

Thailand: Travel Information

Sun, tom yum and spiritual enlightenment



Introduction

The Kingdom of Thailand draws more visitors than any other country in southeast Asia with its irresistible combination of breathtaking natural beauty, inspiring temples, renowned hospitality, robust cuisine and ruins of fabulous ancient kingdoms. Few countries are so well endowed. Chiang Mai has a striking mountain backdrop, over 300 temples and a quaint historical aura. It's also a modern, friendly, internationally-flavoured city with much to offer the visitor - food, accommodation and shopping are all top quality and cheap, and the nights are relatively cool. Bangkok has dominated Thailand's urban hierarchy as well as its political, commercial and cultural life since the late 18th century. Distinctly modern and Westernized, Bangkok is still a sleepy Thai village with a louder soundtrack of traffic and nightlife. Thailand's second-largest city and the gateway to the country's north was founded in 1296. You can still see the moat that encircled the original city. Doi Suthep, topped by one of Thailand's holiest wats, rises behind the city, providing a dramatic backdrop and fine views of the city. Bangkok proper seethes on the east side of the Mae Nam Chao Phraya (Chao Phraya River), drawing rural Thai folk into its cluttered fold daily. The city is reportedly sinking at a rate of 5cm (2in) every year, but there's too much sà-nùk (a Thai sense of fun) going on for that to get anyone down.



Weather Overview

The best overall time for visiting most of Thailand climate-wise is between November and February when it is not too wet and not too hot. The south is best visited when the rest of Thailand is miserably hot (March to May), and the north is best from mid-November to early December or when it starts warming up again in February. If you're spending time in Bangkok, be prepared to roast in April and do some wading in October - probably most challenging two months, weather-wise, in the capital.

Visa Overview

Most visitors can stay for 30 days without a visa. Visitors from 39 different countries can stay for 30 days without a visa. Check with a Thai embassy or consulate if you plan on arriving without a visa or visit www.mfa.go.th/web/12.php.

History:

Pre 20C

The earliest civilisation in Thailand is believed to have been that of the Mons in central Thailand, who brought a Buddhist culture from the Indian subcontinent. In the 12th century, this met a Khmer culture moving from the east, the Sumatran-based Srivijaya culture moving north, and citizens of the Thai state of Nan Chao, in what is now southern China, migrating south. Thai princes created the first Siamese capital in Sukhothai and later centres in Chiang Mai and, notably, Ayuthaya.

The Burmese invaded Siam in both the 16th and 18th centuries, capturing Chiang Mai and destroying Ayuthaya. The Thais expelled the Burmese and moved their capital to

Thonburi. In 1782, the current Chakri dynasty was founded by King Rama I and the capital was moved across the river to Bangkok. In the 19th century, Siam remained independent by deftly playing off one European power against another.

Modern

The 20th century brought great change to Thailand. In 1932, a peaceful coup converted the country into a constitutional monarchy and in 1939 Siam became Thailand. During WWII, the Thai government sided with the Japanese. After the war, Thailand was dominated by the military and experienced more than twenty coups and countercoups interspersed with short-lived experiments with democracy. Democratic elections in 1979 were followed by a long period of stability and prosperity as power shifted from the military to the business elite.

In February 1991 a military coup ousted the Chatichai government, but bloody demonstrations in May 1992 led to the reinstatement of a civilian government with Chuan Leekpai at the helm. This coalition government collapsed in May 1995 over a land-reform scandal but replacement prime minister Banharn Silpa-archa was no better. Dubbed a 'walking ATM' by the Thai press, he was forced to relinquish the prime ministership just over a year later after a spate of corruption scandals. Ex-general and former deputy PM Chavalit Yongchaiyudh headed a dubious coalition until late 1997, when veteran pragmatist Chuan Leekpai retook the reins.

Recent

In 1997 the Thai baht pretty much collapsed, dragging the economy (and many other southeast Asian economies) down in a screaming heap. The unfinished skyscrapers around Bangkok are a legacy of this downturn. In August 1997 the International Monetary Fund stepped in with a bailout package of austerity measures which - although it slowed Thailand's growth dramatically and hit the poor hardest - seemed to have turned things around by early 1998. By the turn of the new century, Thailand's economy had stopped going into free fall, but rebuilding had only just begun. Genuine attempts to weed out corruption seem underway, but the poverty-stricken of Thailand are still wary of promises and agitating for more reforms.



