

# Thailand

## HIGHLIGHTS

- **Bangkok** (p710) Join the urban orbit in this rowdy metropolis that never sleeps, always eats and specialises in a good time.
- **Ko Phi Phi** (p817) Ogle the perfect proportions of this beach paradise.
- **Chiang Mai** (p749) Soak up the university-town atmosphere of this northern city where you can *finally* become Thai through cooking, massage or meditation courses.
- **Ko Tao** (p799) Learn to swim like a fish at this world-class dive spot.
- **Ko Pha-Ngan** (p795) Laze your way through the day on this popular, laid-back isle.
- **Off the beaten track** (p774 and p737) Track down the old Khmer ruins of Phanom Rung Historical Park or follow the road all the way to the end for sleepy but scenic Sang-klaburi.

## FAST FACTS

- **Budget** US\$16 to US\$20 a day
- **Capital** Bangkok
- **Costs** guest house in Bangkok US\$11 to US\$14, four-hour bus ride US\$4, a plate of rice and curry US\$1, big bottle of Beer Chang US\$2.50
- **Country code** ☎ 66
- **Language** Thai
- **Money** US\$1 = 33B (*baht*)
- **Phrases** *sà wàt dīi* (hello), *khàwp khun* (thank you), *a-ròy* (delicious)
- **Population** 65 million
- **Time** GMT + seven hours
- **Visas** 30-day visa-free entry for most nationalities at airports, 15-day visas at land borders



## TRAVEL HINTS

Skip the bus services that originate out of Bangkok's Th Khao San; these often have hidden costs and hassles.

## OVERLAND ROUTES

Enter via Laos from Vientiane to Nong Khai or from Luang Prabang to Chiang Mai (via Huay Xai-Chiang Khong crossing); via Cambodia from Siem Reap to Bangkok (via Poipet-Aranya Prathet).

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 sheltering vibrant schools of fish and magical underwater gardens; and 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 food is practically worshipped, the markets are piled high with pyramids of colourful tropical fruits and vegetables and the *róť khēn* (vendor cart) is an integral piece of a city's infrastructure.

The new millennium has brought Thailand into a new era of prosperity, with a widening middle class that is one more generation removed from subsistence farming. This means that Bangkok is a tried-and-true international city on par with Singapore for affluence and sophistication and that the young urban generation only knows about village life through TV and story books. With the old ways becoming ancient history, the country is stepping into uncharted territory and the ongoing political stand-off has provided a dramatic and unresolved domestic cliffhanger. Though the global economic downturn and internal political strife has hurt the once raging tourist industry, now is a historic time to observe the kingdom at a crossroads. Plus there will be fewer backpackers to share the trail with.

You'll suffer few travelling hardships in Thailand and be rewarded with tales of island paradises, elephant encounters, renowned cuisine and a deeply spiritual culture where saffron-robed monks walk barefoot through city streets and riotous temples reflect the harsh midday sun. Just prepare your friends for potential boredom from too many 'in-Thailand' stories.

## CURRENT EVENTS

Thailand has been garnering unfavourable headlines since its most recent coup in 2006, which ousted the popular but controversial prime minister, Thaksin Shinawatra. 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' because they wear the colour associated with the monarchy, were unhappy with the return of Thaksin's political friends 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 deep blow to Thailand's economy and tourist industry just as the US financial crisis was morphing into a global recession.

The Constitutional Court got involved to satisfy PAD's demands to dissolve the ruling (and popularly elected) party. 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. He has no popular mandate, is facing mounting unemployment and economic problems, and has fumbled with a human-rights scandal in which Rohingya refugees from Myanmar were abandoned at sea by the Thai navy.

In April 2009, coinciding with the Songkran festival, the Thaksin-supporters, calling themselves the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD) but better known as the 'Red Shirts', staged violent street protests in an outer district of Bangkok and stormed a hotel in Pattaya where the Asean summit was being held. Their demands were the removal of the prime minister and the return of elections, neither of which were met but their actions proved that the Abhiset government could not mend the political divide. Though many of the key UDD leaders have been arrested, the movement remains popular with rural and working-class people. And so the story shall continue...

## 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 Angkor empire. The third Sukhothai