

# Destination Thailand

**'this is Thailand, a country where the people have become experts at ignoring the metaphorical elephants in their rooms'**

Technically, elephants are not allowed on the streets of Bangkok, but during the right time of year (typically after rice farmers have finished harvesting their crops), you can't help but come across the giant beasts, wandering the congested sois with their owners, largely ignored by just about everybody except foreign tourists. To most visitors it's inconceivable that a creature so large can be so casually disregarded. But this is Thailand, a country where the people have become experts at ignoring the metaphorical elephants in their rooms.

Since the abolition of the absolute monarchy in 1932, political instability has essentially been the norm in Thailand. The most recent period of unrest began in 2006 with the coup d'état (the 18th in 70 years) that saw then Prime Minister, Thaksin Shinawatra, forcibly removed from office, sent into exile and replaced by military rule. Unlike elsewhere where such an event might have had people protesting on the streets, the 'smooth as silk' coup hardly disrupted Bangkok traffic, and Thais, depending on their political allegiances, appeared to accept the changes with restrained joy or quiet resignation.

The following 15 months of caretaker rule were largely seen as ineffectual, and spanned lowlights ranging from limits on press freedom to significant economic slowdown, but public displays of discontent were rare if not non-existent. Long-awaited elections in late 2007 led to the People's Power Party (PPP) of Samak Sundaravej, an alleged Thaksin proxy, gaining a majority in parliament. This sparked a series of street protests led by the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), the same anti-Thaksin group whose protests preceded the 2006 coup.

In less than six months, the largely middle-class Bangkok-based PAD had boldly taken over Government House and was demanding Samak's resignation. In response, pro-Thaksin supporters, many of whom are relatively poor farmers, labourers and taxi drivers from Thailand's north and northeast, formed their own pro-government alliance called the United Front of Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD). Even moderate Thais began taking sides, with PAD supporters wearing yellow (a colour associated with the monarchy), and government supporters sporting red. For the first time in recent Thai history, it appeared that at least one elephant – the vast divide between the urban, educated elite and the rural poor – could no longer be ignored.

In June 2008, after several weeks of PAD occupation of Government House, the country's Constitutional Court found Samak guilty of accepting money to host a cooking program, and he was forced to stand down. Although his dismissal due to this technicality was tantamount to the coup the PAD demanded, they were anything but placated when Sundaravej was subsequently replaced by Somchai Wongsawat, Thaksin's brother-in-law.

Meanwhile, Thaksin and his wife Potjaman remained largely in exile in the UK, with only sporadic visits to Thailand. However in late 2008, the Supreme Court found Thaksin guilty of a corruption charge, sentencing him to two years' imprisonment. Potjaman was subsequently sentenced to three years in jail for tax fraud. The couple's UK visas were later revoked, and any plans to return to the UK or Thailand were inevitably shelved.

In October and November of 2008 confrontations between the PAD and police and pro-government supporters became increasingly violent, leading to the death of two PAD members. Rumours of a military coup were rampant, and more bloody clashes were feared. Events culminated in late November when several thousand PAD protesters took over both

of Bangkok's airports, bringing tourism to a complete standstill for more than a week. It wasn't until the Constitutional Court dissolved the ruling party that the protesters finally agreed to leave the airports.

After a great deal of political wrangling, a tenuous new coalition was formed in December, led by Oxford-educated Abhisit Vejjajiva, leader of the Democrat Party and Thailand's fifth prime minister of 2008. Although Abhisit's appointment ushered a brief period of relative stability, violent protests in early 2009 by red-shirted Thaksin supporters in Bangkok and Pattaya showed that, although still in exile, the former Prime Minister remains the single most influential and polarising figure in Thai politics.

But perhaps the largest elephant of all is the impending but unspoken reality of a Thailand without its current monarch. Thailand's king, Bhumibol Adulyadej, is the world's longest-serving head of state and a figure literally worshipped by the vast majority of Thais for more than 60 years. The king is in his eighth decade now and his health has been failing. It remains to be seen how the Thais will adapt to life without a ruler whose reign most have lived their entire lives under. For certain, the grief felt by Thais will be profound, and the lack of the king's relatively stabilising influence on domestic politics, and the contentious issue of royal succession will have profound implications on Thailand's near future.

Yet, despite the seemingly endless cycle of crises, Thailand continues to progress towards a modern, wealthy society. Bangkok's infrastructure continues to improve, with ambitious plans to expand both the Metro and Skytrain, and the long-awaited airport link scheduled to begin operations in 2009. Elsewhere in the country, virtually all of the communities devastated by the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami have fully recovered. Road links to distant parts of the country are improving, and an abundance of cheap domestic flights makes it easier than ever for those who wish to get off the beaten track.

