

Chiang Mai Province



The mist-shrouded mountains of Chiang Mai Province have long enticed visitors to explore this southern slice of the great Himalayan mountain range. Initially drawn north by tales of elephants and vine-filled jungles, visitors are pleasantly distracted by the gateway city of Chiang Mai, a laid-back cultural capital. Further piquing the imagination are the minority tribes who live among the high-altitude valleys, struggling to maintain their ethnically independent identities.

The province straddles one of Asia's great crossroads – a southern spur of the Silk Road – fusing commerce and culture between points further north and west in modern-day China, Laos and Myanmar. Ancient caravan traders dealt in opium, silks and timber. Today, only silk remains a legal commodity and the horse-drawn conveyances are merely historical legends. Instead the province has adapted to the expectations of a modern marketplace. Chiang Mai is among Thailand's largest cities, though it retains the charm of a small town, and it functions as the north's principal hub for tourism, transport, education and cross-border commerce.

Outside of the provincial capital, Chiang Mai Province boasts more natural forest cover than any other province in the north. In addition, two of Thailand's highest mountain peaks are in the province: Doi Inthanon (2565m) and Doi Chiang Dao (2195m). Cycling, hiking, elephant trekking, birdwatching and river rafting attract those interested in the province's natural surrounds.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Touring the sacred temples of **Wat Phra Singh** (p282), **Wat Chedi Luang** (p282) and **Wat Chiang Man** (p283)
- Making merry at Chiang Mai's **Saturday Walking Street** (p291) and **Sunday Walking Street** (p287)
- Learning how to whip up a Thai feast with a **cooking course** (p300)
- Embarking on the popular pilgrimage to **Wat Phra That Doi Suthep** (p296)
- Escaping to the country with a weekend trip to **Chiang Dao** (p327)



■ BEST TIME TO VISIT: NOVEMBER–FEBRUARY:

■ POPULATION: 1.65 MILLION

Climate

Most visitors will find the weather in Chiang Mai province to be most enjoyable during the cool season, roughly from November to February, when temperatures are mild and rain is scarce. The landscape is still green from the previous months' rains and the temperatures can be cool enough to warrant a jacket at night, particularly at higher elevations.

During the hot season, from March until June, Chiang Mai often experiences a 'fire season', when a thick haze forms over the city, a combination of dust and smoke from the burning off of nearby rice fields. Temperatures can be brutal and the once green forests become dry and brown. You'll find some relief from the heat at the higher elevations of Chiang Dao and Doi Inthanon.

The annual monsoons, usually lasting from June to October, are generally lighter in Chiang Mai than in central or southern Thailand. The outer areas of Chiang Mai city can flood when rains are unusually heavy but it shouldn't present an impediment to your travel plans.

Getting There & Away

Chiang Mai International Airport is an important regional airport receiving domestic and international flights. Chiang Mai city serves as the road transport hub for all of northern Thailand. The northern rail line terminates in Chiang Mai.

Getting Around

Buses and *sǒrng-tǎa-ou* run frequently to towns and villages around Chiang Mai Province from Chiang Mai's Chang Pheuk bus terminal. Private transport is also available for independent touring.

CHIANG MAI

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pop 174,000

Snuggled into the foothills of northern Thailand, Chiang Mai is a sanctuary of sorts with a refreshing combination of city accoutrements and country sensibilities. It is a city of artisans and craftspeople, of university professors and students, of idealists and culture hounds – creating a disposition that is laid-back, creative and reverential.

Life is easier here than in the urban grid of Bangkok, making it possible to cast off the workaday blues in pursuit of long-delayed dreams, a popular fantasy among Thais from other provinces.

The city is often lauded for its enduring Lanna characteristics; for the quaint, walled quarter filled with temples; and for the surrounding mountains with their legendary, mystical attributes. The sacredness of the city is evidenced by nearly 300 temples (121 of which are within the municipality), a number that rivals Bangkok, the country's religious and monarchical centre.

But Chiang Mai isn't a pickled city, preserved to the point of inauthenticity. In reality, it is dynamic and modern without having lost its down-to-earth charm. Sure there's traffic, pollution and ugly concrete buildings that detract from the old-timers' stories of an old-fashioned village filled with bicycles, but the conveniences of Western-style grocery stores, widespread wi-fi and an internationally savvy tourism industry always comes with trade-offs. Adding to the modern mix of the city, the university students keep Chiang Mai looking youthful in indie fashions. The population of expats is relatively small and most do a better job of integrating (and learning to speak Thai) than their counterparts in Bangkok. This makes it easier for the average visitor to peek more closely into the average Thai life without bumping into cultural barriers. Plus Chiang Mai Thais have a noteworthy sense of humour that eases awkward exchanges.

So enough praises, what can you do in Chiang Mai? First, be glad you aren't suffocating in Bangkok and then be a culture geek for a few days: do a cooking course, go temple spotting, shop for local handicrafts or explore some of the nearby natural attractions. Before you know it, a week will have slipped by before you even start to get itchy feet.

HISTORY

Though modern-day borders slice the region's history into its own national allegiance, Chiang Mai and Thailand's other northern provinces share more of their early development with the Shan state of present-day Myanmar, neighbouring parts of Laos and even the southern mountains of China than with Bangkok and Thailand's central plains. For more information about the history and language of the region, see p337.