The relatively new Thai Rak Thai Party (Thais Love Thais), led by Thaksin Shinawatra, emerged as a force in Thai politics and saw many sitting MPs defect to its ranks. In parliamentary elections held in January 2001, Thai Rak Thai trounced Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai's democrats.

Although Thaksin has thus far been able broadly to deliver on his promises, he has faced opposition from anti-reform elements within his own Thai Rak Thai party, as well as accusations of corruption during his time as deputy prime minister in 1997. One worrying recent development has been Thaksin's widespread suppression of the Thai media. As owner of Thailand's only independent TV station, he sacked 23 journalists during the election that brought him to power, and has since come down heavily on all forms of political commentary on radio or TV. Thaksin also instigated the recent 'war on drugs', which has left thousands dead, many apparently victims of a shoot-to-kill policy by the

Thai police. He has also been criticised for a lack of commitment to ending sectarian violence in Thailand's deep south.

In early 2006 Thaksin faced growing calls to resign amid mounting criticism over his family's sale of shares in telecoms giant Shin Corp. Several anti-Thaksin demonstrations occurred, prompting Thaksin to dissolve parliament and call a snap election on 2 April 2006.

In December 2004 the west-facing Andaman coast was hit by a tsunami, killing more than 5000 people. Worst affected were small family-run businesses and fishermen, whose buildings and boats were lost to the waters. Aside from areas such as Ao Lo Dalam on Phi Phi island and the Khao Lak/Takua Pa areas in Phang-Nga province, the majority of tourist-reliant areas reopened within weeks or even days of the event.

Places of Interest

Sirinat National Marine Park

Comprising Nazi Thon, Nai Yang and Mai Khao beaches, as well as the former Nai Yang National Park and Mai Khao wildlife reserve, Sirinat National Park encompasses 22 sq km of coastal land, plus 68 sq km of sea. The beaches were looking rather glum in the wake of the tsunami, but they will recover in time and suspended park facilities will no doubt be restored.



Ancient City

Ancient City (Muang Boran), south of Bangkok, is billed as the largest open-air museum in the world. Over 100 of Thailand's most impressive monuments are rendered slightly less impressive in this 80-hectare (200-acre) collection of scale models. The grounds follow the basic shape of Thailand itself and the monuments are placed accordingly.

Web: www.ancientcity.com



Wat Phra Kaew & Grand Palace

Wat Phra Kaew (Temple of the Emerald Buddha) is an architectural wonder of gilded chedi (stupas) seemingly levitating above the ground, polished orange and green roof tiles piercing the humid sky, mosaic-encrusted pillars and rich marble pediments. One of the city's holiest and most spectacular sites, the temple inspires awe in even the most jaded traveller.

Web: www.palaces.thai.net

Attractions

Chiang Mai

Chiang Mai has a striking mountain backdrop, over 300 temples and a quaint historical aura. It's also a modern, friendly, internationally-flavoured city with much to offer the visitor - food, accommodation and shopping are all top quality and cheap, and the nights are relatively cool.

Thailand's second-largest city and the gateway to the country's north was founded in 1296. You can still see the moat that encircled the original city. Doi Suthep, topped by one of Thailand's holiest wats, rises behind the city, providing a dramatic backdrop and fine views of the city.

Low-key and likeable, modern Chiang Mai is easily managed and very traveller-friendly. It's well known for its restaurants and also has heaps of good guesthouses (although the hotel 'safes' are notoriously not). Chiang Mai is a good base for mountain treks, and just about every guesthouse advertises treks to visit the hill tribes who live in the surrounding area. Most treks are four to five days and include overnight stays in villages. You may want to think twice about joining such an excursion if you have qualms about interrupting the traditional patterns of life in hill-tribe areas. This part of Thailand has become considerably overtrekked in the last decade: don't expect untouched hill-tribe villages. At the same time, it is a privilege to be in this part of the world so come with a respectful attitude and leave only footprints.

Bangkok

Bangkok has dominated Thailand's urban hierarchy as well as its political, commercial and cultural life since the late 18th century. Distinctly modern and Westernized, Bangkok is still a sleepy Thai village with a louder soundtrack of traffic and nightlife.