Political crises have also done little to alter what makes the country arguably the most diverse and rewarding destination in Southeast Asia. A friendly and tolerant population and a solid infrastructure make Thailand an approachable destination for first-time travellers, while destinations and activities ranging from tropical beaches to cooking courses will appeal to even the most jaded traveller.

Throughout Thailand's lengthy and often rocky experiment with democracy, the Thai people's ability to ignore elephants has been a constant factor. But until issues such as class division, Thaksin Shinawatra's polarising influence on politics, and royal succession are acknowledged and dealt with, political instability is bound to define Thailand's future, as well as its past.

#### FAST FACTS

Area:	514,000 sq km
Border countries:	Cam- bodia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar (Burma)
Population:	65,493,296
Inflation:	2.2%
GDP per capita:	US\$8000
Religion:	95% Buddhist
Literacy:	92.6%
Original name:	Siam
Number of coups d'état since 1932:	18
Number of 7-Elevens: currently	3912
Highest Point: Doi Inthanon	2565m
Rice exports:	10.02 million tonnes in 2008 (number-one rice exporter in the world)

# Getting Started

Most people find travel in Thailand to be relatively easy and economical. Of course, a little preparation will go a long way towards making your trip hassle-free and fun.

## WHEN TO GO

The best time to visit most of Thailand is between November and February, because it rains the least and it is not too hot. This period is also Thailand's main season for festivals, like Loi Krathong and Songkran.

If you plan to focus on the northern provinces, the hot season (March to May) and early rainy season (June to July) are not bad either, as temperatures are moderate at higher elevations. Northeastern and central Thailand, on the other hand, are best avoided from March to May, when temperatures may climb over 40°C. Because temperatures are more even year-round in the south (because it's closer to the equator), the beaches and islands of southern Thailand are a good choice for respite when the rest of Thailand is miserably hot.

Thailand's peak tourist season runs from November to late March, with secondary peaks in July and August. If you want to avoid crowds and take advantage of discounted room rates, consider travelling during the least crowded months (typically April to June, September and October).

Although the rainy season (roughly July to October) gets a bad reputation, there are some bonuses: temperatures tend to be cooler, tourists are fewer and the landscape is lush and green. Depending on the region and the month, the rains might be hour-long downpours in the afternoon. October, however, tends to be the wettest month.

## COSTS & MONEY

Thailand is an inexpensive country to visit thanks to advantageous foreign currency exchanges and an affordable standard of living. Those on a budget should be able to get by on about 600B to 700B per day outside Bangkok and the major beach islands. This amount covers basic food, guesthouse accommodation and local transport but excludes all-night beer binges, tours, long-distance transport or vehicle hire. Travellers with more money to spend will find that for around 1500B or more per day life can be quite comfortable.

Bangkok is a good place to splurge on a hotel for recovery from a long flight or to celebrate returning to 'civilisation'. In the provinces, guesthouses tend to be the best value even for bigger budgets. Market meals

See Climate Charts (p742) for more information.

### HOW MUCH?

2nd-class air-con sleeper train, Bangkok to Surat Thani 758-848B

Beach bungalow on Ko Pha-Ngan 350-500B

One-day Thai cooking course in Chiang Mai 900B

National park admission 200B

Dinner for two at a midrange restaurant 300-500B

See also the Lonely Planet Index, inside front cover.

### DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

Pack light wash-and-wear clothes, plus a pullover (sweater) or light jacket for chilly bus rides and the northern mountains. Slip-on shoes or sandals are handy. Laundry is cheap in Thailand, so you only need to travel with a week's supply of clothes.

You can buy toothpaste, soap and most other toiletries almost anywhere in Thailand. International stores like Boots tend to carry tampons and antiperspirants strong enough to fight the tropical malady. See p772 for a list of recommended medical items.

Other handy items include: a small torch (flashlight), sarong (dries better than a towel), waterproof money/passport container (for swimming outings), earplugs and sunscreen (high SPFs are not widely available outside of big cities).

Be sure to check government travel advisories for Thailand before you leave. See Dangers & Annoyances (p743) for general security issues.

