



Ko Chang & Eastern Seaboard

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Why Go?

Bangkok Thais have long escaped the urban grind with weekend escapes to the eastern seaboard. Some of the country's first beach resorts sprang up here, starting a trend that has been replicated wherever sand meets sea. As the country has industrialised, only a few beaches within reach of the capital, such as Ko Samet's, remain spectacular specimens. Further afield, Ko Chang and its sister islands offer a more 'tropical' ambience, but are far from undiscovered.

Just beyond the foothills and the curving coastline is Cambodia, and the east coast provides a cultural link between the two countries. Many of the mainland Thai towns were at some point occupied by the French during the shifting border days of the colonial era. Travellers who take the time to explore these lesser-known spots will find remnants of Old Siam, tasty market meals and an easy-going prosperity that defines ordinary Thai life in this region.

When to Go

➔ The best time to visit is the end of the rainy season (usually around November) but before the start of high season (December to March) when the weather is cool, the landscape green and rates reasonable. Peak season on Ko Chang is the Christmas and New Year holiday period. Crowds thin in March, the start of the hot season.

➔ The rainy season runs from May to October. A few businesses on Ko Chang close and the nearby islands of Ko Kut, Ko Mak and Ko Wai go into hibernation with many places shut. Your best monsoon bet is Ko Samet, which enjoys its own micro-climate and stays relatively dry.

Si Racha

POP 68,292

ศรีราชา

A subdued seaside town, Si Racha is a mix of a traditional fishing village and modern industry. Waterfront condo towers eclipse a labyrinth of rickety piers, while the container ships docking at the Laem Chabang port share the shipping channels with wooden, multicoloured fishing boats.

Thai towns are adept at disguising themselves so that they resemble each other. Si Racha, though, is more international than most, thanks to the Japanese car manufacturers based nearby. There are many sushi joints here, as well as Japanese-style bars, and on weekends the impeccably maintained health park is full of Japanese expats jogging and throwing baseballs around.

But Si Racha is most attractive for what it doesn't have; there are no girlie bars or traffic jams and precious few foreign visitors, allowing you to enjoy a taste of small town Thai life.

Best of all, Si Racha is the gateway to the peaceful little island of Ko Si Chang. Once a royal retreat, the island feels like an extended fishing village, only with a palace and some impressive temples scattered around it.

Sights

Si Racha's attractions are limited, but the town itself makes for a pleasant stroll.

Ko Loi

ISLAND

This small rocky island is connected to the mainland by a long jetty at the northern end of Si Racha's waterfront and lauded as a local highlight. It has a festival atmosphere centred around a **Thai-Chinese temple** (☺daylight hours), decorated by a couple of giant ponds with turtles of every size, from tiny hatchlings to seen-it-all-before seniors. This is also where you can catch the boat to Ko Si Chang.

Health Park

GARDEN

The town's waterfront Health Park is possibly one of the best-maintained municipal parks in the country. There are sea breezes, a playground, a shady coffee shop with wi-fi, a jogging track and a lot of evening activity.

Sleeping

The most authentic (read: basic) places to stay are the wooden hotels on the piers.

Samchai

HOTEL \$

(☑0 3831 1800; Soi 10, Th Jermjompol; r 350B; ☺☺) More comfortable than other pier options, this place seems to ramble forever. The rooms are functional, but clean and acceptable.

Siriwatana Hotel

HOTEL \$

(☑0 3831 1037; Soi Siriwatana, Th Jermjompol; r 200B) This wooden stilt hotel sits above the sea – in fact, you can look straight through the squat toilet's hole to the ocean. It's very simple and very cheap.

Seaview Sriracha Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(☑0 3831 9000; 50-54 Th Jermjompol; r 990-1900B; ☺☺☺) Rooms are large and comfortable; try to score one at the back for views of the sea and piers and to avoid traffic noise.

Eating & Drinking

Unsurprisingly, Si Racha is famous for its seafood and you have the choice of eating it both Thai- and Japanese-style.

Ko Loi Seafood Stalls

SEAFOOD \$

(dishes 40-160B; ☺10am-9pm) Perched on the Ko Loi jetty, these humble spots specialise in fresh seafood. There is no English menu, so just point and pick.

Night Square

MARKET \$

(Th Jermjompol & Th Si Racha Nakorn; dishes from 50B; ☺5pm) This evening market is small, but big enough to feed a street-stall appetite.

Moom Aroy

SEAFOOD \$\$

(Soi 8, Th Jermjompol; dishes 60-420B; ☺11am-10pm) Moom Aroy delivers on its name, which means 'delicious corner'. This is the place to enjoy a Si Racha seafood meal with views of the pier and squid rigs. It is north of town; turn left at Samitivet Sriracha Hospital and look for the tank with the 2m fish out front.

Asami Sriracha

JAPANESE \$\$

(Th Jermjompol; sushi from 80B, sashimi from 140B; ☺11am-11pm; ☺) Authentic and popular eatery that sees a lot of expat Japanese customers. The sushi is as fresh as possible, and there are also ramen and teppanyaki dishes here.

Bang Saen

SEAFOOD \$\$

(dishes 150-350B; ☺11am-10pm) Do as the Thais do and judge your beach by its seafood restaurants. This resort, 18km north of town, isn't good for swimming but week-ending Bangkokians and local university students love it for its food and views. You'll need private transport to reach it.