

Destination Thailand

Thailand is often referred to as a golden land, not because there is precious metal buried underground but because the country gives off a certain lustre, be it the fertile rice fields of the central plains or the warm hospitality of its citizenry. People come here as miners: first perhaps for the uniquely Western concept of R&R. And while they toast themselves to a bronze hue on the sandy beaches, they find in the daily rhythm of Thailand a tranquillity that isn't confined to vacation time. Welcome to a life-altering experience disguised as a holiday.

This is an exotic land that is surprisingly convenient and accessible. First introductions are made in Bangkok, a modern behemoth of screaming traffic, gleaming shopping centres and international sensibilities interwoven with devout Buddhism. Even the most cosmopolitan Thais wouldn't dare choose a marriage date without consulting a monk or astrologer. And notice the protective amulets that all Thais – from the humble noodle vendor to the privileged aristocrat – wear around their necks: this is holy fashion.

Sitting upon the crown of the kingdom are misty mountains and Chiang Mai, the country's bohemian centre, where the unique and precise elements of Thai culture become a classroom, for cooking courses and language lessons, for curious visitors. Climbing into the mountain range are the stupa-studded peaks of Mae Hong Son and villages of post-Stone Age cultures. Sliding down the coastal tail are evergreen limestone islands filled with tall palms that angle over pearlescent sand. Thailand's beaches are stunning, hedonistic and mythic among residents of northern latitudes. But few visitors trudge into the northeast, a region better suited for homestays and teaching gigs than quick souvenir snapshots. In this scrappy region you can dive deep into the Thai psyche, emerging with a tolerance for searingly spicy food and a mastery of this strange tonal language.

Always eager to please, Thailand is a thick maze of ambiguities and incongruities with an irresistible combination of natural beauty, historic temples, renowned hospitality and robust cuisine.



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, primarily because it rains the least and is not too hot during these months. This period is also Thailand's main season for both national and regional festivals.

If you plan to focus on the mountains of 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. Haze from the burning-off of agricultural fields during these months, however, does obscure visibility in the north. Northeastern and central Thailand, on the other hand, are best avoided from March to May, when temperatures may climb over 40°C during the day and aren't much lower at night. 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 – and we mean peak – tourist season runs from November to late March, with secondary peaks in July and August. If your main objective is to avoid crowds and to take advantage of discounted rooms and low-season rates, you should consider travelling during the least crowded months (typically April to June, September and October).

COSTS & MONEY

Thailand is an inexpensive country to visit by almost any standards. Those on a budget should be able to get by on about 500B per day outside Bangkok and the major beach towns and 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 600B to 1000B per day, life can be quite comfortable.

In Bangkok there's almost no limit to the amount you *could* spend. Because there are so many hotel options, Bangkok is a good place to splurge for recovery from a long flight or as a reward for reentering 'civilisation'. For under US\$100 you can get a river-view room with all the starred trimmings; try finding that in London or New York. In the provinces, guesthouses tend to be better value than the midrange hotels (which are rarely well maintained). Guesthouses also have a built-in community of travellers and lots of tale swapping.

ATMs are widespread and are the easiest ways to get Thai baht. Have a supply of US dollars in cash on hand, just in case. Credit cards are accepted in big cities and resort hotels but not in family-run guesthouses or restaurants.

TRAVEL LITERATURE

Beyond the girlie-bar genre of literature, pickings are slim for English readers looking for travelling paperbacks. Here are a few standouts.

Sightseeing (2005) is a debut collection of short stories by Rattawat Lapcharoensap that hops between Thai households and tourist cafés. The stories give visitors a 'sightseeing' tour of Thai life and coming-of-age moments.

See Climate Charts (pp739–40) for more information.

HOW MUCH?

1st-class bus, Bangkok to Surat Thani 450B

Beach bungalow on Ko Pha-Ngan 300B

One-day Thai cooking course, Chiang Mai 800-990B

National park admission 400B

Dinner for two at a mid-range restaurant 300B

See also Lonely Planet Index, inside front cover.