# TOP PICKS

One of the best ways to get ready for a Thailand tour is to start dreaming about this faraway land. Here are a few highlights:

## BEST ECOTOURISM SPOTS

- Chiang Rai – the centre for hill-tribe trekking with a social justice hook; some trekking companies employ hill-tribe guides or foster community development programs (p350)
- Northeastern Thailand – loads of village homestays are sprouting up all over this rural landscape to put you in touch with the people and rice paddies (p455)
- Chiang Mai – a pretty northern town that is evolving into a cycling mecca for in-town touring and off-roading (p275)

## BEST SCENIC JOURNEYS

- Overnight ferry from Chumphon to Ko Tao – it's just a simple fishing boat with mats on the upper deck and winking stars overhead (p622)
- Mahachai Shortline train – this day's diversion from Bangkok trundles through forests, marshland and wet markets (p190)
- Mae Sa–Samoeng loop – the mountain equivalent of a rollercoaster ride that climbs, dips and twists along the peaks outside Chiang Mai (p326)
- Bus ride from Kanchanaburi to Sangkhlaburi – the local tin-can bus slides in between the toothy green mountains (p226)

## BEST THAILAND MEMORIES

- Smells and bells – rice cooking in the morning, perfume of joss sticks, maniacal honking of long-distance buses, deep bellows of temple bells, 7-Eleven doorbell chimes, barking *jing-jok* (house lizards)
- Religious accoutrements – jasmine garlands, amulets dangling from rear-view mirrors and ceremonial cloths tied around sacred trees
- Smoke and cough – belching diesel buses, chilli-laden smoke from a street-stall wok, burning carcasses of *gài yáhn* (grilled chicken)
- Water, water everywhere – fish ponds and roadside water gardens in front of shops and homes, murky *klong* (canals), sweat pouring out of every pore, 5B plastic water bottles, jewel-toned seas

are cheaper and tastier than guesthouse fare but you'll need a little local language and an adventurous stomach.

ATMs are widespread and are the easiest ways to get Thai baht. Have a ready supply of US dollars in cash, if you need to do a border run (crisp new notes are preferred). Credit cards are accepted in big cities and resort hotels but not in family-run guesthouses or restaurants.

## TRAVEL LITERATURE

Cosy up to the kingdom with tales penned by hapless travellers turned insightful scribes or by culture-straddling Thais. The bulk of the genre is B-grade thrillers revolving around bar-girls and gangsters, but the following titles are culturally acute page-turners.

- *Fieldwork* (2008), by Mischa Berlinski, is set in a fictional hill-tribe village in northern Thailand, with a complicated cast of anthropologists, missionaries and an aimless journalist all pursuing their own version of the title.
- *Sightseeing* (2005) is a debut collection of short stories by Rattawut Lapcharoensap that gives readers a 'sightseeing' tour into Thai households and coming-of-age moments.
- *Thailand Confidential* (2005), by ex-*Rolling Stone* correspondent Jerry Hopkins, weaves an exposé of everything expats and visitors love about Thailand and much they don't.
- *Bangkok 8* (2004), by John Burdett, is a hard-boiled whodunit on the surface, but the lead character, a Thai-Westerner cop, proves an excellent conduit for understanding Thai Buddhism.
- *Touch the Dragon* (1992) is the diary of Karen Connelly, a Canadian who worked as a volunteer in a northern Thai village at the age of 17. Her book about culture and culture shock is well circulated amongst paperback-swapping expats posted in rural areas.
- *The Beach* (1998), by Alex Garland, is the ultimate beach read about a backpacker who finds a secluded island utopia off the coast of Ko Samui.
- *Jasmine Nights* (1995), by SP Somtow, is a coming-of-age novel set in 1960s Bangkok.
- *Mai Pen Rai Means Never Mind* (1965), by Carol Hollinger, is the classic tale of befriending Thailand, written by a Bangkok-based housewife in the 1960s.

## INTERNET RESOURCES

**Lonely Planet** ([www.lonelyplanet.com](http://www.lonelyplanet.com)) Country-specific information as well as a user exchange on the Thorn Tree forum.

**One Stop Thailand** ([www.onestopthailand.com](http://www.onestopthailand.com)) Comprehensive tourism guide to popular Thai destinations.

**Thai Students Online** ([www.thaistudents.com](http://www.thaistudents.com)) Sriwittayapaknam School in Samut Prakan maintains the largest and most informative website portal on Thai culture and society.

**Thailand Daily** ([www.thailanddaily.com](http://www.thailanddaily.com)) Part of World News Network, offering a thorough digest of Thailand-related news from English news sources.

**ThaiVisa.com** ([www.thaivisa.com](http://www.thaivisa.com)) Extensive info on visas as well as user forums and news alerts.

**Tourism Authority of Thailand** ([www.tourismthailand.org](http://www.tourismthailand.org)) Contains provincial tourism profiles, travel promotions and festival information from Thailand's national tourism department.

