bara is a hefty 4000B each way.

**Tigerline** (☎08 1092 8800; www.tigerline.travel.com) offers the cheapest high-speed ferry service to Ko Lanta (1500B, 5½ hours), stopping at Ko Muk (1400B, 3½ hours), Ko Kradan (1400B, four hours) and Ko Ngai (1400B, 4½ hours). It departs from Ko Lipe's Pattaya Beach at 9.30am. The **Satun-Pak Bara Speedboat Club** (☎0 7475 0389, 08 2433 0114; www.taru.taolipeisland.com) offers similar service.

## Pak Bara

The small fishing community of Pak Bara is the main jumping-off point for the islands



in the Ko Tarutao Marine National Park (including Ko Lipe). The main road from La-Ngu terminates at the pier where there are several travel agencies, internet cafes, cheap restaurants and shops selling beach gear.

Travellers planning to visit the quieter islands of the Ko Tarutao National Park should stop by the **park headquarters** (☑0 7478 3485) just behind the pier, where you can book accommodation and obtain permission for camping. Travel agencies at the pier will gladly sell you a ticket to wherever you want to go, and many of these businesses also offer kayaking and snorkelling day trips (from 1500B).

### **i** Getting There & Away

There are hourly buses between 7am and 4pm from Hat Yai to the pier at Pak Bara (90B, 2½ hours).

Air-conditioned minivans leave hourly for Hat Yai (150B, two hours) from travel agencies near Pak Bara pier. There are also minivans to Trang (200B, 1½ hours), which connect to numerous destinations such as Krabi (450B, four hours) and Phuket (650B, six hours).

## UNDERSTAND THAILAND

### Thailand Today

After a five-year period of political instability initiated by the 2006 coup d'état, Thailand has reached a political plateau with the 2011 general election. Ousted prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra's politically allied party, Puea Thai, won a clear majority of parliamentary seats, and his sister Yingluck Shinawatra, a political novice, was elected prime minister. She is Thailand's first female prime minister and this is the fifth straight win for a Thaksin-backed political party.

Prime minister Yingluck's first days in office set about raising the national minimum wage to 300B per hour (a 30% increase), extending symbolic olive branches to the monarchy and the military and pledging to work towards national reconciliation.

The next question mark in Yingluck's administration is when there will be a pardon for her brother, allowing him to return from exile. He was barred from politics until 2012 and is evading a two year prison term. Thaksin has publicly stated that he has no plans to return to Thailand, though this statement contradicts campaign speeches in

which he described his sister as his 'clone' and spoke of an unspecified time when he would return.

It is unclear if the military would allow a Thaksin return as allegiances within that institution are divided and subject to change based on behind-the-scenes negotiations. Presently the monarchy and the military are aligned against Thaksin, though they have cooperated with the outcome of the general election and have not interfered with the new government's assumption of power.

Thais in general seem fatigued from the previous years' political distress, which undermines a deep-seated sense of a unified 'Thai-ness' and a cultural aversion to violence and anger. Bangkokians, especially, are exhausted by the hassles of traffic jams and road closures that accommodate the exercise of freedom of assembly.

## History

### Rise of Thai Kingdoms

It is believed that the first Thais migrated southwest from modern-day Yúnnán and Guangxi, China, to what is today known as Thailand. They settled along river valleys and formed small farming communities that eventually fell under the dominion of the expansionist Khmer empire of present-day Cambodia. What is now southern Thailand, along the Malay peninsula, was under the sway of the Srivijaya empire based in Sumatra.

By the 13th and 14th centuries, what is considered to be the first Thai kingdom – Sukhothai (meaning 'Rising Happiness') – emerged and began to chip away at the crumbling Khmer empire. The Sukhothai kingdom is regarded as the cultural and artistic kernel of the modern state.

Sukhothai was soon eclipsed by another Thai power, Ayuthaya, established by Prince U Thong in 1350. This new centre developed into a cosmopolitan port on the Asian trade route, courted by various European nations. The small nation managed to thwart foreign takeovers, including one orchestrated by a Thai court official, a Greek man named Constantine Phaulkon, to advance French interests. For 400 years and 34 successive reigns, Ayuthaya dominated Thailand until the Burmese led a successful invasion in 1765, ousting the monarch and destroying the capital.

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 region, King Mongkut (Rama IV, r 1851-68) and his son and successor, King Chulalongkorn (Rama V, r 1868-1910), successfully steered the country into the modern age without becoming a colonial vassal. In return for the country's continued independence, King Chulalongkorn ceded huge tracts of Laos and Cambodia to French-controlled Indochina – an unprecedented territorial loss in Thai history.

## A Struggling Democracy

In 1932 a peaceful coup converted the country into a constitutional monarchy, loosely based on the British model. What has followed has been a near-continuous cycle of power struggles among three factions – the elected government, military leaders and the monarchy backed by the aristocrats. These groups occasionally form tenuous allegiances based on mutual dislike for the opposition and the resulting power grab is often a peaceful military takeover sometimes dubbed 'smooth as silk' coups.

During the mid-20th century, the military dominated the political sphere with an anticommunist tenure that is widely regarded as being ineffectual except in the suppression of democratic representation and civil rights. In 1973, student activists staged demonstrations calling for a real constitution and the release of political dissidents. 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, resulting in hundreds of casualties and the reinstatement of authoritarian rule. Many activists went underground to join armed communist insurgency groups hiding in the northeast.

In the 1980s, as the regional threat of communism subsided, the military-backed Prime Minister Prem Tinsulanonda stabilised the country and moved towards a representative democracy. The military reemerged in 1991 to overthrow the democratically elected government; this was the country's 10th successful coup since 1932. In May 1992 huge demonstrations led by Bangkok's charismatic governor Chamlong Srimuang erupted throughout the city and the larger provincial capitals. The bloodiest confrontation occurred at Bangkok's Democracy Monument, resulting in nearly 50 deaths, but it eventually led to the reinstatement of a civilian government.

## Same, Same but Different

Through the turn of this century, Thailand's era of coups seemed to have ended. Democratically elected governments oversaw the 1997 enactment of Thailand's 16th constitution, commonly called the 'people's constitution' because it was the first charter in the nation's history not written under military order. The country pulled through the 1997 Asian currency crisis and entered a stable period of prosperity in the early 2000s. Telecommunications tycoon Thaksin Shinawatra

### COLOURS: MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE

Colours in Thailand have always had meaning. Each day of the week is associated with a colour, which in turn symbolises a person's birth day. (Thai astrology is based on the day of the week not the month or date of a person's birth.)