TOP 10

THAILAND

TOP TENS

One of the best ways to get ready for a Thailand tour is to start dreaming about this faraway land, and here are a few memorable (and unстереotypical) highlights:

SCENERY

- | | |
|--|--|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Bangkok's skyscrapers viewed from a rooftop bar 2 Monks making their morning alms route 3 Karst mountains of Ao Phang-Nga 4 Jewel-coloured waters of Ko Phi-Phi 5 A temple fair 6 Thais swimming fully clothed in the ocean | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 7 A water buffalo and farmer ploughing a field 8 A motorcycle carrying a family of four and groceries 9 Construction workers wrapped up like mummies 10 Freshly powdered babies wearing small amulets |
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SOUNDS

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|---|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Ice-cream jingle – a repetitive, tinny tune played by the ice-cream sàamláws 2 Amplifiers – as a culture that disapproves of speaking loudly, Thailand blasts noise from karaoke machines through official loud-speakers 3 Roosters – it is a myth that these creatures only announce the dawn 4 <i>Túk-kae</i> and <i>jing-jòk</i> – these reptiles make up the nightly serenade of rural Thailand 5 Cell-phone ring tones – pop hits, cat's meow; even proper Thai grandmas have hip ring tones | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 6 Car Horns – used like a blinker with frequency and enthusiasm 7 Bob Marley tunes – a beach bar is incomplete without 'No Woman No Cry' 8 <i>Sòm-tam</i> music – the rhythmic pounding of the mortar and pestle mixing the ingredients together 9 Two-stroke engines – the most ubiquitous and talkative machine on the road 10 'Hey you' – the favourite tourist pitch of hawkers and touts |
|---|---|

SMELLS

- | | |
|---|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Rice cooking in the morning 2 Jasmine garlands for sale at the temples and shrines 3 Frangipani trees 4 Fish sauce 5 Chilli-laden smoke from a street-stall wok | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 6 <i>Kài yâang</i> (grilled chicken) 7 Burning joss sticks 8 Diesel fuel 9 Sewer stench 10 Your sweat-stained clothes |
|---|---|

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

Pack light wash-and-wear clothes, plus a sweater (pullover) or light jacket for chilly evenings and mornings in northern Thailand or air-con places. Slip-on shoes or sandals are better than lace-up boots. Laundry is cheap in Thailand, so don't lug your whole wardrobe around the country.

You can buy toothpaste, soap and most other toiletries cheaply almost anywhere in Thailand. Tampons can be difficult to find outside of a few expat-oriented shops in Bangkok. Thai deodorants aren't as potent at fighting sweaty stink as antiperspirants from home. 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) 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 p741 for general security issues.

Canadian poet Karen Connelly realistically yet poetically chronicles a year of small-town living in northern Thailand in *The Dream of a Thousand Lives: A Sojourn in Thailand* (2001).

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, and thus makes an excellent read for newcomers.

On the surface, *Bangkok 8* (2004), by John Burdett, is a page-turning whodunnit, but the lead character, a Thai-Westerner cop, provides an excellent conduit towards understanding Thailand's interpretation of Buddhism.

Very Thai (2005), by Philip Cornwel-Smith, is a pop-culture encyclopaedia, filled with colourful essays about everyday Thailand, from the country's fascination with uniforms to household shrines. As a hardcover, it isn't very portable but it does answer a lot of those first-arrival questions.

INTERNET RESOURCES

Lonely Planet (www.lonelyplanet.com) Country-specific information as well as reader information exchange on the Thorn Tree forum.

Thai Students Online (www.thaistudents.com) Sriwittayapaknam School in Samut Prakan maintains the country's largest and most informative website.

Thailand Blogs (www.thai-blogs.com) Stories about culture, language and small-town travel are posted by various expat and Thai contributors.

Thailand Daily (www.thailanddaily.com) Part of World News Network, offering a thorough digest of Thailand-related news in English.

ThaiVisa.com (www.thaivisa.com) Aside from the extensive, impartial info on visas for Thailand, you'll find plenty of travel-related material, news alerts and a helpful forum for both visitors and expats.

Tourism Authority of Thailand (www.tourismthailand.org) Contains a province guide, press releases, Thai Authority of Thailand (TAT) contact information and planning hints.

