

Welcome to Thailand

Friendly and fun-loving, exotic and tropical, cultured and historic, Thailand radiates a golden hue from its glittering temples and tropical beaches to the ever-comforting Thai smile.

Sand Between Your Toes

With a long coastline (actually, two coastlines) and jungle-topped islands anchored in azure waters, Thailand is a tropical getaway for the hedonist and the hermit, the prince and the pauper. This paradise offers a varied menu: playing in the gentle surf of Ko Lipe, diving with whale sharks in Ko Tao, scaling the sea cliffs of Krabi, kiteboarding in Hua Hin, partying on Ko Phi-Phi, recuperating at a health resort in Ko Samui and feasting on the beach wherever sand meets sea.

Sacred Spaces

The celestial world is a close confidant in this Buddhist nation and religious devotion is colourful and ubiquitous. Gleaming temples and golden Buddhas frame both the rural and modern landscape. Ancient banyan trees are ceremoniously wrapped in sacred cloth to honour the resident spirits, and fortune-bringing shrines decorate humble homes as well as monumental malls, while garland-festooned dashboards ward off traffic accidents. Visitors can join in on the conversation through meditation retreats in Chiang Mai, religious festivals in northeastern Thailand, underground cave shrines in Kanchanaburi and Phetchaburi, and hilltop temples in northern Thailand.

Fields & Forests

In between the cluttered cities and towns is the rural heartland, a mix of rice paddies, tropical forests and squat villages tied to the agricultural clock. In the north, the forests and fields bump up against toothy blue mountains decorated with silvery waterfalls. In the south, scraggly limestone cliffs poke out of the cultivated landscape like prehistoric skyscrapers. The usually arid northeast beams an emerald hue during the rainy season when tender green rice shoots carpet the landscape.

A Bountiful Table

Adored around the world, Thai cuisine expresses fundamental aspects of Thai culture: it is generous, warm, refreshing and relaxed. Each Thai dish relies on fresh, local ingredients – pungent lemongrass, searing chillies and plump seafood. A varied national menu is built around the four fundamental flavours: spicy, sweet, salty and sour. Roving appetites go on eating tours of Bangkok noodle shacks, seafood pavilions in Phuket and Burmese market stalls in Mae Hong Son. Cooking classes reveal the simplicity behind the seemingly complicated dishes, and mastering the market is an important survival skill.



Why I Love Thailand

By China Williams, Author

When I step off the plane after a gruelling trip across a continent and an ocean, I slip into my Thai 'skin' and the rhythms of the country: chit-chatting with locals, eating at roadside noodle joints, climbing aboard shared taxi pick-up trucks, *wâi*-ing at sacred temples, slipping off my shoes with ease and craving rice for breakfast. The beaches and the jungles are all fine, but I prefer the cities, where life spills out on to the street and the markets are packed with people and produce. Life is pleasant here and best of all, Thais shower my children with attention and affection.

For more about our authors, see page 800

Above: Monk praying in front of Buddha statues