Starting in 2006 anti-Thaksin demonstrators donned yellow shirts showing their allegiance to the king (Thaksin was viewed as having designs on the crown); yellow is the colour associated with the present king because of his birth day. This group was dubbed 'Yellow Shirts' and soon the colour became entwined with the political movement. Yellow Shirts were primarily Bangkok urban elites, aristocrats and some middle class.

The pro-Thaksin camp adopted the colour red as a symbol of democracy and they became known as the 'Red Shirts'. Red Shirts were primarily working class or rural class hailing originally from the north and northeast.

To some degree the ongoing political crisis is a class struggle, though there are left-leaning intellectuals and pro-democracy advocates within the ranks of the Red Shirts, as well as avid anti-Thaksin Yellow Shirts from humble backgrounds. In the middle of the extremes are the un-colour-coded Thais who have sympathies with both sides. The ambivalent middle avoids wearing either colour lest they offend a zealous neighbour or friend.

For the monarchy fans with no political intentions, there are now abandoned drawers of yellow shirts. But luckily this group thought of a solution: pink is the new yellow.

and his populist Thai Rak Thai party were elected into power in 2001 and over the next five years effectively engineered one-party rule. With little political opposition, Thaksin consolidated power in all ranks of government, stifling press criticism and scrutiny of his administration.

In 2006 Thaksin was accused of abusing his powers and conflicts of interest, most notably in his family's sale of their Shin Corporation to the Singaporean government for 73 billion baht (US\$1.88 billion), a tax-free gain thanks to telecommunications legislation that he helped craft. Meanwhile Thaksin's working-class and rural base rallied behind him, spotlighting longstanding class divides within Thai society.

Behind the scenes the military and the aristocrats forged an allegiance that resulted in the 2006 coup of the Thaksin government, forcing the charismatic prime minister into exile. At first the military takeover was heralded as a necessary step in ridding the country of an elected dictator and kleptocracy. The military spent the next year attempting to 'clean house' of Thaksin's political party (Thai Rak Thai) only to have the regenerated (and re-christened) party win the 2007 reinstatement of democratic elections. In response, the aristocrats, organised under the group calling itself the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) but often dubbed 'Yellow Shirts', were unhappy with the return of Thaksin's political proxies and staged massive protests in Bangkok that took over the parliament building and closed down the city's two airports for a week in November 2008. This dealt a blow to Thailand's economy just as the US financial crisis was morphing into a global recession.

The Constitutional Court sided with PAD's demands and dissolved the ruling (and popularly elected) party due to a technicality. A new coalition was formed in December 2008, led by Oxford-educated Abhisit Vejjajiva, leader of the Democrat party and Thailand's fourth prime minister of the year. It was viewed by pro-Thaksin factions as a silent coup.

The pro-Thaksin faction (known as 'Red Shirts') retaliated with a crippling demonstration after Thailand's Supreme Court ordered the seizure of US\$46 billion of Thaksin's assets and charged him with abusing his powers as prime minister. Starting in March 2010, thousands of Red Shirts occupied Bangkok's central shopping district for two months. Protest leaders demanded the dissolution of the government and reinstatement of elections.

In May 2010 the military used force to evict the protestors, resulting in bloody clashes (91 people were killed) and a smouldering central city (US\$1.5 billion of crackdown-related arson damage was estimated). In an effort to avoid future civilian-military showdowns, elections were held in 2011 and Thaksin's politically allied party won a clear majority.

## The Monarchy

Further complicating matters is the ailing health of the revered King Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama IX, r 1946-), who defined a new political role for the monarchy as a paternal figure who acted with perceived wisdom in times of political crisis. Now 83 years old, the king is the world's longest-serving monarch but as his health has declined, his role in the society at large has diminished. During the most recent political struggle, the monarchy and the military were clearly aligned against the outcome of democracy and the now-deposed Thaksin government, whose consolidation of power was viewed as a threat to the smooth transfer of the crown from father to son, Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn.

## The Culture

Thais are laid-back, good-natured people whose legendary hospitality has earned their country a permanent place on the global travel map.

## The National Psyche

Paramount to the Thai philosophy of life is *sànrúk* (fun) – each day is celebrated with food and conversation, foreign festivals are readily adopted as an excuse for a party and every task is measured on the *sànrúk* meter.

The social dynamics of Thai culture can be perplexing. The ideals of the culture are based on Buddhist principles and include humility, gratitude and filial piety. These golden rules are translated into such social conventions as saving face (*nâa*), in which confrontation is avoided and people endeavour not to embarrass themselves or other people.

An important component of saving face is knowing one's place in society: all relationships in Thai society are governed by conventions of social rank defined by age, wealth, status and personal and political power. Thais 'size up' a Westerner's social status with a list of common questions: Where are you from? How old are you? Are you married? These questions to a Thai

## DON'T GET TIED-UP BY THAI ETIQUETTE

Master this simple list of dos and don'ts (mainly don'ts) and you'll be an honoured guest.

- » The king's anthem is played before every movie in a theatre and the national anthem is played twice a day (in the morning and evening) in public places like bus and train stations. You are expected to stand respectfully during both.
- » Thailand is a nonconfrontational culture. Don't get angry, yell or get physically violent; keep your cool and things will work out.
- » Feet are the lowest and 'dirtiest' part of the body. Keep your feet on the floor, not on a chair; never touch anyone or point with your foot; never step over someone (or something) sitting on the ground; and take your shoes off when you enter a home or temple.
- » Dress modestly (cover shoulders and knees) and don't sunbathe topless.
- » Women aren't allowed to touch or sit next to a monk or his belongings. The very back seat of the bus and the last row on public boats are reserved for monks.
- » A neat and clean appearance complements Thais' persistent regard for beauty. Frequent daily showers provide natural air-conditioning and a pleasing scent to your neighbours.
- » Traditionally, Thais greet each other with a *wâi*, a prayerlike gesture. In general, if someone *wâis* you, then return the *wâi* (unless *wâi*-ed by a child or a service person). The placement of the fingertips in relation to the facial features varies with the recipient's social rank and age. The safest, least offensive spot is to place the tips of your fingers to nose level and slightly bow your head.
- » It is illegal to step on money in Thailand, as the king's image is on all coins and notes; all images of the king are treated like holy objects.

are matters of public record and aren't considered impolite.

Religion and the monarchy, which is still regarded by many as divine, are the culture's sacred cows. Whatever you do, don't insult the king or disrespect his image, especially in this new era of ultra-sensitivity towards the institution.