Itineraries

CLASSIC ROUTES

JUST THE HIGHLIGHTS

Two Weeks / Bangkok to Bangkok

Even if you're only doing a Thailand 'pop-in', you've still got lots of sightseeing choices thanks to the affordability of domestic flights. Start off in **Bangkok** (p101) and then head off to the tropical sea breezes of either **Ko Samui** (p578) or **Phuket** (p660). If you need a more bohemian setting, hop over to **Ko Pha-Ngan** (p604) from Samui or **Ko Yao** (p689) from Phuket. Thailand's popular beach destinations are quieter, and some say better, during the low season but the near-constant rain can be a vacation damper. In general, the Andaman gets more rain than the Gulf coast, so be prepared to hop across the peninsula. If a multiday soaker is in the works, check out the beaches of **Ko Samet** (p243) or **Ko Chang** (p257) on the Southeastern Gulf, which tends to get less rain than the peninsula.

Once you've tired of sand between your toes, fly up to **Chiang Mai** (p272) for a Thai cooking class and temple wanderings. Hike up to the top of **Doi Suthep** (p325) to a popular religious pilgrimage site. Rent a car or motorcycle to explore the mountains and villages around Chiang Mai, including **Chiang Dao** (p328) and **Doi Ang Khang** (p330).

Before buzzing back to Bangkok to spend your last baht, stop at **Sukhothai** (p402), a former ancient capital with picturesque temple ruins.



Bangkok to Ko Samui or Phuket by plane. Ferry to Ko Pha-Ngan or Ko Yao. Fly, train or bus to Chiang Mai. Bus to Doi Suthep, Chiang Dao and Doi Ang Khang. Bus to Sukhothai.

GRAND CIRCUIT

One Month / Bangkok to Bangkok

If you've got a month to 'do' Thailand, spend a few days in **Bangkok** (p101; or leave it till last), then take a slow ride north with a stop in the former ancient capital of **Ayuthaya** (p194) and the monkey capital **Lopburi** (p203). Visit more historic temple ruins in **Sukhothai** (p402) and then continue to **Chiang Mai** (p274), the cultural capital of the north. For more intensive immersion in the north, see the Remote North trip (p25).

You'll need to do an overnight, long-haul bus ride to dip your toes into the northeast region known as Isan. **Nakhon Ratchasima** (Khorat; p455) is a good landing point with easy access to **Phimai** (p461), which has one of Thailand's most impressive Angkor-period temple complexes, and **Khao Yai National Park** (p464), a forest filled with waterfalls, monkeys and, if you're lucky, a python.

Slide down the Thai-Malay Peninsula to spend the last week of your trip kicking back on Thailand's famous islands. The classic stops include the gulf coast islands of upscale **Ko Samui** (p584), low-key **Ko Pha-Ngan** (p604) or the budget dive scene of **Ko Tao** (p578).

Hop over to the Andaman coast to see those postcard limestone mountains jutting out of the tropical ocean. **Phuket** (p660) and **Ko Phi-Phi** (p705) compete for the bulk of high-end tourists, while **Krabi** (p691) is a favourite for rock climbers.



Train from Bangkok to Ayuthaya, Lopburi and Sukhothai. Bus to Chiang Mai. Bus to Nakhon Ratchasima and Phimai. Train to Surat Thani, jumping-off point for the Ko Samui archipelago, or fly direct to Ko Samui or Phuket. Bus across the peninsula to Krabi. Ferry to Ko Phi-Phi. Bus back to Bangkok.

BEACH BUMMING**Three Weeks / Surat Thani to Khao Lak**

Southern Thailand has culture that has been spiced by ancient traders from China, India and Arabia. It makes a perfect stop for mixing up your beach fun. Hop down to the port town of **Surat Thani** (p578), the launching point to the string of Gulf islands: **Ko Samui** (p584), **Ko Pha-Ngan** (p604) and **Ko Tao** (p578). Or make a side trip west to **Khao Sok National Park** (p582), one of Thailand's most important rainforests.

