

Northern Thailand



Northern Thailand's 'mountainous' reputation may cause residents of Montana or Nepal to chuckle, but it's the fertile river valleys between these glorified hills that served as the original homeland of the Thai people, and thus the birthplace of much of what is associated with Thai culture. The mountains may not be large, but their impact and significance are immense.

Despite the centuries that have passed since early Tai tribes from southern China are thought to have settled here, northern Thailand continues to cling to its roots, and for many Thais the area still maintains an aura of the 'real' Thailand. The dialect and food of the northern Thais are among the more conservative and unchanged, and traditions here continue to run deep.

In addition to the Thai majority, the north is the most ethnically diverse part of the country, with well-known hill tribes such as Hmong and Akha, to lesser known groups such as the unique Chinese community of Mae Salong and Mae Hong Son's small Muslim communities.

Put all this together and it's clear that these old hills are the perfect destination for seeking out a special cultural experience. Exploring a Buddhist temple in Phrae, volunteering at a refugee clinic in Tak, or sampling a dish at Lampang's evening market; northern Thailand's attractions are generally low-key but eminently rewarding. And for those seeking something more vigorous, the region's geography and climate ensure that there is also ample opportunity for more active pursuits such as rafting in Nan, visiting a Phitsanulok national park or a road trip to Phayao.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Exploring one of the region's numerous and diverse national parks, such as Phitsanulok's historical **Phu Hin Rong Kla National Park** (p395) or Mae Hong Son's rugged **Salawin National Park** (p454)
- Hiking and rafting in Um Phang, where the end of the road leads to **Nam Tok Thilawsu** (p418), Thailand's biggest, most beautiful waterfall
- Learning to be a mahout (elephant caretaker) at Lampang's **Elephant Conservation Center** (p348)
- Getting off the beaten path to the little-visited but atmospheric northern cities such as **Phayao** (p375)
- Cycling around the awesome ruins of Thailand's 'golden age' at **Sukhothai** (p398) and **Si Satchanalai-Chaliang Historical Parks** (p404)
- Renting a vehicle and driving the legendary **Mae Hong Son Loop** (p426) or the extraordinary drive from **Chiang Khong** to **Phayao** (p376)



■ BEST TIME TO VISIT: NOVEMBER–MARCH

■ POPULATION: 7.8 MILLION

History

Northern Thailand's history has been characterised by the shifting powers of various independent principalities. One of the most significant early cultural influences in the north was the Mon kingdom of Hariphunchai (modern Lamphun), which held sway from the late 8th century until the 13th century. Hariphunchai art and Buddha images are particularly distinctive, and many good examples can be found at the Hariphunchai National Museum in Lamphun.

The Thais, who are thought to have migrated down from China since around the 7th century, united various principalities in the 13th century – this resulted in the creation of Sukhothai and the taking of Hariphunchai from the Mon. In 1238 Sukhothai declared itself an independent kingdom under King Si Intharathit and quickly expanded its sphere of influence. Because of this, and the influence the kingdom had on modern Thai art and culture, Sukhothai is considered by Thais to be the first true Thai kingdom. In 1296 King Mengrai established Chiang Mai after conquering the influential Mon kingdom of Hariphunchai.

Later, Chiang Mai, in an alliance with Sukhothai in the 14th and 15th centuries, became a part of the larger kingdom of Lan Na Thai (Million Thai Rice Fields), popularly referred to as Lanna. This extended as far south as Kamphaeng Phet and as far north as Luang Prabang in Laos. The golden age of Lanna was in the 15th century. For a short time the Sukhothai capital was moved to Phitsanulok (1448–86), and Chiang Mai became an important religious and cultural centre. However, many Thai alliances declined in the 16th century. This weakness led to the Burmese capturing Chiang Mai in 1556 and their control of Lanna for the next two centuries. The Thais regrouped after the Burmese took Ayuthaya in 1767, and under King Kawila, Chiang Mai was recaptured in 1774 and the Burmese were pushed north.

In the late 19th century Rama V of Bangkok made efforts to integrate the northern region with the centre to ward off the colonial threat. The completion of the northern railway to Chiang Mai in 1921 strengthened those links until the northern provinces finally became part of the kingdom of Siam in this early period of the 20th century.

Climate

The mountains in northern Thailand influence the climate. It can get quite cold in the highland town of Mae Hong Son and rain pockets can get stuck in the ranges of Tak Province. The central-plains areas around Sukhothai are less variable.

National Parks

Travellers who make it to one of northern Thailand's national parks usually consider it a highlight of their trip. In a region where the elevation reaches as high as 2000m, the north is home to some of Thailand's rarest geography and wildlife. Chae Son (p349) is known for its waterfalls and hot springs. Doi Luang (p349) and Thung Salaeng Luang (p396) were designated for wildlife protection, while Phu Hin Rong Kla (p395) is of interest for its ties to Thailand's Communist Party. Other parks in the north include Salawin National Park (p454), with its rocky river, and Doi Phu Kha (see p388) with its 2000m peaks. All of the national parks in this section are worth the extra effort if you love nature and want some peace and quiet.

Language

Thailand's regional dialects vary greatly and can even be unintelligible to native speakers of Thai not familiar with the vernacular being spoken. *Gǎm méuang*, the northern Thai dialect, is no exception and, in addition to an entirely different set of tones to master, possesses a wealth of vocabulary specific to the north. The northern dialect also has a slower rhythm than Thailand's three other main dialects, an attribute reflected in the relaxed, easy-going manner of the people who speak it.

Northern Thai also has its own writing system, based on an old Mon script that was originally used only for Buddhist scripture. The script became so popular during the Lanna period that it was exported for use by the Thai Lü in China, the Khün in the eastern Shan State and other Thai-Kadai-speaking groups living between Lanna and China. Although few northerners nowadays can read the northern Thai script – often referred to as 'Lanna script' – it is occasionally used in signage to add a northern Thai cultural flavour.

The Language chapter covers only the central Thai dialect; for some useful northern Thai words and phrases, see boxed text, p339.