### Lifestyle

Thailand straddles the divide between the highly Westernised urban life in major cities and the traditional rhythms of rural, agricultural life. But several persisting customs offer a rough snapshot of daily life. Thais wake up early, thanks in part to the roosters that start crowing sometime after sunset. In the grey stillness of early morning, barefoot monks carrying large round bowls travel through the town to collect their daily meals from the faithful. The housewives are already awake steaming rice and sweeping their front porches with stiff bristled brooms. Soon business is in full swing: the vendors have arrived at their favourite corner to feed the uniformed masses, be they khaki-clad civil servants or white-and-black wearing university students.

Eating appears to make up the rest of the day. Notice the shop girls, ticket vendors or even the office workers: they can be found in a tight circle swapping gossip and snacking (or *gin lên*, literally 'eat for fun'). Then there is dinner and after-dinner and the whole seemingly chaotic, yet highly ordered, affair starts all over again.

### 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 a certain extent practises customs unique to its region or influenced by neighbouring countries. Politically and economically the central Thais are the dominant group. People of Chinese ancestry make up roughly 14% of the population, many of whom have been in Thailand for generations. Ethnic Chinese probably enjoy better relations with the majority population here than in any other country in Southeast Asia. Other large minority groups include the Malays in the far south, the Khmers in the northeast and the Lao, spread throughout the north and east. Smaller non-Thai-speaking groups include the hill tribes living in the northern mountains.

## Sport

Thailand is obsessed with football (soccer), like the rest of the world, but there are some home-grown sports worth watching.

### Muay Thai (Thai Boxing)

Enjoying a global appreciation, *muay thai* is a martial sport akin to boxing but all surfaces of the body are fair targets and everything but the head can deliver a blow. Many foreigners come to Thailand to study the sport or to watch the skilled boxers in their home setting, where matches are accompanied by wild musical orchestration and frenzied betting. You'll know when a match is on because all the taxi and motorcycle drivers will be huddled around a communal TV, cheering in unison.

The most famous matches are at the major stadiums in Bangkok (see p666). There are also 'tourist' matches held at stadiums throughout the country.

### Tàkrâw

Sometimes called Siamese football, *tàkrâw* is best described as volleyball for the feet. This sport does not enjoy much commercial success but it is a popular pastime, often played in school yards or as informal pick-up games in empty lots. In its most formal variation, players assemble on either side of a net and volley a *lûuk tàkrâw* (rattan ball) using their feet or head to touch the ball. Like gymnasts, the players perform aerial pirouettes to spike the ball. But the most common variation is for players to stand in a circle and simply try to keep the ball airborne.

## Religion

Alongside the Thai national flag flies the yellow flag of Buddhism – Theravada Buddhism (as opposed to the Mahayana schools found in East Asia and the Himalaya). Country, family and daily life are all married to religion. 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'.

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 (*phrá phuum*) are constructed outside buildings and homes to encourage the spirits to live independently from the

family but to remain comfortable so as to bring good fortune to the site.

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

## Arts

### Music

Classical Thai music was developed for the royal court as an accompaniment to classical dance-drama and other forms of theatre. Traditional instruments have more pedestrian applications and can often be heard at temple fairs or provincial festivals. Whether used in the high or low arts, traditional Thai music has an incredible array of textures and subtleties, hair-raising tempos and pastoral melodies.

In the north and northeast there are several popular wind instruments with multiple reed pipes, which function like a mouth organ. Chief among these is the *khaen*, which originated in Laos; when played by an adept musician it sounds like a calliope organ. It is used chiefly in *mâw lam* music, a rural folk tradition often likened to the American blues. A near cousin to *mâw lam* is *lûuk thâng* (literally, 'children of the fields'), which enjoys a working-class fan base much like country music does in the US.

Popular Thai music has borrowed rock-and-roll's instruments to create perky teenybop hits to hippie protest ballads and even urban indie anthems. It is an easy courtship with Thai classic rock, like the decades-old group Carabao and the folk style known as *phleng phêua chii-wit* (songs for life). Alternative rock groups like Modern Dog and Aparment Khunpa, have defined Thailand's new millennial sound.

### Sculpture & Architecture

Thailand's most famous sculptural output has been its bronze Buddha images, coveted the world over for their originality and grace. Traditional architecture is more visible as it is applied to simple homes and famous temples. Ancient Thai homes consisted of a single-room teak structure raised on stilts, since most Thais once lived along river banks or canals. The space underneath also served 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), long believed to be a

spiritual protector. Temple buildings demonstrate more formal aspects of traditional architecture and artistic styles.

## Theatre & Dance

Traditional Thai theatre consists of six dramatic forms, including *khôhn*, a formal masked dance-drama depicting scenes from the *Ramakian* (the Thai version of India's Ramayana) that were originally performed only for the royal court. Popular in rural villages, *li-gair* is a partly improvised, often bawdy folk play featuring dancing, comedy, melodrama and music. The southern Thai equivalent is *mānohraa*, which is based on a 2000-year-old Indian story. Shadow puppet plays (*nāng*) found in southern Thailand demonstrate that region's cultural heritage with Malaysia and Indonesia.

## Environment

Thailand's shape on the map has been likened to the head of an elephant, with its trunk extending down the Malay peninsula. The country covers 517,000 sq km, which is slightly smaller than the US state of Texas. The centre of the country, Bangkok, sits at about 14° north latitude – level with Madras, Manila, Guatemala and Khartoum. Because the north-south reach spans roughly 16 latitudinal degrees, Thailand has perhaps the most diverse climate in Southeast Asia.

## The Land

The country stretches from dense mountain jungles in the north to the flat central plains to the southern tropical rainforests. Covering the majority 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. The landscape becomes dusty and brown until the rains (from July to November) transform everything into a fecund green. As the rains cease, Thailand enters its 'winter', a period of cooler temperatures, virtually unnoticeable to a recent arrival except in the north where night-time temperatures can drop to 13°C. By March, the hot season begins and the mercury climbs to 40°C or more at its highest, plus humidity.

In the south, the wet season lasts until January, with months of unrelenting showers and floods. Thanks to the rains, the south supports the dense rainforests more indicative of a 'tropical' region. Along the

coastline, mangrove forests anchor themselves wherever water dominates.

Thailand's national flower, the orchid, is one of the world's most beloved parasites, producing such exotic flowers that even its host is charmed.

## Wildlife

Thailand is particularly rich in bird life: more than 1000 resident and migrating species have been recorded and approximately 10% of all world bird species dwell here. Thailand's most revered indigenous mammal, the elephant, once ran wild in the country's dense virgin forests. Since ancient times, annual parties led by the king would round up young elephants from the wild to train them as workers and fighters. Integral to Thai culture, the elephant symbolises wisdom, strength and good fortune. White elephants are even more auspicious and by tradition are donated to the king. Sadly, elephants are now endangered, having lost their traditional role in society and much of their habitat.

