



Northern Thailand

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Why Go?

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 birthplace of much of what is associated with Thai culture. The mountains may not be large, but their impact and significance are immense.

Not surprisingly, these old hills are the ideal destination for a unique Thai experience. Exploring a Buddhist temple in Phrae, taking part in a homestay in rural Sukhothai, or sampling a dish at Lampang's evening market - northern Thailand's cultural attractions are generally low-key but are eminently rewarding. And for those seeking something more vigorous, the region's rugged geography ensures that there is also ample opportunity for more active pursuits such as rafting in Nan, visiting a national park in Phitsanulok or a road trip to Phayao.

When to Go

Northern Thailand is the place to head in winter (November to January), when daytime temperatures at the higher elevations are a relatively comfortable 20°C to 23°C and nighttime temperatures can, in some places, dip perilously close to freezing.

From March to May, the hottest time of year, daytime temperatures climb close to 40°C and smoke from slash-and-burn agriculture can fill the skies. The rainy season, June to October, should generally be avoided if you plan to do any trekking.

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 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 lasted 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.

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

SPEAKING NORTHERN

Northerners used to take offence when outsiders tried speaking *gǎm méuang* to them, an attitude that dates back to a time when central Thais considered northerners to be very backward, and made fun of their dialect. Nowadays most northerners are proud of their native language and there was even a popular Bangkok-based TV series in which many characters spoke the northern dialect.

To help you win some smiles from the locals, we've provided a brief lexicon of the local lingo.

» <i>Óo gǎm méuang bòr jǎhng</i>	I can't speak northern Thai
» <i>A yǎng gór?</i>	What did you say?
» <i>An née tów dai?</i>	How much is this?
» <i>Mee kôw nêung bòr?</i>	Do you have sticky rice?
» <i>Lám dáa đáa</i>	Delicious
» <i>Máan lá</i>	Yes/That's right
» <i>Bòr mâan</i>	No
» <i>Sow</i>	20
» <i>Gàht</i>	Market
» <i>Jôw</i>	(A polite word used by women; equivalent to the central Thai <i>ka</i>)
» <i>Bàht só! Nòrng née ngáhm kànhàt!</i>	Hey, you're really cute!