

Understand Thailand's Islands & Beaches

THAILAND'S ISLANDS & BEACHES TODAY 356

The idyllic tranquillity of the coast belies the region's complex social and political issues.

HISTORY & POLITICS 358

An elegant tapestry of ancient ruling empires has imbued the region with grace and artistry that persists even today.

PEOPLE & SOCIETY 372

Coy giggles, brash bar scenes and numerous minority groups – Thailand's cultural kaleidoscope is as complicated as it is diverse.

FOOD & DRINK 382

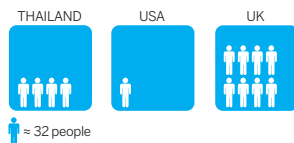
We've got the inside scoop on all things edible. Get ready to really use your mouth in the Land of Smiles.

ENVIRONMENT 388

A realm of impossible beauty awaits those in search of endless vistas of sand and sea.



population per sq km



Thailand's Islands & Beaches Today

The Sex Industry

No matter how you cut it, Thailand's most desirable places of leisure – like the islands and beaches – play host to the country's roaring sex industry. It is common to stumble upon prostitutes and touts hawking the skin trade, and while the industry is perhaps far more overt in the Land of Smiles than it is in other nations, one should not misinterpret the fact that Thailand's relationship with prostitution is a long and complicated one.

Today, Thailand has a reputation as being an international sex tourism destination, a designation that began around the time of the Vietnam War. Foreigners are explicitly targeted in the red light districts in Bangkok, Phuket and Pattaya, but there is also a more clandestine domestic sex industry (especially around border towns) and myriad informal channels of sex for hire.

Prostitution is technically illegal, a law declared in the 1960s after much pressure from the UN, but entertainment venues (from go-go bars to massage parlours) are governed by a separate law that allows for non-sexual services. Some analysts have argued that the high demand for sexual services limits the likelihood of the industry being curtailed; limiting abusive practices is the goal of many activists and government agencies.

The International Labor Organisation estimates that a Thai sex worker's salary equals the average wage of a Thai service-industry worker or a mid-level civil servant's job. These economic factors provide a strong incentive for rural, unskilled or uneducated individuals – especially those with financial obligations – to engage in sex work.

Much of Thai society revolves around the importance of family, with many workers, including those in the sex industry, sending home large percentages of their salary. This incoming wealth is often transformed

- » Population: 66.7 million
- » GDP: US\$580.3 billion
- » GDP per capita: US\$8700
- » Unemployment: 1.2%
- » Education spending: 4.1% of GDP

Dos & Don'ts

- » Do take off your shoes when entering a home or temple. Be careful where you put your feet (which are considered filthy in Thailand).
- » Don't argue or get visibly angry; you'll cause yourself embarrassment.

- » Do stand respectfully for the national anthem.
- » Don't criticise the monarchy.
- » Do smile: it puts Thais at ease.
- » Do dress modestly (cover to the elbows and ankles) for visits to temples or buildings associated with the monarchy.

Top Books

- Very Thai** (Philip Cornwell-Smith) Colourful photos and essays on Thailand's quirks.
- Chronicle of Thailand** (William Warren) History of the last 50 years.