Further down the Thai-Malay Peninsula, visit **Nakhon Si Thammarat** (p627), the cultural capital of the deep south. Head to **Songkhla** (p631) for seafood and Thai-style beachcombing. Saunter across the peninsula to **Satun** (p726), the departure point for boats to the **Ko Tarutao Marine National Park** (p730).

The Andaman celebrities of **Krabi** (p691), **Ko Phi-Phi** (p705) and **Phuket** (p660) are lined up in a row. But if you need more solitude, check out **Ko Lanta** (p714) or **Ko Yao** (p660).

Pay your respects to the tsunami-recovering beach at **Khao Lak/Lamru National Park** (p653), where whale-sized boulders decorate a turquoise bay. Then hop over to the **Similan Islands Marine National Park** (p655) for some of Thailand's best diving.

Train from Bangkok to Surat Thani.
Boat to the islands.
Bus to Khao Sok.
Bus to Nakhon Si Thammarat, Songkhla and Satun.
Boat to Ko Tarutao Marine National Park. Bus to Krabi.
Bus to the islands.
Bus to Phuket and Khao Lak. Boat to Similan Islands.
Bus back to Bangkok.

**ROADS LESS TRAVELLED****REMOTE NORTH****Two Weeks / Chiang Mai to Nong Khai**

Misty mountains and a mix of ethnic hill-tribe villages continue to attract trekkers and ethno-tourists to the northern apex of Thailand. From **Chiang Mai** (p274) wander outside of the city to **Chiang Dao** (p328) for a spooky cave walk or hike through the jungle. Then hop over to **Chiang Rai** (p350), where ecotreks visit hill-tribe villages. Catch a ride to **Mae Salong** (p361), a Yunnanese mountaintop settlement. From Mae Salong you can follow a network of roads high along narrow mountain ridges all the way to **Doi Tung** (p368), in the infamous Golden Triangle area where opium poppy was once grown, and then on to **Mae Sai** (p365), a border town with Myanmar. Follow the border to **Chiang Saen** (p371), where boats navigate the Mekong River all the way to China. You can head downstream to **Chiang Khong** (p375) and loop back to Chiang Rai. Catch an overnight bus to **Nan** (p383), a remote provincial capital surrounded by hill-tribe villages not found in other parts of northern Thailand.

Drop south to **Phitsanulok** (p393), a charming market town and transfer point to **Thung Salaeng Luang National Park** (p401). Keep heading east to **Loei Province** (p501) to catch the spirit festival at **Dan Sai** (p505). Continue northeast to **Chiang Khan** (p507), a mellow riverside village, and the Mekong darling of **Nong Khai** (p491), a gateway to Laos, and take an overnight train ride back to Bangkok. You can also connect this route with Mekong River trip (p27).



Bus from Chiang Mai to Chiang Dao and Chiang Rai.
Bus to Mae Salong, Doi Tung, Mae Sai and Chiang Saen.
Boat to Chiang Khong. Bus to Chiang Rai, Nan and Phitsanulok.
Bus to Thung Salaeng Luang on to Loei and then to Dan Sai. Bus to Chiang Khan to Nong Khai. Train to Bangkok.

TAILORED TRIPS

MOUNTAIN SCRAMBLE

Climb into the bosom of lush mountains and ethnic minority villages that cling to the border between Thailand and Myanmar. Because these areas are fairly remote, they offer many of the same outdoor activities as Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai but with fewer visitors. Due west of Bangkok is **Kanchanaburi** (p207), a popular base for soft adventures into the jungle and the sight of the WWII 'Bridge over the River Kwai'. Continue to remote **Sangkhlaburi** (p222), with its Mon community, and **Three Pagodas Pass** (p224), where you can visit Myanmar for a day at a busy border market.

Continue north to **Um Phang** (p424), famous for its pristine waterfalls, white-water rapids and trekking adventures to Karen villages rarely visited by foreigners. You can do a multiday hike between Um Phang and Sangkhlaburi or bus from Kanchanaburi to Um Phang.