# Events Calendar

Religious holidays make up the bulk of Thailand's festival line-up but that doesn't mean that these are solely prayer and incense affairs. Many religious holidays are based on the lunar calendar, causing the exact dates to vary. For specific dates, visit the website of the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) at [www.tourismthailand.org](http://www.tourismthailand.org). Dozens of smaller festivals offer snapshots of provincial culture; see the respective destination chapters for more information.

## JANUARY–FEBRUARY

### CHINESE NEW YEAR

Jan-Feb

Called *đrút jeen*, Thais with Chinese ancestry celebrate their ancestral lunar new year with a week of house-cleaning and fireworks. Phuket (p649), Bangkok (p103) and Nakhon Sawan all host city-wide festivities, but in general Chinese New Year is more of a family event.

### MAKHA BUCHA

Feb-Mar

One of three holy days marking important moments of Buddha's life, Makha Bucha (*Mah-ká Boo-chah*), on the full moon of the third lunar month, commemorates Buddha preaching to 1250 enlightened monks who came to hear him 'without prior summons'. A public holiday, it's mainly a day for temple visits. Organisations and schools will often make merit as a group at a local temple.

## APRIL

### SONGKRAN

12-14 Apr

Thailand's famous water fight marks the Thai New Year (12 to 14 April; dates vary). The traditional religious activities are held in the morning and involve showing respect to elders and sacred temple images by sprinkling water on them. Afterwards Thais in Chiang Mai (p302) and Bangkok (p148) load up their water guns and head out to the streets for battle: water is thrown, catapulted and sprayed from roving commandos and outfitted pick-up trucks at willing and unwilling targets.

## MAY–JUNE

### ROYAL PLOUGHING CEREMONY

May

This royal ceremony employs astrology and ancient Brahman rituals to kick-off the rice-

planting season. Sacred oxen are hitched to a wooden plough and part the ground of Sanam Luang (p129) in Bangkok. The ritual was revived in the 1960s by the king, and Crown Prince Maha Vajiralongkorn has assumed the ceremony's helm.

### ROCKET FESTIVAL

May-Jun

In the northeast, where rain can be scarce, villagers craft bamboo rockets (*băng fai*) that are fired into the sky to encourage the rains to be plentiful for the upcoming rice-planting season. This festival is celebrated in Yasothon (p542), Ubon Ratchathani (p481) and Nong Khai (p508).

### VISAKHA BUCHA

May-Jun

The holy day of Visakha Bucha (*Wi-sāh-ká Boo-chah*) falls on the 15th day of the waxing moon in the sixth lunar month and commemorates the date of the Buddha's birth, enlightenment and *parinibbana* (passing away). Activities are centred around the temple.

### BUN PHRA WET

Jun

This Buddhist holy day is given a Carnival makeover at the Phi Ta Khon Festival (p525) in Dan Sai village'. Revellers disguise themselves in garish 'spirit' costumes and parade through the village streets wielding wooden phalluses and downing rice whisky. The festival commemorates a Buddhist legend in which a host of spirits (*pêe*, also spelt '*phi*') appeared to greet the Buddha-to-be (Prince Vessantara or Phra Wet), the penultimate birth.

## JULY

### ASALHA BUCHA

Jul

The full moon of the eighth lunar month commemorates Buddha's first sermon during Asalha Bucha (*Ah-sāhn-hà Boo-chah*). During Khao Phansaa, worshippers make offerings of candles other necessities to the temples and attend ordinations.

### KHAO PHANSAA

Jul

The day after Asalha Bucha marks the beginning of Buddhist Lent (the first day of the waning moon in the eighth lunar month), the traditional time for men to enter the monkhood and the start of

the rainy season when monks typically retreat inside the monastery for a period of study and meditation. In Ubon Ratchathani, candle wax offerings have grown into elaborately carved sculptures that are shown off during the Candle Parade (p484).

## AUGUST

### HM THE QUEEN'S BIRTHDAY 12 Aug

The Queen's Birthday (12 August) is a public holiday and national mother's day. In Bangkok, the day is marked with cultural displays at Sanam Luang (p129) as well as festive lights lining the royal avenue of Th Ratchadamnoen Klang.

## SEPTEMBER–OCTOBER

### VEGETARIAN FESTIVAL Sep-Oct

A holiday from meat is taken for nine days (during the ninth lunar month) in adherence with Chinese Buddhist beliefs of mind and body purification. Cities with large Thai-Chinese populations, such as Bangkok (p163), Trang (p704) and Krabi (p681), are festooned with yellow banners heralding vegetarian vendors, and merit-makers dressed in white shuffle off for meditation retreats. In Phuket the festival gets extreme, with entranced marchers turning themselves into human shish kebabs (p663).