## Environmental Issues

Like all countries with a high population density, there is enormous pressure on Thailand's ecosystems: in the middle of last century about 70% of the countryside was forest; by 2000 an estimated 20% of the natural forest cover remained.

In response to environmental degradation, the Thai government created protected natural areas and outlawed logging. Thailand designated its first national park (Khao Yai) in the 1960s and has added over 100 parks, including marine environments, to the list since. Together these cover 15% of the country's land and sea area, one of the highest ratios of protected to unprotected areas of any nation in the world. Since the turn of the millennium, forest loss has slowed to about 0.2% per year according to the World Bank.

Though the conservation efforts are laudable, Thailand's national parks are poorly funded and poorly protected from commercial development, illegal hunting and logging, or swidden agriculture. The passing of the 1992 Environmental Act was an encouraging move by the government, but standards still lag behind Western nations. Thailand is a signatory to the UN Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES). Forty of Thailand's 300 mammal species are on the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) list of endangered species.

## Food & Drink

### Food

Restaurants reviewed in this guide are organised into the following categories: budget \$ (up to 150B), midrange \$\$ (151B to 350B) and top-end \$\$\$ (more than 350B).

Thai food is a complex balance of spicy, salty, sweet and sour. The ingredients are fresh and light with lots of lemongrass, basil, coriander and mint. Chilli peppers pack a slow, nose-running, tongue-searing burn. And pungent *nám plaa* (fish sauce; generally made from anchovies) adds a touch of the salty sea. Throw in a little zest of lime and a pinch of sugar and the ingredients make a symphony of flavours that becomes more interesting with each bite.

Thailand is 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. No self-respecting shoe-stringer would shy away from the pushcarts in Thailand for fear of stomach troubles. The hygiene standards are some of the best in the region, and sitting next to the wok you can see all the action, unlike some of the guesthouses where food is assembled in a darkened hovel.

For breakfast and 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 teaspoonfuls of the provided spices: dried red chilli, sugar, fish sauce and vinegar. Now you have the true taste of Thailand in front of you. The weapons of choice when eating noodles (either *küaytiaw* or *phat thai*) are chopsticks and a rounded soup spoon.

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.

### Drink

Water purified for drinking is simply called *nám dèum* (drinking water), whether boiled or filtered. All water offered in restaurants, offices or homes will be purified. Ice is generally safe in Thailand. *Chaa* (tea) and *kaa-fae* (coffee) are prepared strong, milky and sweet – an instant morning buzz.

Thanks to the tropical bounty, exotic fruit juices are sold on every corner. Thais prefer a little salt to cut the sweetness of the juice; the salt also has some mystical power to make a hot day tolerable.

Cheap beer appears hand-in-hand with backpacker ghettos. Beer Chang and Beer Singha (pronounced 'sing', not 'sing-ha') are a couple of local brands. Thais have created yet another innovative method for beating the heat; they drink their beer with ice to keep the beverage cool and crisp.

More of a ritual than a beverage, Thai whisky usually runs with a distinct crowd – soda water, Coke and ice. Fill the short glass with ice cubes, two-thirds whisky, one-third soda and a splash of Coke. Thai tradition dictates the youngest in the crowd is responsible for filling the other drinkers' glasses. Many travellers prefer to go straight to the ice bucket with shared straws, not forgetting a dash of Red Bull for a cocktail to keep them going.

## SURVIVAL GUIDE

### DIRECTORY A-Z

#### Accommodation

A tiered pricing system has been used in this book to determine budget category. In big cities and beach resorts, rate under 1000B are indicated as budget (\$), 1500B to 3000B

as midrange (\$\$) and over 3000B as top end (\$\$\$). For small towns, rates under 600B are budget (\$), 600B to 1500B are midrange (\$\$) and over 1500B are top end (\$\$\$). There is a healthy selection of budget accommodation in Thailand, starting at around 200B to 350B for a dorm bed or a bed-in-a-box single with fan and shared (cold water) bathroom. In the small towns, 400B and higher should get you a private (hot water) bathroom and air-con. In the big cities and beach resorts, such amenities cost around 700B.

Guesthouses are the primary budget options. Many started out as converted family homes, and sometimes have graduated into multi-storey apartment-style towers. Guesthouses usually subsidise their low room rates with an attached restaurant, which cultivates a sense of community accompanied by lots of travel advice and cultural conversation.

More impersonal are the Thai-Chinese hotels that cater to a local clientele and are sometimes the only option in non-touristed places. The amenities and rates tend to be higher (usually around the 500B-plus range).

During Thailand's peak season (December to February), prices increase and availability decreases, especially on the island and beach resorts.

Unless otherwise noted, reservations at the guesthouses are not recommended as stand-

ards vary from room to room and year to year. It is imperative for a traveller to inspect the room beforehand since refunds are not a common practice in Thailand. Advance payment to secure a reservation is also discouraged.

In this chapter, high-season prices have been quoted. Enquiries for discounts can be made during off-tourist seasons.

## Customs

Thailand allows the following items to enter duty free:

- » reasonable amount of personal effects (clothing and toiletries)
- » professional instruments
- » 200 cigarettes
- » 1L of wine or spirits

Thailand prohibits import of the following:

- » firearms and ammunition (unless preregistered with the police department)
- » illegal drugs
- » pornographic media

When leaving Thailand, you must obtain an export licence for any antique reproductions or newly cast Buddha images (except personal amulets). Submit two front-view photos of the object(s), a photocopy of your passport, the purchase receipt and the object(s) in question, to the **Department of Fine Arts** (☎ 2628 5032). Allow four days

## BUSINESS HOURS

The following are standard business hours in Thailand. Reviews in this book list only variations from these. Government offices and banks are closed public holidays (see p781).

TYPE OF BUSINESS	BUSINESS HOURS	EXCEPTIONS
Bars	6pm-midnight (officially)	Closing times vary due to local enforcement of curfew laws; bars close during elections and certain religious public holidays.
Banks	9.30am-3.30pm, Mon-Fri	ATMs accessible 24 hours
Clubs (discos)	8pm-2am	Closing times vary due to local enforcement of curfew laws; clubs close during elections and certain religious public holidays.
Government offices	8.30am-4.30pm, Mon-Fri	Some close for lunch (noon-1pm), while others are open Saturday (9am-3pm).
Live-music venues	6pm-1am	Closing times vary due to local enforcement of curfew laws; clubs close during elections and certain religious public holidays.
Restaurants	10am-10pm	Some shops specialise in morning meals and close by 3pm.
Stores	local stores: 10am-6pm, department stores: 10am-8pm,	In some small towns, local stores close on Sunday.



for the application and inspection process to be completed.

