

Northwestern Gulf Coast



Thai vacationers have been flocking to Thailand's northwestern gulf coast for decades, yet somehow foreign tourists never got the memo. This thin isthmus connecting the Asian continent to the Malay Peninsula offers sleepy seaside towns, rugged shell-strewn sand dunes and plenty of intriguing detours, making it a great place to slough off Bangkok's urban smog.

Most tourists will only experience the region through the window of a speeding bus or train destined for the kingdom's southern treasures. Those who decide to stop will enjoy a unique vacationing experience steeped in local tradition.

Quiet Phetchaburi makes for a pleasant afternoon of temple gazing. Stop in Cha-am to master the lyrics of your favourite Thai pop-rock song as it blares along the beach during the usual weekend bustle. Countless guesthouses and resorts are crammed along the beachfront thoroughfare, much like in Hua Hin, further south, which is the favoured resort destination of the royal family.

The dramatic crags of Khao Sam Roi Yot National Park are definitely worth a visit, especially for wildlife enthusiasts. And at the southernmost point of the region, Chumphon earns its spot on the map as the official gateway to southern Thailand and the obligatory transfer point for the diving-centric Ko Tao.

While transport between major destinations is a cinch, navigating the quieter regions requires a little ingenuity and may put your independent travel spirit to the test.

NORTHWESTERN GULF COAST

HIGHLIGHTS

- Searching for hidden street stalls and secret seaside shanties in charming **Hua Hin** (p176)
- Listening for rustling leaves while trying to spot a furry monkey at **Khao Sam Roi Yot National Park** (p183)
- Eavesdropping on Thai gossip from under your beachside umbrella in **Cha-am** (p172)
- Ogling crumbling temples scattered around **Phetchaburi** (opposite)
- Pressing binoculars against your face while anticipating the arrival of a rare bird in **Kaeng Krachan National Park** (p172)



■ DRY SEASON: NOVEMBER–MAY

■ WET SEASON: JUNE–OCTOBER

Climate

The northwestern gulf coast shares its weather patterns with the rest of central Thailand. Temperatures peak in the March to May hot season, followed by monsoon rains falling in the June to October wet season. November through February is known as the 'cool' season and is the best time to visit. The afternoon temperatures seem to hover around 32°C throughout the year, but evenings tend to be cooler and there is little rain.

National Parks

Kaeng Krachan (p172) is the largest national park in Thailand, covering nearly half of Phetchaburi Province. This unending expanse of jungle is known for the Pala-U waterfall and excellent birdwatching. The undulating hills of Khao Sam Roi Yot (p183) offer breathtaking views of the gulf amid limestone cliffs. This is another spot bird fanatics can check off their lists.

PHETCHABURI (PHETBURI)

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pop 47,200

Unlike many other centres of worship around the world, quiet Phetchaburi (also called Phetburi) feels surprisingly devoid of tourist traffic. Dozens of temples lie frozen within the city's slowly paced quotidian life, each one a relic reflecting the achievements of empires that flourished long ago. The Khmer first settled here in the 11th century, and since then the town has seen a steady stream of inhabitants that have used the convenient riverside location as a central trading post. Today the town has barely changed, and a stroll through the city centre reveals a place teeming with crumbling wát mixed with old teak houses and misplaced concrete indicators of a modern future.

If you're light on time, the sleepy religious town can be tackled in an afternoon visit – glimpse the diverse array of wát along the eastern riverbank during a half-day walking tour (see the boxed text, p170). The underground Buddhist shrine at the Khao Luang caves is also worth a visit.

Orientation & Information

If you've come by bus, you'll be getting off close to Khao Wang and will have to take a motorcycle taxi into the centre of town. Train users should follow the road southeast of the tracks until you come to Th Ratchadamnoen,