Take the high and winding 'Death Highway' north to **Mae Sot** (p417), a cross-pollinated town of Karen, Burmese and Thai residents. Because of violence on the Myanmar border, Mae Sot and surrounding villages provide refugee camps to displaced Burmese nationals. Follow the backroads to the trekking towns of **Mae Sariang** (p429) and **Mae Hong Son** (p429). Next up is **Pai** (p445), a hippie outpost with lots of live music and rural strolls. Descend out of the winding mountain route into urban Chiang Mai. From here you can tack on the Remote North trip (see p25).



ANCIENT ARCHITECTURE

This trip takes in several former royal capitals and one-time outposts of the Angkor empire, many of which are designated UNESCO World Heritage Sites. Start at the former ancient capital of **Ayuthaya** (p194) and then continue to **Lopburi** (p203), one of Thailand's oldest towns and former Angkor centre and later an Ayuthayan capital in exile. Continue north to **Sukhothai** (p402), which is considered the first Thai kingdom. Nearby Sukhothai-era ruins can be found in **Kamphaeng Phet** (p411), an historic walled city, and **Si Satchanalai-Chaliang** (p408), an ancient pottery-making centre.

Take an overnight bus to **Nakhon Ratchasima** (Khorat; p456), a good launching point to the Angkor-era ruins at **Phimai** (p461). Follow the Angkor trail east to Buriram Province where an extinct volcano is topped by **Prasat Hin Khao Phanom Rung** (p468), the most important and visually impressive Angkorean temple site in Thailand. It's a short jaunt to **Prasat Meuang Tam** (p470) – known for its L-shaped lily ponds – and smaller Angkorean sites.

Further south visit **Khao Phra Wihan** (p545), dramatically perched on a 600m-high cliff, over the Cambodian border from Surin Province.



MEKONG RIVER

The Mekong River, the lifeblood of Southeast Asia, defines the northern and northeastern border of the country. Alongside the fertile river, villages and towns exchange cultures and peoples with Laos. This is most pronounced in the northeastern region known as Isan.

Start in the charming riverside town of **Nong Khai** (p491), a rock-skipping throw from Laos. This is one of the most popular border-crossing points into Laos. If the pace here is too fast, backtrack along the river road to little-visited **Sangkhom** (p499). Then pick up the river road heading east as it curves around the tip of Thailand to tidy **Nakhon Phanom** (p510) and sleepy **That Phanom** (p513), both sporting vestiges of Lao-French architecture. Foreigners are few in these parts, making for a perfect tourist-trail buster. **Mukdahan** (p528) is another gateway to Laos and entertains visitors with an Indochinese market. For a little urban Isan, check out **Ubon Ratchathani** (p532), which puts you on the train route back to Bangkok or positions you for the Ancient Architecture trip (opposite) in reverse. At this point the river dives into the southern tip of Laos, through Cambodia and Vietnam to empty into the South China Sea.



THAILAND FOR KIDS

This circuit is designed to offer children plenty to see and do without the need for marathon travel. Bangkok is as hyperactive as your average toddler and has enough attractions to last kids a week. Get your requisite animal watching at **Dusit Zoo** (p145) and **Queen Saovabha Memorial Institute** (p137), where deadly snakes are milked daily to make antivenom. On the outskirts of Bangkok you'll find culture and history bundled into a walkable, climbable form at **Muang Boran** (p190) in nearby Samut Prakan.

A half-day's train ride will deliver you to **Lopburi** (p203), Thailand's monkey capital and an extraordinary annual festival in which the town provides a banquet feast for the creatures. Further northeast, **Surin** celebrates an annual elephant round-up with parades, mock battles and lots of photo opportunities.

If your visit doesn't coincide with these festivals, take the train to **Kanchanaburi** (p207), a centre for jungle elephant rides as well as historic attractions. Outside of town take the tykes along the scenic trails following the seven-tiered waterfall at **Erawan National Park** (p217) or pet the tigers at the **Tiger Temple** (p218).

End the trip with a relaxing stay at the beachside resort of **Hua Hin** (p556), whose advantages include relatively calm waters, plenty of restaurant variety and pony rides on the beach.