## Dangers & Annoyances

Although Thailand is not a dangerous country, it's wise to be cautious, particularly if travelling alone. Most tourist-oriented towns will have a **tourist police office** (☎1155), with officers who can speak English and liaise with the Thai police. The tourist police can also issue official documentation for insurance purposes if valuables are stolen.

It is not recommended to travel into Thailand's southernmost provinces of Yala, Narathiwat, Pattani and remote corners of Songkhla.

Here are a few pointers to avoid problems:

- » Avoid arguments with Thais (especially about money or matters of the heart), who might react inexplicably violently when they feel a 'loss of face' (public embarrassment or humiliation).
- » Don't wander around alone at night intoxicated, especially women and especially on Ko Samui and Ko Pha-Ngan.
- » Don't buy, sell or possess drugs (opium, heroin, amphetamines, hallucinogenic mushrooms and marijuana); there are strict punishments for drug possession and trafficking that are not relaxed for foreigners.
- » Don't accept an invitation to go shopping or play cards with a stranger you've met on the street. This is the lead up to a well-rehearsed scam.
- » Carry your personal effects (money, credit cards, passport) on your person to avoid theft or loss, especially during long-distance travel when stowed luggage can be accessed by thieves.

## Driving Licence

An International Driving Permit is necessary to drive vehicles in Thailand, but this is rarely enforced for motorcycle hire.

## Electricity

Thailand uses 220V AC electricity; power outlets most commonly feature two-prong round or flat sockets. See p927 for details.

## Embassies & Consulates

Most foreign embassies are located in Bangkok; a few have consulates in Chiang Mai or Phuket.

**Australia** (Map p650; ☎0 2344 6300; www.thailand.embassy.gov.au; 37 Th Sathon Tai, Bangkok)

**Cambodia** (☎0 2957 5851-2; 518/4 Pracha Uthit/Soi Ramkamhaeng 39, Bangkok)

**Canada** Bangkok (Map p650; ☎0 2636 0540; www.thailand.gc.ca; 15th fl, Abdulrahim Bldg, 990 Th Phra Ram IV); Chiang Mai Consulate (Map p686; ☎0 5385-0147; 151 Superhighway, Tambon Tahsala)

**China** Bangkok (☎0 2245 7044; www.china.embassy.or.th; 57 Th Ratchadaphisek); Chiang Mai Consulate (Map p686; ☎0 5327 6125; 111 Th Chang Lor, Tambon Haiya)

**Denmark** (Map p650; ☎0 2343 1100; www.amb.bangkok.um.dk; 10 Soi 1, Th Sathon Tai; Bangkok) Consulates in Phuket and Pattaya.

**France** (Map p650; ☎0 2657 5100; www.ambafrance-th.org; 35 Soi 36, Th Charoen Krung); Bangkok Visa & Culture Services (Map p650; ☎0 2627 2150; 29 Th Sathon Tai); Chiang Mai Consulate (Map p686; ☎0 5328 1466; 138 Th Charoen Prathet) Consulates in Phuket & Surat Thani.

**Germany** (Map p650; ☎0 2287 9000; www.bangkok.diplo.de; 9 Th Sathon Tai, Bangkok)

**India** (Map p650; ☎0 2258 0300-6; indian.embassy.in.th; 46 Soi Prasanmit/Soi 23, Th Sukhumvit); Bangkok Visa Application Centre (Map p650; ☎02 6652 9681; www.ivac-th.com; Glass Haus Bldg, 15th fl, ste 1503, Th Sukhumvit) Chiang Mai Consulate (Map p686; ☎0 5324 3066; 33/1 Th Thung Hotel, Wat Gate)

**Indonesia** (Map p660; ☎0 2252 3135; www.kemlu.go.id/bangkok; 600-602 Th Phetchaburi, Bangkok)

**Ireland** (Map p650; ☎0 2677 7500; www.irelandin thailand.com; 28th fl, Q House, Th Sathon Tai, Bangkok) Consulate only; the nearest Irish embassy is in Kuala Lumpur.

**Israel** (Map p650; ☎0 2204 9200; bangkok.mfa.gov.il; Ocean Tower 2, 25th fl, 25 Soi 19, Th Sukhumvit, Bangkok)

**Japan** Bangkok (Map p650; ☎0 2207 8500; www.th.emb-japan.go.jp; 177 Th Withayu); Chiang Mai Consulate (Map p686; ☎0 5320 3367; 104-107 Airport Business Park, Th Mahidon)

**Laos** (☎0 2539 6678; www.bkklaembassy.com; 502/1-3 Soi Sahakarnpramoon, Pracha Uthit/Soi 39, Th Ramakamhaeng)

**Malaysia** (Map p650; ☎0 2629 6800; 35 Th Sathon Tai, Bangkok) Consulate in Songkhla.

**Myanmar** (Burma; Map p650; ☎0 2233 2237; www.mofa.gov.mm; 132 Th Sathon Neua, Bangkok)

**Nepal** (☎0 2391 7240; www.immi.gov.np; 189 Soi 71, Th Sukhumvit, Bangkok)

## PRACTICALITIES

- » *Bangkok Post* and the *Nation* are Thailand's English-language news dailies.
- » The main video format is PAL.
- » Thailand follows the international metric system.
- » Thailand measures its year from the beginning of the Buddhist Era (in 543 BC); meaning that 2012 is 2555 in Thailand.

**Netherlands** (Map p660; ☎ 0 2309 5200; www.netherlandsembassy.in.th; 15 Soi Tonson, Th Ploenchit, Bangkok)

**New Zealand** (Map p660; ☎ 0 2254 2530; www.nzembassy.com; 14th fl, M Thai Tower, All Seasons Pl, 87 Th Withayu, Bangkok)

**Philippines** (Map p650; ☎ 0 2259 0139; www.philembassy-bangkok.net; 760 Th Sukhumvit, Bangkok)

**Russia** (Map p650; ☎ 2234 9824 www.thailand.mid.ru; 78 Soi Sap, Th Surawong) Consulates in Pattaya & Phuket.

**Singapore** (Map p650; ☎ 0 2286 2111; www.mfa.gov.sg/bangkok; 129 Th Sathon Tai, Bangkok)

**Spain** (Map p650; ☎ 0 2661 8284; es.embassyinformation.com; 23 fl, Lake Ratchada Office Complex, 193 Th Ratchadaphisek)

**Switzerland** (Map p660; ☎ 0 2674 6900; www.eda.admin.ch/bangkok; 35 Th Withayu Neua)

**UK** Bangkok (Map p660; ☎ 0 2305 8333; uk.in.thailand.fco.gov.uk; 14 Th Withayu); Chiang Mai Consulate (Map p686; ☎ 0 5326 3015; British Council, 198 Th Bamrungrat) Consulate also in Pattaya.