### ORK PHANSAA Oct-Nov

The end of the Buddhist lent (three lunar months after Khao Phansaa) is marked by the *gà-tin* ceremony, in which new robes are given to the monks by merit-makers. The peculiar natural phenomenon known as the '*naga* fireballs' (p514) coincides with Ork Phansaa.

## NOVEMBER

### SURIN ELEPHANT ROUND-UP Nov

Held on the third weekend of November, Thailand's biggest elephant show celebrates this northeastern province's most famous residents. The event in Surin (p473) begins with a colourful elephant parade culminating in a fruit buffet for the pachyderms. Re-enactments of Thai battles showcase mahouts and elephants wearing royal military garb.

### LOI KRATHONG Nov-Dec

One of Thailand's most beloved festivals, Loi Krathong is celebrated on the first full moon of the 12th lunar month. The festival thanks the river goddess for providing life to the fields and forests and asks for forgiveness for the polluting ways of humans. Small handmade boats (called *kràthong* or *grà-tong*) are sent adrift in the country's waterways. The *grà-tong* are origami-like vessels made from banana leaves, they're decorated with flowers, and incense, candles and coins are placed in them. Loi Krathong is a peculiarly Thai festival that probably originated in Sukhothai (p401). In Chiang Mai the festival is also called Yi Peng (p302).

## DECEMBER

### HM THE KING'S BIRTHDAY 5 Dec

Honouring the king's birthday on 5 December, this public holiday hosts parades and merit-making events; it is also recognised as national father's day. Th Ratchadamnoen Klang in Bangkok (p103) is decorated with lights and regalia. Everyone wears yellow shirts, the colour associated with the king's birthday. Phuket (p649) also holds the Kings Cup Regatta during the first week of the month in honour of the monarch.

# Itineraries

## CLASSIC ROUTES

### JUST A QUICKIE

Even if you're only doing a Thailand 'pop-in', you can still pack in a full itinerary thanks to the affordability of domestic flights. Start off in **Bangkok** (p103) and then fly to the tropical beach resorts of **Ko Samui** (p575) or **Phuket** (p649). Although both are international superstars, there are plenty of quiet corners, and beaches with personalities to suit every sand hunter. If you find yourself on a spot that fits like a wet bathing suit, shop around the island before plotting your escape route to the next destination.

Once you've tired of sand and sun, fly up to **Chiang Mai** (p275) for a Thai cooking class and temple-spotting. Then explore the surrounding countryside filled with high-altitude road trips and hill-tribe trekking. Pay homage to Thailand's highest peak at **Doi Inthanon National Park** (p334).

Return to Bangkok with a tan, a Thai recipe book and lots of travel tales for the water cooler.

### Two Weeks/Bangkok to Bangkok



**Fly from Bangkok to Ko Samui or Phuket. Return to Bangkok and fly, train or bus to Chiang Mai. Rent a car for trips around Chiang Mai.**



## A LITTLE BIT OF EVERYTHING

### One Month/Bangkok to Nakhon Ratchasima

If you've got a month to wander through all of Thailand, spend a few days in **Bangkok** (p103), then take a slow ride north stopping in the ancient capital of **Ayuthaya** (p195) and the monkey town of **Lopburi** (p205). Visit more historic ruins in **Sukhothai** (p397) and then continue to **Chiang Mai** (p275), the cultural capital of the north. Be a high-altitude hippie in **Pai** (p439) and join a do-good trekking tour in **Chiang Rai** (p350). For more intensive northern immersion, see the Altitude Adjustment trip (p26).

By now the beach is calling so transit back through Bangkok to the classic island stops: **Ko Samui** (p575) for the party scene, **Ko Pha-Ngan** (p595) for beach bumming and **Ko Tao** (p610) for deep-sea diving.

Hop over to the Andaman Coast to see those famous postcard views of limestone mountains jutting out of the sea. **Phuket** (p649) is convenient but **Ko Phi-Phi** (p692) is the prettiest of them all; both require stacks of baht to stay somewhere with an ocean view. Backpackers and rock climbers opt for **Krabi** (p681). On the way back north detour to the rainforests of **Khao Suk National Park** (p639).

Transit again through Bangkok to dip your toes into the agricultural northeast. Crawl through the jungle of **Khao Yai National Park** (p467). Then head to **Nakhon Ratchasima** (Khorat; p458), a transit point for trips to the Angkor ruins at **Phimai** (p465) and the pottery village of **Dan Kwian** (p463).

