



THAILAND

TOP SIGHTS, AUTHENTIC EXPERIENCES

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Welcome to Thailand

Thailand is blessed: exotic and mysterious yet approachable and hospitable, it has the looks and personality to entice the world to its shores.

Bangkok, the kingdom's capital, is an adrenaline rush. The pace is fast, the spaces cramped and the sights and smells dizzying. It is disorienting but addictive for urban junkies. In contrast, the tranquil southern coast will soothe modern nerves. The waters are clear, the diving is spectacular and the pace is oh-so sleepy. Thailand's famous islands and beaches specialise in fun, from beach parties to casual dining. Along the Andaman Coast dramatic limestone mountains cluster like prehistoric monuments.

Beyond the beach scene, Thailand's culture trail educates and enlightens. Intense displays of religious devotion and tangible history unfold in Bangkok, the seat of religion and monarchy. Further north, the ancient capitals of Ayuthaya and Sukhothai are peppered with gravity-ravaged ruins and serene Buddha figures. Northern Thailand is lush mountains, historic cities and border intrigue. The gateway to the region, Chiang Mai, has a well-preserved old city and university atmosphere. In higher altitudes, minority hill tribes cling to a distinct cultural identity.

In every corner of the kingdom, Thais concoct flavourful feasts from simple ingredients. Travelling from region to region becomes an edible buffet, from fiery coconut milk curries in southern Thailand to steamy bowls of noodles in Bangkok and hearty stews in Chiang Mai.

“Thailand has the looks and personality to entice the world to its shores”



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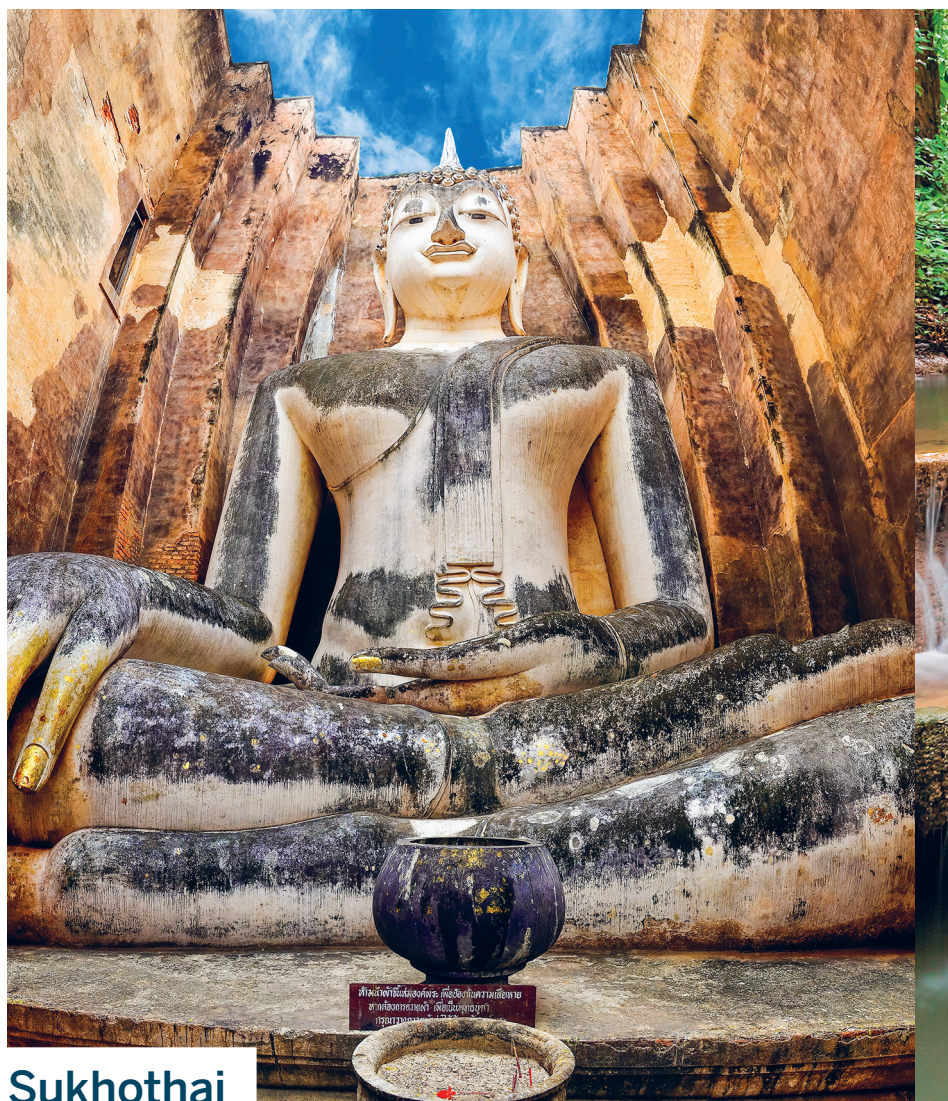


Chiang Mai

The cultural capital of the north

Chiang Mai (p74) is a cultural darling wearing its Lanna heritage with pride. Its old walled city is crowded with temples dating to the days of the teak boom. Bookshops and ethnic-chic stores outnumber glitzy shopping centres. The dining scene celebrates the fresh and local produce of the region. Great country escapes are just an hour's journey outside the city. Nowhere else in Thailand has such a delightful mixture of big-city attractions with a provincial pace.

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Sukhothai

Crumbling temples and picturesque countryside

Hop on a bicycle and explore Thailand's most impressive historical park, winding past crumbling temple ruins, graceful Buddha statues and fish-filled ponds. Worthwhile museums and good-value accommodation round out the package. Despite its popularity, Sukhothai (p152) rarely feels crowded, but nearby Si Satchanalai-Chaliang Historical Park attracts only a few history adventurers willing to scale its ancient stairways. Wat Si Chum (p159)

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Kanchanaburi

One of the country's easiest – and best – getaways

Given the jaw-dropping natural beauty of Kanchanaburi (p168), it seems paradoxical that the region is best known for the horrors of WWII's Death Railway. The provincial capital's war memorials are a mandatory stop before heading deeper into the parks and preserves that comprise the Western Forest Complex, one of Asia's largest protected areas. The area is home to numerous waterfalls and caves as well as an array of lush riverside resorts.

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