Snapshot

Since the bloodless, 'smooth as silk' military coup d'état on 19 September 2006, the political situation in Thailand has been most intriguing. After assuming power, the leaders of the coup promptly handed power to an interim government, approved of by King Bhumibol Adulyadej. The new leaders have pledged to leave in early 2008 after a new constitution is drawn up and democratic elections take place.

FAST FACTS:

Area: 514,000 sq km
 Border countries: Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar (Burma)
 Population: 64,632,000
 Inflation: 5.1%
 GDP per capita: US\$9100
 Religion: 95% Buddhist
 Literacy: 92.6%
 Original name: Siam
 Number of coups d'état since 1932: 18
 Number of 7-Elevens: currently 3800
 Highest Point: Doi Inthanon 2565m
 Rice exports: 7.4 million tonnes in 2006 (number one rice exporter in the world)

This stunning turn of political events started brewing after the former ruling political party, Thai Rak Thai, won by a huge margin in the February 2005 elections. Then prime minister, Thaksin Shinawatra, arrogantly wielded his mandate and personal agenda against anyone standing in his way – the press, political opponents, and, many have speculated, the king. A period of protest followed, particularly in Bangkok, as influential people in politics, academia and the press began to hit back, creating visible, though peaceful, unrest in the streets.

Rumours of a coup flew around for months before it happened, so it wasn't a huge surprise. After some initial fears of chaos, Thais soon embraced the new government with relief and a sense of humour. This was far from the societal collapse many foreigners had assumed would happen. The interim government has been cautious in its approach and has pledged to clean up the rampant corruption and restore national unity. But some of these unelected leaders, not used to the political game, have made some embarrassing stumbles along the way. Meanwhile Thaksin, in self-exile, has continued to give interviews with high-profile news organisations, and many in the public wonder whether he is plotting a return to power.

A series of random attacks by anonymous Muslims in the three southernmost provinces, Yala, Narathiwat and Pattani, have become recognised as a serious ongoing threat. Since 2004, more than 1800 people have been murdered in the deep south, and because the insurgents haven't listed specific demands and have no known leader, the violence has been difficult to stop. After more than two years of Thaksin's strong-armed policies and harsh tactics in the region in which innocent Muslims were arrested and even killed, it became clear that the efforts were counterproductive and were fuelling even more violence. But the interim government, after trying a conciliatory approach, has not had any more success, as daily bombs and killings have continued.

On New Years Eve 2006, Bangkok itself suffered through a series of bomb attacks in high-profile places throughout the city – the first of its kind in the capital – killing three people and injuring dozens. Most ruled out Muslim involvement and have instead blamed Thaksin loyalists. Since that incident, higher security measures have been introduced in Bangkok, such as bag searches at mall entrances and at Skytrain and subway stations.

Thailand has mostly recovered from the tragic December 2004 tsunami, which left an estimated 8000 people dead. Thousands of dedicated Thai and foreign volunteers made this heroic recovery possible. But while popular tourist areas were quickly cleaned up and restored to pre-tsunami standards, those in many poorer fishing villages are still struggling to overcome the deaths of family members and the loss of livelihoods.

In 2006 Thais jubilantly celebrated the king's 60th year on the throne with great fanfare (he's currently the longest-serving monarch in the world) and continue to look to him for inspiration during these somewhat turbulent times. Despite everything, things have held together nicely as the economy is steady and tourism is as robust as ever. Visitors won't notice anything amiss and Thais haven't stopped smiling.

The Authors

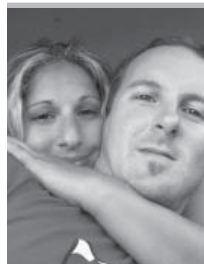
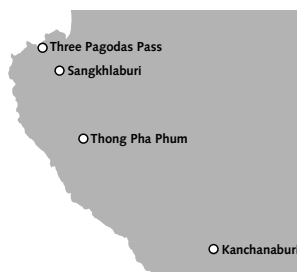


CHINA WILLIAMS Coordinating Author, Bangkok & Central Thailand

China grew up in South Carolina, where the hot summers and casual chitchat prepared her well for a Thailand encounter. She first arrived in the kingdom as an English teacher in the small provincial capital of Surin and made periodic trips to Bangkok for visa business, navigating the city by public bus long before the Skytrain was anything more than a stalled eyesore. China now lives in the US, skipping across the Pacific twice a year to Thailand to update various guidebooks. Home is most recently in Montana with her husband, Matt, and baby son, Felix.