Train from Bangkok to Ayuthaya, Lopburi and to Phitsanulok. Bus to Sukhothai. Bus to Chiang Mai. Bus to Pai or Chiang Rai from Chiang Mai. Fly, train or bus to Bangkok, then train or bus to Surat Thani and ferry to the Ko Samui archipelago, or fly direct to Ko Samui or Phuket from Bangkok. Bus to Krabi. Ferry to Ko Phi-Phi. Bus or fly (from Phuket) back to Bangkok. Bus to Nakhon Ratchasima, Phimai and Dan Kwian.



## BEACH BINGING

### Three Weeks/Surat Thani to Khao Lak

If your bragging buddies back home have sent you to Thailand with a long list of must-see beaches, then pack light and prepare for a marathon-run through the islands and coves of the Malay Peninsula. Head to the string of Gulf islands just off the coast of **Surat Thani** (p624) and take your pick from **Ko Samui** (p575), **Ko Pha-Ngan** (p595) or **Ko Tao** (p610).

Then cross the peninsula to conquer the Andaman celebrities of **Phuket** (p649), **Krabi** (p681) and **Ko Phi-Phi** (p692). Don't forget about the backpacker darling **Ko Lanta** (p698).

Pay your respects to **Khao Lak/Lamru National Park** (p641), which was badly bruised by the 2004 tsunami but today boasts long uninterrupted stretches of dunes facing a turquoise bay. From Khao Lak, you are nearby a global diving superstar: **Similan Islands Marine National Park** (p645).



**Boat to the Gulf islands from Surat Thani. Bus from Surat Thani to Phuket. From Phuket boat to Ko Phi-Phi or bus to Krabi. Boat to Ko Phi-Phi or Ko Lanta from Krabi. Bus from Krabi to Khao Lak. Boat to Similan Islands.**

## ROADS LESS TRAVELLED

### ALTITUDE ADJUSTMENT

#### Three Weeks/Mae Sot to Chiang Rai

Climb into the bosom of lush mountains and the ethnic minority villages that cling to the border between Thailand, Myanmar and Laos.

**Mae Sot** (p411) is a cross-pollinated town of Thai residents and displaced Karen and Burmese nationals. There isn't so much to see but the town is a border crossing for visa runs and is filled with aid workers and opportunities to volunteer in refugee camps and schools. Slightly off the main tourist trail, Mae Sot also has nature tours tailored to flora and fauna fanatics.

Follow the backroads to the trekking towns of **Mae Sariang** (p451) and **Mae Hong Son** (p422) to learn about the ethnic minorities more closely aligned to Myanmar than Thailand that thrive on these forested mountain peaks. Next is **Soppong** (p447) and its underground cave sculptures. Do some hippie-style R&R at **Pai** (p439), a mountain retreat with lots of daytime strolls and night-time carousing. Descend out of the winding mountain route into urban **Chiang Mai** (p275), a base for meditation and massage courses.

More mountains await northwards in **Chiang Dao** (p327), Pai's more sober sister. Then take the backdoor to Chiang Rai by busing to **Fang** (p330) and zig-zagging up the mountain ridge to **Mae Salong** (p358), a Yunnanese tea settlement. Slide into **Chiang Rai** (p350), which has a socially conscious trekking industry run by hill-tribe cooperatives and hill-tribe homestays.

Bus from Mae Sot to Mae Sariang, Mae Hong Son, Soppong and Pai to the transport hub of Chiang Mai. Bus to Chiang Dao, Fang and Mae Salong. Bus to Chiang Rai.



## TAILORED TRIPS

### SOUTHERN COMFORT & CULTURE

You might come to southern Thailand to recharge your vitamin D reserves on the powdery beaches but take some time to savour southern Thai culture, which has been spiced by ancient traders from China, India, Malaysia and Indonesia. From Bangkok, break up the long journey south in **Phetchaburi** (p549), where you can explore cave sanctuaries, hilltop palaces or the local cuisine. Traipse through the Gulf islands described in Beach Binging (p25). Be a little more adventurous by catching a southern tailwind to **Nakhon Si Thammarat** (p628), the cultural keeper of the southern tradition of shadow puppets. Then drink up the majesty of the province's unspoilt coastline at **Ao Khanom** (p627), a nearly deserted bay as pretty as Samui but without the package tourists. Then follow the windswept coast to **Songkhla** (p729) for seafood and Thai-style beachcombing. Saunter over to **Satun** (p717), a low-key Muslim town nearby the port for boats to **Ko Tarutao Marine National Park** (p720), a collection of beach celebrities like Ko Lipe (p722) and nearly unknowns like Ko Adang (p726).

Stop in at **Trang** (p704) for a caffeine buzz at one of its historic Hokkien-style cafes and then wade out to Ko Muk (p709) and its famously photographed cave lake. Then ricochet between the Andaman queens described in Beach Binging (p25).