**USA** Bangkok (Map p660; ☎ 0 2205 4049; http://bangkok.usembassy.gov; 95 Th Withayu); Chiang Mai Consulate (Map p686; ☎ 0 5310 7777; 387 Th Wichayanon)

**Vietnam** (Map p660; ☎ 0 2251 5836-8; www.vietnamembassy-thailand.org; 83/1 Th Withayu, Bangkok)



## Festivals & Events

Many Thai festivals are linked to Buddhist holy days and follow the lunar calendar. Thus they fall on different dates each year. Many provinces hold annual festivals or fairs to promote their agricultural specialities. A complete, up-to-date schedule of events around the country is available from TAT.

Businesses typically close and transport becomes difficult preceding any public holiday or national festivals. The following are popular national festivals:

**Songkran Festival** From 12 to 14 April, Buddha images are 'bathed', monks and elders have their hands respectfully sprinkled with water and a lot of water is wildly tossed about on everyone else for fun. Bangkok and Chiang Mai are major battlegrounds.

**Loi Krathong** On the night of the full moon in November, small lotus-shaped boats made of banana leaves and decorated with flowers and candles are floated on waterways in honour of the river goddess.

## Gay & Lesbian Travellers

Gays and lesbians won't have a problem travelling through Thailand as long as they are respectful of the culture and remain somewhat discreet. Prominent gay communities exist in large cities such as Bangkok and Chiang Mai, and gay-pride events are celebrated in Bangkok, Pattaya and Phuket. Although public displays of affection are common (and are usually platonic) between members of the same sex, you should refrain from anything beyond friendly hand holding.

Gay, lesbian and transsexual Thais are generally tolerated in day-to-day life, though they face institutional discrimination and are often labelled as 'sexual deviants' and barred from studying to become teachers or from joining the military.

**Utopia** (www.utopia-asia.com) is a good starting point for more information on Thailand for gay or lesbian travellers.

## Internet Access

You'll find plenty of internet cafes in most towns and cities. The going rate is anywhere from 40B to 80B an hour. Connections tend to be pretty fast. At many guesthouses, free wi-fi is available though downed service is common and staff are poorly trained to fix it. Wi-fi signals can also be weak if your room is located too far from the router.

## Legal Matters

In general, Thai police don't hassle foreigners, especially tourists. One major exception is in regard to drugs.

If you are arrested for any offence, the police will allow you the opportunity to make a phone call to your embassy or consulate

in Thailand, 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.

## Post

The Thai postal system is relatively efficient and few travellers complain about undelivered mail or lost parcels. Never send cash or small valuable objects through the postal system, even if the items are insured. Poste restante can be received at any town that has a post office.

## Public Holidays

Government offices and banks close on the following days; also see p781 for details on national festivals and Buddhist holy days.

**New Year's Day** January 1

**Makha Bucha Day, Buddhist holy day**

February (date varies)

**Chakri Day, commemorates founder of the Chakri dynasty, Rama I** April 6

**Songkran Festival, traditional Thai New Year and water festival** April 13-14

**Coronation Day, commemorating the 1946 coronation of HM the King and HM the Queen** May 5

**Labour Day** May 1

**Visaka Bucha, Buddhist holy day** May/June (date varies)

**Asahna Bucha, Buddhist holy day**

July (date varies)

**Queen's Birthday** August 12

**Chulalongkorn Day** October 23

**Ork Phansaa, the end of Buddhist 'lent'** October/November (date varies)

**King's Birthday** December 5

**Constitution Day** December 10

**New Year's Eve** December 31

## Telephone

The telephone numbers listed in this chapter are written for domestic dialling; to call a Thai telephone number from outside the country, omit the initial '0'.

If you want to call an international number from Thailand, dial an international access code then the country code then the subscriber number. There are various international access codes with different rates per minute.

The standard is 001; it is the most expensive with the best sound quality. Economy rates are available with 007, 008 and 009.

Here's an example of how to call the US from Thailand: 007 (international access code) + 1 (country code) + 415 776 8322 (subscriber number).

Many expats use **DeeDial** ([www.deedial.com](http://www.deedial.com)), a direct-dial service that requires a prepaid account managed through the internet. The cheapest service it offers is the 'ring-back' feature, which circumvents local charges on your mobile phone.

There are also a variety of international phonecards available through **CAT** ([www.cthai.com](http://www.cthai.com)).

## Toilets

Increasingly, the Asian-style squat toilet is less of the norm in Thailand. There are still specimens in provincial bus stations, older homes and modest restaurants. Some modern toilets also come with a small spray hose – Thailand's version of the bidet. For info on how to use a squat toilet, see p930.

## Tourist Information

The **Tourist Authority of Thailand** (TAT; [www.tourismthailand.org](http://www.tourismthailand.org)) has offices throughout the country that distribute maps and sightseeing advice. TAT offices do not book accommodation, transport or tours. Contact information for regional offices is listed under each town.

## Travellers With Disabilities

Thailand presents one large, ongoing obstacle course for the mobility-impaired. The book *Exotic Destinations for Wheelchair Travelers* by Ed Hansen and Bruce Gordon contains a useful chapter on seven locations in Thailand. See p930 for organisations that promote travel for special-needs individuals.

## Visas

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs oversees immigration and visas issues. Check the Thai embassy or consulate for application procedures and costs. Changes to visa requirements are often monitored by **Thaivisa** ([www.thaivisa.com](http://www.thaivisa.com)).

## VISA EXEMPTIONS & TOURIST VISAS

The Thai government allows citizens from most of Europe, Australia, New Zealand and the USA to enter the country without a prearranged visa. Arrivals by air receive

a 30-day visa and arrivals by land receive 15-day visa (no fee is charged in either case).

Technically, without proof of an onward ticket and sufficient funds, any visitor can be denied entry but this is rarely enforced.

If you plan to stay in Thailand longer than your arrival visa allows, you should apply for the 60-day tourist visa from a Thai consulate or embassy before entering the country.

### VISA EXTENSIONS

If you wish to stay in the country longer than your visa allows, you have two options for extension. You can cross a land border and receive a new 15-day visa upon reentry (at no charge); or you can apply for a visa extension at a Thai immigration office and receive seven to 10 days with a fee.

The fee for a visa extension is 1900B and the number of days (seven to 10) depends on the discretion of the immigration officer. Bring two passport-sized photos and one copy each of the photo and visa pages of your passport. Dress neatly and do not hire a third party proxy.