Bangkok proper seethes on the east side of the Mae Nam Chao Phraya (Chao Phraya River), drawing rural Thai folk into its cluttered fold daily. The city is reportedly sinking at a rate of 5cm (2in) every year, but there's too much *sà-nùk* (a Thai sense of fun) going on for that to get anyone down. It's worth putting up with the coronary-inducing traffic jams, pollution, annual floods and sticky weather to experience the contrasts of the city: glass and steel buildings competing for sky space with glittering temple spires; jasmine wreaths decorating the on-board shrines of buses and taxis to ward off accidents, shaven-headed, orange-robed monks fielding calls on their mobile phones. Just like any good Buddhist you may have to struggle a bit to reach enlightenment in Bangkok, but when it hits you'll understand that famous Thai smile.



Travel Alert

Bangkok Bombings/Military Coup/Conflict in Southern Thailand
A series of deadly bombings took place in Bangkok on December 31, 2006, with tourist areas targeted and foreigners among the casualties. Travellers should exercise caution in Bangkok, heed any local warnings and closely monitor the media for any developments. In September 2006, a coup was carried out against the Thai civilian government. The situation is now calm and martial law has been lifted in Bangkok and other areas but remains in place in Chiang Mai.

For more information go to [Safe Travel](#) or for the latest on what travellers are saying check out our [Thorn Tree forum](#).

Violence perpetuated by Muslim insurgents in the southern provinces of Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat and Songkhla continues to make the area bordering Malaysia unsafe. Recent attacks have targeted restaurants and shopping areas and tourists have been killed. Travellers should avoid these regions if possible.

Thailand's border with Myanmar (Burma) contains a volatile mixture of landmines, bandits, smugglers and rebels, and is prone to occasional low-level military stoushes. Check consular information for the most up-to-date situation.

Danger and Annoyance

In Bangkok, unlicensed taxis, recognisable by their black and white licence plates, should be avoided. This is most relevant for solo women travelling at night. Look for licensed taxis that have yellow and black licence plates. Be aware that the number of drink spiking incidents in Bangkok is on the rise.

Many travellers suffer heat exhaustion and dehydration when travelling in Thailand during the warmer months, so stay sun smart and keep up the fluids throughout the day.

Take caution when leaving valuables in hotel safes. Many travellers have reported unpleasant experiences leaving valuables in Chiang Mai guesthouses while trekking. Make sure you obtain an itemised receipt for property left with hotels or guesthouses - note the exact quantity (and record the corresponding numbers) of travellers cheques and all other valuables. When you're on the road, keep zippered luggage secured with small locks, especially while travelling on buses and trains. Several travellers have recounted tales of thefts from their bags or backpacks during long overnight bus trips, particularly on routes between Bangkok and Chiang Mai or Ko Samui. Hotel rooms should be locked at night, and cheap, thin-walled rooms checked for strategic peepholes.

Health Conditions

Malaria

This serious and potentially fatal disease is spread by mosquito bites symptoms range from fever, chills and sweating, headache, diarrhoea and abdominal pains to a vague feeling of ill-health. Seek medical help immediately if malaria is suspected. Without treatment malaria can rapidly become more serious and can be fatal. If medical care is not available, malaria tablets can be used for treatment. If you do contract malaria, be sure to be re-tested once you return home as you can harbour malaria parasites even if you are symptom free. Travellers are advised to prevent mosquito bites at all times by sleeping under a mosquito net impregnated with repellent, wearing light-coloured clothing, long trousers and long-sleeved shirts; using mosquito repellents containing the compound DEET on exposed areas and refraining from using perfumes and aftershave.

Thailand's more susceptible areas for malaria include northern Kanchanaburi Province (especially Thung Yai Naresuan National Park) and parts of Trat Province along the Cambodian border (including Ko Chang).

Japanese B encephalitis

This mosquito-transmitted viral infection of the brain is a risk only in rural, rice-growing areas, and is thought to be a very low risk for travellers. However, it can be fatal, and may cause permanent brain damage in those who recover. There is an effective vaccine, and you should take measures to avoid mosquito bites.

Rabies

Many animals can be infected with rabies (such as dogs, cats, bats and monkeys) and it's their saliva that is infectious. Any bite, scratch or even lick from a warm-blooded, furry animal should be cleaned immediately and thoroughly. Scrub with soap and running water, and then apply alcohol or iodine solution. Medical help should be sought promptly to receive a course of injections to prevent the onset of symptoms and death.