### CULTURE GEEKS

Do you love wandering around old stuff? If so, Thailand has enough crumbling fortresses, half-destroyed temples and limbless Buddha statues to fill a hard drive with pictures. This trip takes in several former royal capitals and one-time outposts of the Angkor empire, which once stretched into Thailand from western Cambodia.

Start at the ancient capital of **Ayuthaya** (p195), an easy day trip from Bangkok, then continue to **Lopburi** (p205), one of Thailand's oldest towns and a former Angkor centre. Continue north to **Sukhothai** (p397), which is considered the first Thai kingdom and is the best preserved of Thailand's ancient ruins. Nearby is **Si Satchanalai-Chaliang Historical Park** (p404), another collection of ruins set in the countryside.

Take an overnight bus to **Nakhon Ratchasima** (Khorat; p458), a good launching point for the Angkor-era ruins at **Phimai** (p465). Follow the Angkor trail east to Buriram Province where an extinct volcano is topped by the temple complex of **Phanom Rung** (p470), the most important and visually impressive of the Angkorean temples in Thailand. It's a short jaunt from here to **Prasat Meuang Tam** (p472) – known for its remoteness and reflective lily ponds.



## MIGHTY MEKONG RIVER RUN

There aren't a lot of big-ticket attractions in Thailand's rural northeast (known as Isan) but cultural chameleons will find an old-fashioned way of life, easygoing people and interesting homestays that mix lodging with lounging around the rice fields. The most scenic route through the region is along the Mekong River, which divides Thailand and Laos. The border towns barely recognise the boundary and often share more cultural attributes with their foreign neighbours than their fellow citizens.

Start in the charming town of **Nong Khai** (p508), a rock-skipping throw from Laos and an easy border-crossing point.

If the pace here is too fast, follow the river road east to **Beung Kan** (p516), a dusty speck of a town with a nearby temple built on a rocky outcrop and several neighbouring homestays with forays into wild-elephant territory. Pass through **Nakhon Phanom** (p527) for its picturesque river promenade but base yourself in tiny **That Phanom** (p531), with its famous Lao-style temple, honoured with a vibrant 10-day festival in January/February.

For a little urban Isan, check out **Ubon Ratchathani** (p481), surrounded by the Pha Taem National Park, river rapids and handicraft villages. Afterwards pick up the Culture Geek trip (p27) in reverse.



## THAILAND FOR KIDS

Entertain and enlighten the kids without a lot of marathon travel. **Bangkok** (p103) is hyperactive enough for all ages (and it's all the better if your hotel has a swimming pool). Nearby you'll find culture and history bundled into a compact mini-state at **Muang Boran** (p132).

Let their imaginations run with the wild things in **Lopburi** (p205), home to a troop of monkeys who receive (deserved or not) a banquet feast during the town's signature festival. Lopburi is on the train line from Bangkok – a transport highlight for the locomotive fan in the family. Also accessible by train, **Surin** (p473) celebrates an annual elephant round-up with a buffet breakfast for the pachyderms and mock battles.

If your visit doesn't coincide with these festivals, **Kanchanaburi** (p210) is hugged by thick jungle explored by elephant treks and bamboo rafting. Or opt for **Khao Yai National Park** (p467), which is close to Bangkok and filled with as many monkeys as visitors.

End the trip with a beach romp. Steer clear of the Thai beaches (like Hua Hin and parts of Phuket and Samui) dominated by older European tourists who disapprove of children's deficient volume control. **Ko Samet** (p245) is a semi-wild island and an easy trip from Bangkok.



# The Authors



## CHINA WILLIAMS

**Coordinating Author**  
**Getting Started, Events Calendar, Itineraries,**  
**Thailand & You, The Culture, Arts, Chiang Mai Province,**  
**Northern Thailand (Lamphun Province), Directory, Transport, Glossary**

For many years China hopped across the Pacific Ocean to work on Lonely Planet's guidebooks to Bangkok. But a baby in 2007 segued her career from dusty backpack to dirty nappies. After a year's 'retirement', China has resumed the twice annual pilgrimage with her son in tow. With each visit she falls in love with a different region of Thailand and for now her heart is pledged to Chiang Mai, a city that suits her post-flower child temperament. She first came to Thailand to teach English in Surin more than a decade ago. In between trips, China lives in Baltimore, Maryland, with her husband, Matt, and son, Felix.