If you overstay your visa, the penalty is 500B per day, with a 20,000B limit. Fines can be paid at the airport or in advance at an immigration office. If you've overstayed only one day, you don't have to pay.

The following are immigration offices where visa extensions can be handled:

**Bangkok** (☎0 2141 9889; Bldg B, Bangkok Government Center, Th Chaeng Wattana; ☀9am-noon & 1-4.30pm Mon-Fri)

**Chiang Mai** (☎0 5320 1755-6; Th Mahidon; ☀8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri)

**Krabi** (☎0 7561 1097; Th Utarakit, Krabi Town; ☀8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri)

**Ko Samui** (☎0 7742 1069; Th Thaweerat-phakdee; Nathon; ☀8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri)

**Phuket** (☎0 7622 1905; 482 Th Phuket, Phuket Town; ☀8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri)

### Volunteering

Voluntary and paid positions with charitable organisations can be found in the education, development or public-health sectors. Volunteers typically work with marginalised communities - like Burmese migrants, hill-tribe villagers or rural north-eastern Thais. There are also opportunities to work at animal sanctuaries or on environmental issues.

The following are volunteering organisations:

**Akha Association for Education and Culture in Thailand** (Afect; www.akhathai.org; Chiang Rai) A hill-tribe-run NGO that operates schools and public information programs in northern Thai villages.

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

**Cultural Canvas Thailand** (☎08 6920 2451; www.culturalcanvas.com; Chiang Mai) A placement organisation working with migrant learning centres and other social-justice projects in northern Thailand.

**Isara** (☎0 4246 0827; www.isara.org; Nong Khai) Free program for English and computer teachers in underprivileged schools around Thailand.

**LemonGrass Volunteering** (☎08 1977 5300; www.lemongrass-volunteering.com; Surin) A program for English teaching positions around the northeastern town of Surin.

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

### Working

Teaching English is one of the easiest ways to immerse yourself into a Thai community. Those with academic credentials, such as teaching certificates or degrees in English as a second language (ESL) or English as a foreign language (EFL), get first crack at the better-paying jobs at universities and international schools. But there are hundreds of language schools for every variety of native English speaker. **Ajarn.com** (www.ajarn.com) has job listings and tips on teaching.

## Getting There & Away

### Air

Thailand has one primary international airport in Bangkok, while Chiang Mai, Phuket and Ko Samui receive some international flights from nearby countries.

The following airlines fly to and from Bangkok:

**Air Asia** (☎0 2515 9999; www.airasia.com)

**Air Berlin** (☎0 2236 9779; www.airberlin.com)

**Air Canada** (☎ 2670 0400; www.aircanada.com)

**Air China** (☎ 2634 8991; www.fly-airchina.com)

**Air France** (☎ 2610 0808; www.airfrance.fr)

**Air New Zealand** (☎ 2235 8280; www.airnewzealand.com)

**Bangkok Airways** (☎ 1771; www.bangkokair.com)

**British Airways** (☎ 2627 1701; www.britishairways.com)

**Cathay Pacific Airways** (☎ 2263 0606; www.cathaypacific.com)

**China Airlines** (☎ 2250 9898; www.china-airlines.com)

**Delta Airlines** (☎ 2660 6900; www.delta.com)

**Emirates** (☎ 2664 1040; www.emirates.com)

**Eva Air** (☎ 2269 6288; www.evaair.com)

**Garuda Indonesia** (☎ 2679 7371; www.garuda-indonesia.com)

**Gulf Air** (☎ 2254 7931; www.gulfairco.com)

**Japan Airlines** (☎ 2649 9520; www.jal.co.jp)

**Jetstar Airways** (☎ 2267 5125; www.jetstar.com)

**KLM-Royal Dutch Airlines** (☎ 2610 0800; www.klm.com)

**Korean Air** (☎ 2620 6900; www.koreanair.com)

**Lao Airlines** (☎ 2236 9822; www.laoairlines.com)

**Lufthansa Airlines** (☎ 2264 2400; www.lufthansa.com)

**Malaysia Airlines** (☎ 2263 0565; www.mas.com.my)

**Myanmar Airways International** (☎ 2261 5060; www.maiair.com)

**Nepal Airlines** (☎ 2266 7146; www.nepalairlines.com.np)

**Orient Thai** (☎ 1126; www.flyorientthai.com)

**Philippine Airlines** (☎ 2263 0565; www.philippineairlines.com)

**Qantas Airways** (☎ 2236 2800; www.qantas.com.au)

**Royal Brunei Airlines** (☎ 2637 5151; www.bruneiair.com)

**Scandinavian Airlines** (☎ 2645 8200; www.flysas.com)

**Singapore Airlines** (☎ 2353 6000; www.singaporeair.com)

**South African Airways** (☎ 2635 1410; www.flysaa.com)

**Thai Airways International** (☎ 2288 7000; www.thaiair.com)

**United Airlines** (☎ 2353 3939; www.ual.com)

**Vietnam Airlines** (☎ 2655 4137; www.vietnamair.com.vn)

## Land

Thailand enjoys open and safe border relations with Cambodia, Laos and Malaysia. Myanmar's internal conflicts require a restricted border that is subject to frequent closings and shifting regulations.

### CAMBODIA

Cambodian tourist visas are available at the border for US\$20, though some borders charge 1200B. Bring a passport photo and avoid the runner boys who want to issue a health certificate or exchange money.

**Aranya Prathet to Poipet** (p669) The most direct land route between Bangkok and Angkor Wat.

**Hat Lek to Cham Yeam** (p729) The coastal crossing for travellers heading to/from Ko Chang/Sihanoukville.

**Ban Pakard to Psar Pruhm** (p729) A backdoor route from Ko Chang (via Chanthaburi) to Battambang and Angkor Wat.

Several little-used crossings include Chong Chom-O Smach and Chong Sa-Ngam-Choam (p719).

### LAOS

It is fairly hassle-free to cross into Laos. Lao visas (US\$30 to US\$42) can be obtained on arrival and applications require a passport photo.

**Nong Khai to Vientiane** (p724) The main gateway between the two countries. Nong Khai is easily reached by train or bus from Bangkok.

**Chiang Khong to Huay Xai** (p703) A popular crossing linking Chiang Mai with Luang Prabang.

**Mukdahan to Savannakhet** (p721) Tri-lateral link between Thailand, Laos and Vietnam.

**Nakhon Phanom to Tha Khaek** (p722) The third Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge opened in 2011.

**Chong Mek to Vang Tao** (p720) Links Ubon Ratchathani to Pakse in Laos.

Remote crossings include Bueng Kan to Paksan (Lao visas must be arranged in

advance), Tha Li-Kaen Thao and Ban Huay Kon-Muang Ngeun, though they aren't recommended because of difficulty or expense of onward transport.

