



# Northeastern Thailand

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## Why Go?

The northeast of Thailand, or Isan (pronounced *ee-sahn*) as it's usually known, stretches from the wild Mekong River (Mae Nam Khong in Thai) down to the edges of the Khorat Plateau, and is home to Thailand's best national parks and most ancient temple ruins. Rich in religious significance and influenced by nearby Cambodia and Laos, it has a culture and food all its own.

As the country's most populous region and second-largest in terms of area, this relatively dry expanse is known more for its farming, culture and hard-working people than its tourist sights. But dispel those stereotypes from your mind – while it doesn't have the beaches or wild parties, it is rich in natural attractions, historic sites and unique cultural activities. The traditional music reflects the pulse of the agrarian culture, and the people are down to earth and friendly. The place moves to its own rhythm. If you relax into it and go with the flow, you'll find a warm welcome.

## When to Go

- ➔ The weather is best during the 'cool' season from November to February. It almost never rains and temperatures, while still warm, are cooler than the rest of the year.
- ➔ The hot season from March to May sees temperatures soar to the high 30s and stay there. Any rain that falls at this time is a real blessing. Travelling can be arduous, but some of the best festivals are held during this time.
- ➔ Isan is at its most beautiful during the rainy season (June to October) because the forests and rice paddies turn green and the waterfalls run wild. The rain can be a challenge, though.

## History

As with all of Southeast Asia, Isan's identity and allegiance have changed over the centuries, with parts of the region being variously under the sway of Laos and Cambodia in more recent times, and in earlier times part of the ancient Chenla and Dvaravati cultures. The region's history stretches back around 5600 years, to the Ban Chiang culture, which, by at least 2100 BC, had developed bronze tools.

The Dvaravati kingdoms, about which very little is known, were in ascension from somewhere between the 7th and 10th centuries, and traces of the culture can be found at Phu Phrabat in Udon Thani and Muang Sema in Nakhon Ratchasima. The Khmers came in the 9th century and occupied the region for some 400 years. They left their iconic massive temples, examples of which can be seen over much of Isan, but notably at Phimai in Nakhon Ratchasima and Phanom Rung in Buriram.

As the Khmer empire waned, the Lan Xang (Lao) kingdom rose in power and in the 14th century campaigned south deep into what is now Isan, as far as present-day Roi Et Province. From the 17th century the region came under the sway of Siamese kings, but remained largely autonomous. In the 19th century the region was once again briefly subjected to Lao influence when the Lao prince Chao Anou, rebelling against Thai dominion, stormed into Isan and worked his forces down as far as Nakhon Ratchasima, where his plans were thwarted in part by a local hero whose exploits have taken on folkloric proportions.

In the mid-20th century a dedicated program to make Isan more 'Thai' was carried out in the interests of national solidarity. But the Thai government, with considerable help from the US, only began serious development here in the 1960s, as a way to counter communist threat. The result was an improved economy and increased opportunity, but 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 more people of Lao heritage in Isan than in Laos. On the other hand, in the southern-

most provinces of Lower Isan, many villages maintain Khmer as their primary tongue.

Isan can be roughly divided into three subregions: Upper Isan, consisting of the northernmost provinces of Loei, Nong Khai, Udon Thani and Bueng Kan, as well as the provinces hugging the Mekong; Lower Isan, the southern provinces of the region stretching from Nakhon Ratchasima to Ubon Ratchathani; and Central Isan, headed by Khon Kaen and Roi Et Provinces.

## UPPER ISAN

The northern regions of Isan hug the Lao border, following the curves of the Mekong as it wends its way through Thailand before going into Cambodia and Laos, and taking in some rugged and, in places, spectacular national parks.

The national and historic parks are the main attractions, but the Mekong region in particular is becoming a hot spot for riverside retreats, with some excellent resorts springing up offering luxurious relaxation in rustic surrounds.

## Loei Province

Loei is Isan's westernmost province and in some ways has a lot in common with northern Thailand. It has mountains, it has ethnic minorities and it has spectacular national parks. It's a diverse, beautiful province with probably the most tourist potential of all Isan.

The people of Loei call themselves 'Thai Loei' and are proud of their culture. It is believed the Thai Loei migrated from Luang Prabang via Chiang Mai to their present location in the 1850s. Being close to the border, Loei has also seen migrations of other ethnic groups and has sizeable numbers of Tai Phuan and Tai Dam, plus a very small number of Maew (Hmong) people.

The terrain here is mountainous and temperatures fluctuate from one extreme to the other: it's one of the few provinces in Thailand where temperatures drop below 0°C.

## Loei

POP 22,700

Loei is a relatively small provincial capital and easy to get around. It makes a convenient base from which to explore the province's