Welcome to Thailand

Thailand is blessed: exotic and mysterious yet approachable and hospitable, it has the looks and personality to entice the world to its shores.

Bangkok, the kingdom’s capital, is an adrenalin rush. The pace is fast, the spaces cramped and the sights and smells dizzying. It is disorienting but addictive for urban junkies. In contrast, the tranquil southern coast will soothe modern nerves. The waters are clear, the diving is spectacular and the pace is oh-so sleepy. Thailand’s famous islands and beaches specialise in fun, from beach parties to casual dining. Along the Andaman Coast dramatic limestone mountains cluster like prehistoric monuments.

Beyond the beach scene, Thailand’s culture trail educates and enlightens. Intense displays of religious devotion and tangible history unfold in Bangkok, the seat of religion and monarchy. Further north, the ancient capitals of Ayuthaya and Sukhothai are peppered with gravity-ravaged ruins and serene Buddha figures. Northern Thailand is lush mountains, historic cities and border intrigue. The gateway to the region, Chiang Mai, has a well-preserved old city and university atmosphere. In higher altitudes, minority hill tribes cling to a distinct cultural identity.

In every corner of the kingdom, Thais concoct flavourful feasts from simple ingredients. Travelling from region to region becomes an edible buffet, from fresh coconut curries in southern Thailand to steamy bowls of noodles in Bangkok and hearty stews in Chiang Mai.

Beyond the beach scene, Thailand’s culture trail educates and enlightens.

Traditional Thai dancers

THIS EDITION WRITTEN AND RESEARCHED BY
China Williams, Mark Beales, Joe Bindloss, Austin Bush, David Eimer, Bruce Evans, Damien Harper, Isabella Noble
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Wat Phra Kaew (p38), Bangkok
Ko Pha-Ngan

Party hard, or take it easy

Famous for its sloppy Full Moon parties, Ko Pha-Ngan (p197) has graduated from a sleepy bohemian island to a stop on the party-people circuit. In between the lunar festivities, it still excels in laid-back island life accessible to everybody. Backpackers can still find rustic, kick-back spots, just like the old days. And comfort seekers are attracted by Ko Pha-Ngan as an alternative to too-comfortable Ko Samui. Divers will be rewarded with easy access to some of the Gulf of Thailand’s best dives sites. Far left: Chalok Lam (p206); left: vendors at a Full Moon party, Hat Rin (p200)
Phuket

The ultimate laid-back beach escape

An international resort, Phuket (p211) is an easy-peasy destination. You can fly in from Bangkok, cutting out the long land journey, and retreat into a five-star resort or arty boutique hotel for a trouble-free tropical vacation. There are slinky stretches of sand, hedonistic party pits and all the mod cons needed for 21st-century rest and recreation. Mix it up with day trips to mangrove forests, water sports and monkey-rescue centres. Hat Kata (p215)
**Ko Phi-Phi**

*The darling of the Andaman coast*

The prettiest island in all of Thailand, Ko Phi-Phi (p245) has gorgeous blonde-sand beaches, scenic limestone cliffs and jewel-toned waters. It’s a car-free and carefree island where the parties last all night and sound systems serenade the stars. Don’t come looking for serenity. Its sister island Ko Phi-Phi Leh is an uninhabited park with coral reefs and interior lagoons. And, of late, party boats sail among the scenery, tipple in hand. *Ao Maya* (p251)

**Railay**

*Dramatic karst towers are the main event*

You’d never know that you were still on the mainland when you wade from a long-tail boat to the shore of this limestone-studded peninsula (p237). Towering karst peaks hem in all sides, creating the illusion of a rocky fortress. Rock-climbers have transformed the cliffs into vertical challenges, while kayakers and snorkellers take to the sea to explore low-tide caves and peek at the marine life sheltered by these hulking missile-shaped islands.
Plan Your Trip

Need to Know

When to Go

High Season (Nov–Mar)
- A cool and dry season follows the monsoons.
- Christmas and New Year’s holidays bring crowds and inflated rates.

Shoulder Season (Apr–Jun, Sep & Oct)
- April–June is very hot and dry. Coastal areas get natural sea-breeze air-con.
- September and October are ideal for the north and the gulf coast.

Low Season (Jul–Oct)
- Monsoon season ranges from afternoon showers to major flooding.
- Some islands shut down; boat service is limited during stormy weather.
- Rain is usually in short, intense bursts.

Currency
Thai baht (B)

Language
Thai

Visas
International air arrivals receive a 30-day visa.

Money
ATMs are widespread and charge a 150B to 180B foreign-account fee; Visa and MasterCard accepted at most hotels and high-end restaurants but not at family-owned businesses.

Mobile Phones
Thailand is on a GSM network through inexpensive prepaid SIM cards; 4G is in urban areas.

Time
GMT plus seven hours.
**Daily Costs**

**Budget:** Less than 1000B
- Basic guesthouse room: 400–1000B
- Market/street stall meal: 40–100B
- One beer: 100B
- Public transport: 20–50B

**Midrange:** 1000–3000B
- Midrange hotel room: 1000–3000B
- Seafood dinner: 350B
- Organised tour or activity: 1000–1500B
- Motorbike hire: 150-250B

**Top End:** More than 3000B
- Boutique hotel room: 3000B
- Fine dining: 350–500B
- Private tour: 2000B
- Car hire: from 800B

**Useful Websites**


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

**Thaivisa** (www.thaivisa.com) Expat site for news and discussions.

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

**Opening Hours**

All government offices and banks are closed on public holidays. Bars and clubs close during elections and certain religious holidays.

**Banks** 9.30am–3.30pm Monday to Friday;
ATMs accessible 24 hours

**Bars & clubs** Open until midnight or 1am; ‘entertainment zones’ until 2am

**Government offices** 8.30am–4.30pm Monday to Friday

**Restaurants** 10am–8pm or 9pm

**Stores** 10am–7pm; shopping centres until 10pm

**Arriving in Thailand**

**Suvarnabhumi International Airport (Bangkok)** Taxis cost 220B to 380B plus tolls and 50B airport surcharge. An Airport Rail Link also provides service.

**Chiang Mai International Airport** Taxis are a flat 120B.

**Phuket International Airport** Buses and minivans run to Phuket Town (100–150B) and beaches (180B). Metered taxis cost 550B.

**Getting Around**

**Air** Domestic routes from Bangkok are plentiful.

**Bus** Intercity buses are convenient; purchase tickets at bus stations to avoid unscrupulous agents.

**Hired transport** Bangkok has metered taxis; elsewhere tuk-tuk and motorcycle taxis have negotiated fares. Motorcycles and cars are easily rented.

**Public transport** Bangkok has an extensive public transit system. Elsewhere sörng-tā-ou (converted pick-up trucks) on fixed routes.

**Train** Slow but scenic.

For more on getting around, see p308