



Northeastern Thailand

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Why Go?

For travellers and Thais alike, the northeast is Thailand's forgotten backyard. Isan (*ee-sahn*), as it's called, offers a glimpse of the Thailand of old: rice fields run to the horizon, water buffalo wade in muddy ponds, silk weavers work looms under their homes, and pedal-rickshaw drivers pull passengers down city streets. If you have a penchant for authentic experiences, it will surely be satisfied here.

Spend even just a little time in this colossal corner of the country and you'll discover as many differences as similarities to the rest of Thailand. The language, food and culture are more Lao than Thai, with hearty helpings of Khmer and Vietnamese thrown into the mix.

And spend time here you should because it's home to some of Thailand's best historic sites, national parks and festivals. Thailand's tourist trail is at its bumpiest here (English is rarely spoken), but the fantastic attractions and daily interactions could end up being highlights of your trip.

When to Go

Only 1% of foreign travellers who come to Thailand visit Isan, so you don't need to worry about high and low seasons. The relatively cool dry season from November through February is the most comfortable time to visit, and the Surin Elephant Round-up in November is one festival worth planning your travels around. As the March-to-May hot season (when temperatures can climb over 40°C) comes to a close, towns and villages across the region, most famously Yasothon, launch giant homemade rockets into the sky to call for rain.

Isan is at its most beautiful during the June-to-October rainy season because the forests and rice paddies turn green and the waterfalls run wild. Dan Sai's Phi Ta Khon Festival (June) and Ubon Ratchathani's Candle Parade (July) attract hordes of Thai tourists.

History

The social history of this enigmatic region stretches back some 5600 years, to the hazy days of the Ban Chiang culture, which, by at least 2100 BC, had developed bronze tools to till fields. Though Ban Chiang was a very advanced society, the Khorat Plateau, over which Isan spreads, was a sparsely populated region for most of its history due to poor soils and frequent droughts, and no major powers were ever based here – it was usually under the control of empires based around it.

The name Isan comes from Isanapura (now known as Sambor Prei Kuk), the 7th-century capital of the Chenla kingdom, which at the time included what is now northeast Thailand and is now the general term used to classify the region (*pâhk ee-sâhn*), people (*kon ee-sâhn*) and food (*ah-hâhn ee-sâhn*) of the northeast.

Evidence shows that the Dvaravati held sway here and then the Khmers came in the 9th century and occupied it for some 500 years. After the Khmer empire waned, Isan was under the thumb of Lan Xang and Siam kings, but remained largely autonomous.

But as the French staked out the borders of colonial Laos, Thailand was forced to define its own northeastern boundaries. Slowly but surely, for better and worse, Isan fell under the mantle of broader Thailand.

Long Thailand's poorest area, the northeast became a hotbed of communist activity. Ho Chi Minh spent some years proselytising in the area, and in the 1940s a number of Indochinese Communist Party leaders fled here from Laos and helped bolster Thailand's communists. From the 1960s until an amnesty in 1982, guerrilla activity was rife across Isan. But the various insurgencies evaporated as the Thai government, with considerable help (and most of the money) from the US, began to take an interest in developing the region, resulting in an improved economy and increased opportunity. Despite rapid improvement since then, the per capita income here remains only one-third the national average.

Language & Culture

Isan is a melting pot of Thai, Lao and Khmer influences. The Isan language, still a more common first language than Thai, is very similar to Lao. In fact, there are probably

EATING ISAN

Isan's culinary creations are a blend of Lao and Thai cooking styles that make use of local ingredients. The holy trinity of northeastern cuisine, *gâi yâng* (grilled chicken), *sôm-dam* (spicy papaya salad) and *kôw nêe-o* (sticky rice), is integral to the culture. Also essential are chillies, and a fistful of potent peppers find their way into most dishes, especially *lâhp* (spicy meat salad). Outsiders, including most other Thais, are not fans of *blah râh*, a fermented fish sauce (that looks like rotten mud), but Isan people (*kon ee-sâhn*) consider it almost essential to good cooking.

Fish dominates Isan menus, with *blah dûk* (catfish), *blah chôn* (striped snake-head) and *blah boo* (sand goby) among the most popular. These are mostly caught in the Mekong and other large rivers. Fish that families catch themselves are usually small (sometimes so tiny they're eaten bones and all) because they come from streams and rice paddies, as do crabs, frogs and eels. The most famous fish associated with the northeast is *blah bêuk* (giant Mekong catfish), but it's seldom eaten here because it's expensive. Fish farming, however, is slowly bringing it back to menus.

To both Westerners and other Thais, nothing stands out in Isan cuisine as much as insects. Even as recently as the 1970s insects composed a large part of the typical family's diet, though it became a fading tradition when the government promoted chicken and pig farming, thus lowering the prices of these now popular meats. Insects are still very common as snacks and chilli-sauce ingredients. Purple lights shining out in the countryside are for catching giant water bugs, which, along with crickets, grasshoppers, cicadas, *nôrn mái pài* (bamboo worms) and more, are sold in most night markets. In fact, there's still enough of a demand that imports come from Cambodia. Thailand has no shortage of silkworm larvae, which, after they're dropped into boiling water to remove the silk threads from the cocoon, are popped into the mouth. If they stay in the water long enough to get crispy on the outside, you're in for a literal taste explosion: try one when you visit a weaving village and you'll see what we mean.