



# Central Thailand

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## Why Go?

Overflowing with nearly as much history as it is nature, Central Thailand offers everything from cascading waterfalls to ancient temple ruins. Nature lovers are drawn to the cloud-canopied mountain ranges that separate Thailand from Myanmar (Burma) and the untamed jungle that shelters tigers, elephants and leopards. History buffs head north of Bangkok to Ayuthaya, the former capital of Siam. Once one of the world's most splendid cities, today visitors can cycle around its well-preserved ruins. Further north is the tiny town of Lopburi, where monkeys scamper among the Khmer-style temples.

Northwest from Bangkok is Kanchanaburi, where trekking and adventure activities are the big draw. Visitors also come to remember those who died in WWII building the 'Death Railway'.

In the northwest mountains sit Thong Pha Phum and Sangkhlaburi, home to several ethnic groups.

## When to Go

Central Thailand experiences the country's three seasons in equal measure; Kanchanaburi can have baking sunshine while torrential rain buffets Sangkhlaburi. It is hot in the region from February to June, rainy from June to October, and cool (relatively speaking) from October to January: the one constant is the humidity.

Because of altitude, it can be cooler in Sangkhlaburi and surrounding national parks than in other areas. Ayuthaya and Lopburi sit in a wide-open plain that receives similar amounts of rain and heat as Bangkok.

## AYUTHAYA PROVINCE

### Ayuthaya

POP 137,553

พระนครศรีอยุธยา

Ayuthaya was once one of the most dazzling and dynamic cities in Asia; today, its temple ruins largely offer just tantalising hints of this former majesty. The city's most famous sites have been partially restored so it is easy to imagine how they must have looked in their prime, while others remain fully functioning temples.

Between 1350 and 1767 Ayuthaya was the capital of Siam. As a major trading port during the time of the trade winds, international merchants visited and were left in awe of the hundreds of glittering temples and treasure-laden palaces. At one point the empire ruled over an area larger than England and France combined. Ayuthaya had 33 kings who engaged in more than 70 wars during its 417-year period; however, fine diplomatic skills also ensured no Western power ever ruled Siam.

The last of the empire's battles was in 1767, when an invading Burmese army sacked the city, looting most of its treasures. What was left continued to crumble until major restoration work began. In 1991 Ayuthaya's ruins were designated a Unesco World Heritage Site.

Away from the temples, Ayuthaya has a growing number of attractions that focus on locally made produce and handicrafts.

### Sights

At one time, 400 glittering temples stood proudly in Ayuthaya. Today, more than a dozen restored ruins can be found within the heart of the city, while there are also several working temples. The headless Buddha images, crumbling columns and battered balustrades recreate images of a once mighty city.

For simpler navigation, we've divided up the sites into 'on the island' and 'off the island' sections. It is easy to get between the sites by bicycle, and hiring a guide for some historical detail is useful.

Most temples are open from 8am to 4pm; the more famous sites charge an entrance fee. A one-day pass for most sites on the island is available for 220B and can be bought at the museums or ruins.

The ruins are symbols of royalty and religion, two fundamental elements of Thai society, and so please show respect (see p34).

#### ON THE ISLAND

The following sites are in central Ayuthaya.



#### Wat Phra Si Sanphet

TEMPLE

(วัดพระศรีสรรเพชญ์; admission 50B) The three *chedi* (stupas) at Wat Phra Si Sanphet are perhaps the most iconic image in Ayuthaya. Built in the late 14th century, it was the city's largest temple and was used by several kings. It once contained a 16m-high standing Buddha (Phra Si Sanphet) covered with 250kg of gold, which was melted down by Burmese conquerors.

### AYUTHAYA IN...

#### Two Days

Rise early to beat the Ayuthaya sun and cycle around the **Historical Park**. Stop for lunch at **Lung Lek's** noodle emporium before heading north of the island to catch a late-afternoon performance at **Ayuthaya Klong Sabua Floating Market and Water Theatre**. The following day hop on an elephant for a short ride among the ruins then finish your visit by sampling locally made produce at the **Ayothaya Floating Market**.

#### Four Days

Head out of the city to visit **Bang Pa In Palace** and the nearby **Bang Sai Arts and Crafts Centre**. On the way back, drop by at **Wat Phanan Choeng** and ensure good luck by releasing fish back to the river.

#### One Week

A week gives you plenty of time to see the temples and the nearby countryside. Cycle to **Wat Yai Chai Mongkhon** and mingle in the neighbouring Muslim markets before returning to the island for a sunset boat trip. With a few extra days spare, you can learn how to be a mahout at the **Ayuthaya Elephant Palace**.