Dengue fever

The *Aedes aegypti* mosquito, which transmits the dengue virus, is most active during the day, and is found mainly in urban areas in and around human dwellings. Signs and symptoms of dengue fever include a sudden onset of high fever, headache, joint and muscle pains, nausea and vomiting. A rash of small red spots sometimes appears three to four days after the onset of fever. Severe complications do sometimes occur. You should seek medical attention as soon as possible if you think you may be infected. A blood test can indicate the possibility of dengue fever. There is no specific treatment. Aspirin should be avoided, as it increases the risk of haemorrhaging. There is no vaccine against dengue fever.

Getting there

Overview

It may be a bit pricey to get to Thailand by air, but once you're there you can take advantage of bargain-basement flights. Just bear in mind that flights in and out of Thailand are often overbooked so confirm, confirm and reconfirm. Buses are a sterling way to get around - they're fast (often terrifyingly!) air-conditioned and comfy. There are even women-only buses. However, there have been bad reports of the service on buses booked from agencies on Thanon Khao San. If you want to get to Malaysia, there are train services.

Plane

While the prices of flights to Thailand are competitive from Australia, New Zealand and Europe, it can be quite expensive flying to Bangkok from other points of departure. The good news is that once you're in the city you can shop around for an inexpensive return ticket. A host of international carriers land at Don Muang, Bangkok's major airport terminal. Flights in and out of Thailand are often overbooked so it's imperative that you reconfirm ongoing flights as soon as you arrive. The departure tax on international flights is waived if you're in the country for less than 12 hours.

Train

Overland travel from Malaysia is popular and there are four border crossings between Thailand and Malaysia, two on the west coast, one in the centre and one on the east coast. It's not possible to buy through-fare tickets for rail journeys between Bangkok and Kuala Lumpur or Singapore, unless you ride the luxurious Eastern & Oriental Express, but the trip can be made on express trains via the Thai-Malaysia border at Pedang Besar. The journey usually requires an overnight stop in Butterworth (Malaysia) in order to comfortably make train connections. There are plenty of crossing points between Thailand and Myanmar, Laos or Cambodia.

Ferry

It's legal for non-Thai foreigners to cross the Mekong River by ferry between Thailand and Laos at the following points: Nakhon Phanom (opposite Tha Khaek), Chiang Khong (opposite Huay Xai) and Mukdahan (opposite Savannakhet).

Getting around

Overview

The only fault of the trains that ply around Bangkok is slowness - otherwise, they're a delightful option: cheap, comfortable and efficient. Motorbikes are popular, but if you want to take to the roads, even in a car, beware of the anarchic Thai traffic. A cruiser

option is to take one of the many forms of taxis - there are cars, rickshaws both of the motorised and the people-powered variety, and small pick-ups.

Bus

Buses are phenomenally (read hair-raisingly) fast, well serviced, affordable and air-conditioned. Beware of booking private buses from agencies on Thanon Khao San; the service on such buses can be unbelievably bad. A unique feature of Thai public transport is the women-only buses that revved up in June 2000 - an attempt by the government to protect female passengers from crime and sexual harrasment.

Train

Trains are comfortable, frequent, punctual, moderately priced and rather slow. Sleeping berths are a bargain and a wonderfully comfortable way to traverse the countryside.

Car

Cars, jeeps or vans can be rented in Bangkok and large provincial capitals. Thais drive on the left-hand side of the road - most of the time.

Motorcycle

Motorcycles can be rented in major towns and tourist centres. Always check the condition of the bike thoroughly before you take off, and remember that the Thais are notorious scoff-laws when it comes to road rules - but, in actual fact, it is reckless tourists who come off motorcycles most frequently, especially in places like Ko Samui and Phuket.

Taxi

Local transport includes taxis, tuk-tuks (motorised rickshaws), samlors (bicycle rickshaws) and songthaews (small pick-ups). Taxis are (mostly) metered in Bangkok and songthaews tend to run regular routes, but samlors, tuk-tuks and taxis outside Bangkok require bargaining and agreement on a fare before departure

Fast Facts:

Time Zone

GMT/UTC +7

Weight measures

Metric

Area Sqkm

517,000 sq km

Area Code

Country Code: 66

Population

65,000,000

Spoken Language

Thai (official)

Thai is a complicated language with its own unique alphabet, but it's fun to try at least a few words. The main complication with Thai is that it is tonal: the same word could be

pronounced with a rising, falling, high, low or level tone and could theoretically have five meanings!

Religion

95% Buddhist, 4% Muslim

Currency

Baht (Bht)

Electricity

220V 50Hz

Electrical Plug

European plug with two circular metal pins