

Southeastern Thailand



There's nothing moderate about southeastern Thailand. Catering to holidaying hedonists and laid-back hippies, the region represents the many attractions of Thailand – in their extremes.

First there's Pattaya, a testosterone-fuelled, heavy-breathing resort town, where skirts are short and heels high. It's reinventing itself as a family place, but Pattaya still sweats a buzzy late-night aphrodisiac. At the other end of the region, in geography and intensity, is Mu Ko Chang National Marine Park, where islands rise from waters the colour of blue skies and are just as clear.

And then there's everything in between.

The razzle-dazzle of jewels lures dealers to Chanthaburi's gem markets. Equally alluring are Ko Samet's aquamarine waters and white beaches, which once earned it a name that translates to 'Vast Jewel Isle', and on weekends you can watch – or join – Bangkok locals as they make a different kind of trade: weekday anxieties for weekend amusements.

More subdued but no less attractive are the region's subtle hints of Old Siam: teak houses and pier buildings scattered along the coast. Si Racha's pier-front looks across the cargo ship-studded water to Ko Si Chang, a quiet island with hillside temples often overlooked by weekend Bangkok escapees. Trat Province, with its riverside ambience and excellent budget lodgings, invites backpackers en route to Mu Ko Chang and Cambodia to ease off the travellers' accelerator.

Finally, several national parks round out the offerings. In the northern area around Prachinburi, white-water rafting and mountain biking are on offer, while in the smaller parks near the coast, day trips to tiered waterfalls offer shady respite from the buzz of towns and traffic.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Taking in the temples and shrines of **Ko Si Chang** (p232) from the back of a souped-up tük-tük
- Transitioning from wild to mild in **Pattaya** (p234), with its cabaret- and club-filled nightlife and its amusement-park, family-oriented day life
- Navigating the footpaths from beach to beach and bungalow to bungalow along the eastern coast of **Ko Samet** (p245)
- Swinging in a hammock while contemplating another lazy beach day on mellow **Ko Mak** (p269)
- Embarking on a sweaty jungle trek (and cooling waterfall swim) on mountainous **Ko Chang** (p261)



■ BEST TIME TO VISIT: NOVEMBER–MAY

■ POPULATION: 3.6 MILLION

Climate

Southeastern Thailand experiences a three-season, monsoonal climate: a relatively cool dry season in November and December is followed by a hot dry season stretching from January to May. A hot wet season follows from June to October.

During the wet season, Ko Samet stays unusually dry and is the region's most 'monsoon proof' island.

National Parks

The islands of Ko Samet (p245) and Ko Chang (p258) fall within national parks (Khao Laem Ya/Mu Ko Samet National Park and Mu Ko Chang National Marine Park, respectively) and are the region's biggest drawcards after Pattaya. Ko Chang is covered in dense, unspoiled forest, and while the island's coastline is developing fast, the interior is still rugged and untouched.

Khao Chamao/Khao Wong (p244), Khao Khitchakut (p255) and Nam Tok Phlio (p255) National Parks hold fewer surprises, but are worth a visit for a break from the coastal buzz.

Getting There & Away

For the majority of travellers, a trip into, and then through, southeastern Thailand is an eastward progression from Bangkok to Hat Lek on the Cambodian border. Air-con buses link the capital with all major towns, and there are flights from Phuket and Ko Samui to Pattaya, and from Bangkok to Trat. A once-daily train service links Bangkok with Pattaya.

If you are coming from northeast Thailand, regular air-con bus services travel to Rayong and Pattaya from Khorat and Ubon Ratchathani.

Getting Around

Getting around southeastern Thailand is straightforward, with good bus links and steady minivan services between all main attractions. Hourly ferries run to the region's main islands throughout the year, although services to the outlying islands of the Ko Chang archipelago are reduced during the wet season.

CHONBURI PROVINCE

SI RACHA

ศรีราชา

pop 141,400

Si Racha is a jumble of fishing-village roots and immigrant implants. A labyrinth of rickety piers and pontoons testifies to its Old Siam his-

tory, while the glitter and glam of sushi restaurants and karaoke bars highlight the Japanese and Korean immigrants of the present. Down on the seafront you're just as likely to see fishermen mending their nets in a tropical twilight as you are a crowd of hundreds aerobicising as one colour-coordinated unit. Though ships waiting to dock at Si Racha's modern port stud the near horizon, they're far enough away not to spoil the illusion of days gone by.

Si Racha is home to the famous *nám prik sĕe rah-chah* (spicy sauce), a perfect complement to the town's excellent seafood.

Information

Coffee Terrace (94 Th Si Racha Nakorn 1; ☎ noon-11pm) Coffee (45B) and internet (25B per hour).

Krung Thai Bank (cnr Th Surasak 1 & Th Jermjompol)

Post office (Th Jermjompol) A few blocks north of the Krung Thai Bank.

Samitivej Sriracha Hospital (☎ 0 3832 4111; Th Jermjompol, Soi 8) Regarded as Si Racha's best.

Sights

Working-class Si Racha's attractions are limited, but the shambling ambience of the waterfront piers is worth a second glance, and **Ko Loi**, a small rocky island connected to the mainland by a long jetty at the northern end of Si Racha's waterfront, is fun to explore. Here you'll find a **Thai-Chinese Buddhist temple** (☎ daylight), a low-key festival atmosphere, food stalls, and a couple of giant ponds with turtles of every size, from tiny hatchlings to seen-it-all-before seniors. Just south of Ko Loi jetty is the **Health Park**, where you can spot – or join – fitness-conscious individuals walking off a meal. Just a little inland is **Night Square**, where an evening market sets up – it's not too exciting but it's a good landmark to get your bearings.

Sleeping

The most authentic (read: basic) places to stay are the wooden hotels on the piers. A couple of better hotels are located inland.

Sirivatana Hotel (☎ 0 3831 1037; 35 Th Jermjompol; s/d 160/200B) This wooden hotel sits above the sea – in fact, you can look straight through the squat toilet's hole to the ocean. It's simple, but the basic rooms are cheap.

Samchai (☎ 0 3831 1800; Soi 10; r 300-450B; ☎) The Samchai has a similar ambience, though it feels a bit like a port: cement floors with yellow lines wind through the large complex. When we visited a few of the rooms were getting a facelift with new floors and paint (both