### **MALAYSIA**

Malaysia, especially the west coast, is easy to reach via bus, train and even boat.

**Kangar to Padang Besar** (p751) Trains pass through this border crossing from Hat Yai (originating in Bangkok) to Malaysia's Butterworth, the mainland transfer point to Penang.

**Sadao to Bukit Kayu Hitam** (p751) Buses from Hat Yai to Malaysia's west coast pass through here.

**Ko Lipe-Langkawi** (p771) Boats provide a convenient high-season link between these two Andaman islands.

**Satun-Langkawi/Kuala Perlis** (p772) Boats shuttle from this mainland port to Malaysia.

**Sungai Kolok to Kota Bahru** Due to continued violence in Thailand's Deep South, we do not recommend this overland route.

### **MYANMAR**

Most of the land crossings into Myanmar have restrictions that don't allow full access to the country; in most cases these borders are used for a visa run. Border points are also subject to unannounced closures, which can last anywhere from a day to years.

**Mae Sai-Tachileik** (p701) The only crossing through which foreigners can travel beyond the border town, though travel is limited and subject to regulations.

**Ranong-Kawthoung** (p753) This is a popular visa-renewal point in the southern part of Thailand.

**Mae Sot to Myawadi** (p712) This border was closed at the time of research. If it reopens, this is only a day-trip crossing useful for visa runs.

**Three Pagodas Pass** (p710) This crossing has been closed to foreigners since 2006. Prior to its closure, the border was open for day trips only and did not issue Thai visa renewals.

## **Getting Around**

### **Air**

Thailand's major domestic carrier is Thai Airways International (THAI), with Bangkok

Airways running a close second. There are several budget airlines making air travel a price-competitive option over long-distance buses. The most useful routes are Bangkok to Chiang Mai, Ko Samui or Phuket. Book your tickets in advance. When researching domestic flights, compare fares on [www.domesticflightsthailand.com](http://www.domesticflightsthailand.com) or talk to a travel agent.

### **Bicycle**

Bicycles can be rented in most towns for about 50B to 150B per day. Bikes are an ideal form of local transport because they're cheap, nonpolluting and keep you moving slowly enough to see everything. Carefully note the condition of the bike before hiring; most have dodgy brakes.

### **Boat**

Being a riverine people, Thais have colourful boats of traditional design. With a long graceful breast that barely skims the water and an elongated propeller, longtail boats are used as island-hoppers, canal coasters and river ferries. Small wooden fishing boats, brilliantly painted, sometimes shuttle tourists out to nearby islands. Cargo boats and high-speed ferries make the island voyage as well. Boat services are often suspended during rainy season and schedules are subject to weather conditions.

### **Bus & Minivans**

The Thai bus service is widespread, convenient and phenomenally fast – nail-bitingly so. Reputable companies operate out of the government bus stations not the tourist centres. Starting at the top, VIP buses are the closest you will come to a rock star's tour bus. The seats recline, the air-con is frosty and an 'air hostess' dispenses refreshments and snacks. Various diminishing classes of air-con buses begin to strip away the extras until you're left with a fairly beat-up bus with an asthmatic cooling system.

For trips to nearby cities, minivans are a convenient option. They depart from the market instead of an out-of-town bus station and, in some cases, offer hotel drop-off.

For long-distance trips, check out schedules and/or purchase tickets the day before.

### **Car & Motorcycle**

Cars and motorcycles can be rented in most tourist towns. Inspect the vehicle beforehand as fleets are often poorly maintained. Always verify that the vehicle is insured for

liability before signing a rental contract, and ask to see the dated insurance documents.

Motorcycle travel is a popular way to get around Thailand. Motorcycle rental usually requires that you leave your passport as a deposit. Be sure to wear a helmet, especially on the islands where this law is enforced. Also wear protective clothing to reduce injury in the event of an accident. Drive slowly in wet conditions or on uneven pavement.

Thais drive on the left-hand side of the road – most of the time. Every two-lane road has an invisible third lane in the middle that all drivers use as a passing lane. The main rule to be aware of is that ‘might makes right’ and smaller vehicles always yield to bigger ones. Drivers usually use their horns to indicate that they are passing.

## Hitching

It is uncommon to see people hitching, since bus travel is inexpensive and reliable. Hitching becomes an option where public transport isn’t available. In this case you can usually catch a ride, but remember to use the Asian style of beckoning: hold your arm out towards the road, palm-side down and wave towards the ground.

That said, hitching is never entirely safe, and travellers who do so should understand that they are taking a small but potentially serious risk.

## Local Transport

### Sähmlór & Túk-Túk

Sähmlór (also written ‘samlor’), meaning ‘three wheels’, are pedal rickshaws found mainly in small towns for short hops. Their modern replacements are the motorised túk-túk, named for the throaty cough of their two-stroke engines. In Bangkok, túk-túk drivers give all local transport a bad name. In other towns they tend to be more reliable.

You must bargain and agree on a fare before accepting a ride.

## Sörngtāaou

Sörngtāaou (literally, ‘two benches’) are small pick-up trucks with a row of seats down each side. In some towns, sörngtāaou serve as public buses running regular, fixed-fare routes. But in tourist towns, sörngtāaou act as shared taxis or private charter; in this case agree on a fare beforehand.

## Train

The **State Railway of Thailand** (SRT; [www.railway.co.th](http://www.railway.co.th)) operates comfortable and moderately priced, but rather slow, services. All rail travel originates in Bangkok and radiates north, south and northeast. Trains are convenient for overnight travel between Bangkok and Chiang Mai and south to Chumphon or Surat Thani. The train can also dodge Bangkok traffic to Ayuthaya.

The SRT operates passenger trains in three classes – 1st, 2nd and 3rd – but each class varies depending on the train type (ordinary, rapid or express). Rapid and express trains make fewer stops than ordinary trains.

Fares are calculated from a base price with surcharges added for distance, class and train type. Extra charges are added for air-con and for sleeping berths (either upper or lower).

Advance bookings can be made from one to 60 days before your intended date of departure. You can make bookings in person from any train station. Train tickets can also be purchased at travel agencies, which usually add a service charge to the ticket price. If you are planning long-distance train travel from outside the country, you should email the **State Railway of Thailand** ([passenger-ser@railway.co.th](mailto:passenger-ser@railway.co.th)) at least two weeks before your journey. You will receive an email confirming the booking. Pick up and pay for tickets an hour before leaving at the scheduled departure train station.

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