## MARK BEALES

**Central Thailand**

Mark moved to Thailand in 2004, leaving behind life as a journalist in England. Various jobs, including English teacher, TV presenter and freelance writer, have given him a chance to explore almost every part of the country. During his trips, Mark has swum with whale sharks, been bitten by leeches and watched gibbons threaten to invade his log cabin. When Mark isn't on the road he teaches English near Bangkok and attempts to improve his Thai with help from his ever-patient wife, Bui.



## TIM BEYER

**Northeastern Thailand**

While growing up, Tim didn't travel much except for the obligatory pilgrimage to Disney World and an annual summer week at the lake. He's spent most of his adult life making up for this, and has since visited over 50 countries, including most in Southeast Asia. After university he worked briefly as a legislative assistant before quitting Capitol life in 1994 to backpack around West Africa. It was during this trip that the idea of becoming a freelance travel writer and photographer was hatched, and he's been at it ever since. This is his 11th book for Lonely Planet. During the half of the year that he isn't shouldering a backpack somewhere for work or pleasure, he lives in Khon Kaen.

### LONELY PLANET AUTHORS

Why is our travel information the best in the world? It's simple: our authors are passionate, dedicated travellers. They don't take freebies in exchange for positive coverage so you can be sure the advice you're given is impartial. They travel widely to all the popular spots, and off the beaten track. They don't research using just the internet or phone. They discover new places not included in any other guidebook. They personally visit thousands of hotels, restaurants, palaces, trails, galleries, temples and more. They speak with dozens of locals every day to make sure you get the kind of insider knowledge only a local could tell you. They take pride in getting all the details right, and in telling it how it is. Think you can do it? Find out how at [lonelyplanet.com](http://lonelyplanet.com).

**CATHERINE BODRY****Southeastern Thailand,  
Upper Southern Gulf**

Catherine grew up in the Pacific Northwest and moved to Alaska in her early 20s, so it's no surprise that frequent, extended tropical vacations were often in order. She first visited Thailand in 2004 as part of a round-the-world trip (which included only countries where the temperature stayed firmly above 30°C) and returned a year later to perfect her bargaining skills and eat as much curry as possible. This research trip marked Catherine's third visit to the country, and she's probably still sweating curry from it. When Catherine isn't flagging down 2nd-class buses and learning local slang on Lonely Planet research trips, she's usually tromping around the mountains near her home in Seward, Alaska.

**AUSTIN BUSH****Food & Drink, Bangkok, Northern Thailand**

After graduating from the University of Oregon in 1999 with a degree in linguistics, Austin received a scholarship to study Thai at Chiang Mai University and has remained in Thailand ever since. After working several years at a stable job, he made the questionable decision to pursue a career as a freelance writer and photographer, endeavours that have taken him as far as Pakistan's Karakoram Highway and as near as Bangkok's Or Tor Kor Market. Austin enjoys writing about and taking photos of food most of all because it's a great way to connect with people. Samples of his work can be seen at [www.austinbushphotography.com](http://www.austinbushphotography.com).

**BRANDON PRESSER****Lower Southern Gulf, Andaman Coast,  
Deep South**

Growing up in a land where bear hugs are taken literally, this wanderlust Canadian always craved swaying palms and golden sand. A trek across Southeast Asia as a teenager was the clincher – he was hooked, returning year after year to scuba dive, suntan and savour spoonfuls of spicy *sôm-dam* (papaya salad). Brandon was primed to research Thailand's top holiday destinations, but it wasn't all fun and games – there were beaches to be judged, curries to be sampled and kiteboards to be test-ridden. Brandon spends most of the year writing his way around the world and has co-authored several other Lonely Planet guides to Southeast Asia, including *Thailand's Islands & Beaches* and *Malaysia, Singapore & Brunei*.

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## CONTRIBUTING AUTHORS

**Dr Trish Batchelor** is a general practitioner and travel medicine specialist who currently works in Canberra and is Medical Advisor to the Travel Doctor New Zealand clinics. She has just returned from working in Vietnam and has previously worked in Nepal and India. Trish teaches travel medicine through the University of Otago, and is interested in underwater and high-altitude medicine, and the impact of tourism on host countries. She has travelled extensively through Southeast and East Asia.

**David Lukas** is a naturalist who lives on the edge of Yosemite National Park. He has contributed chapters on the environment and wildlife for nearly 30 Lonely Planet guides, including for *Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos & the Greater Mekong, Thailand's Islands & Beaches, Bangkok* and the Environment chapter for this edition of *Thailand*.

**Bhawan Ruangsilp** wrote the History chapter. She is a native of Bangkok and a published historian of the Ayuthaya period at Chulalongkorn University. She finds 17th-century Western travel literature on Siam fascinating and leapt at the chance to lend her expertise to this edition of Lonely Planet's *Thailand* guide.

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