My Favourite Trip

I thought I had explored every corner of Thailand until I waded down that orange bus and trundled northwest of Kanchanaburi to Thong Pha Phum and then to Sangkhlaburi – delightful rain-soaked towns surrounded by shaggy green mountains. I climbed to a hilltop temple just in time to get stuck in a rain storm. Later I hopped aboard a *sǎwngthǎew* that shuttles between Thailand and Myanmar past simple bamboo huts and a mix of ethnicities that only a border can cultivate. The villages were poor, the clothes hand-me-downs and the languages inherited from the mountains beyond. I ate at a food shop on the Burmese side of Three Pagodas Pass, where the owner asked in broken English if I had a brother, meaning why was I travelling alone. All the motorcycle taxis wanted to take me somewhere, where I'm not sure, but I was the only potential customer and thus a minor celebrity.



AARON ANDERSON & BECCA BLOND Andaman Coast & Lower Southern Gulf

Despite arriving in the midst of a coup and leaving in a flood, Becca and Aaron managed to have a spectacular time exploring southern Thailand's islands, beaches and national parks for this guide. Between interviewing tsunami victims for Lonely Planet TV in Khao Lak and learning to surf in Phuket, the engaged couple, and author team, never had a dull moment. This was Becca's third trip to Thailand and the second time she's come to research this title; it was Aaron's first trip to Asia. Becca and Aaron spend most of the year traversing the globe for Lonely Planet.

LONELY PLANET AUTHORS

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BRETT ATKINSON Southeastern Thailand & Upper Southern Gulf

Brett first travelled to Thailand in 1991 and since then has returned several times to explore the country using the world's most diverse and idiosyncratic network of public transport. He's learnt the hard way to keep his knees tucked in when crossing Bangkok on a motorcycle taxi during rush hour, met loads of friendly locals on crowded *sǎwngthǎew*, and overcome the transportation challenge of exploring Ko Chang's outer islands during the wet season. When he's not working for Lonely Planet, Brett writes about travel, sport, and the media, and shares a house in Auckland with Carol and a crazy Siamese cat called Havoc.



TIM BEWER 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. When Lonely Planet asked him to return to Thailand, he said 'Isan, please', as this is, in his opinion, far and away the most fascinating part of the country; his most recent visit only reinforced this belief. When not shouldering a backpack, he lives in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Someday, if he can ever find the time, he will finish his novel.



VIRGINIA JEALOUS Surin & Similan Islands

Virginia has travelled through, lived in, worked in and written about national parks in Australia and Southeast Asia since the 1980s. Various roles as tour guide, tour-guide trainer, bushwalker, supporter of locally owned tourism projects and drinker-of-sunset-cocktails-in-lovely-places have given her strong opinions about tourism in protected areas. A birder from way back, Virginia was thrilled to visit the Surin and Similan Islands and to finally tick off her life-list the eccentric-looking Nicobar pigeon, a bird that eluded her on the Indian side of the Andaman Sea.



LISA STEER Chiang Mai & Northern Provinces

Realising early on that making motor parts in a London workshop wasn't the life for her, Lisa headed to Southeast Asia hoping for an epiphany. Getting so hooked on all things Thai and Indonesian she went back to university to study their cultures, religions, politics and languages. Returning to the region for a few years, she wrote a couple of dissertations, did a stint as a UN election observer and finally became a travel-guide writer. Romance led her to Paris, and work to London, where she had a glam time at *Elle Decoration* magazine. But high heels were traded in for monsoon-season welly boots when Thailand beckoned again.

CONTRIBUTING AUTHORS

Dr Trish Batchelor wrote the Health chapter. She is a general practitioner and travel medicine specialist who is currently the Medical Director of the Travel Doctor clinic in Canberra, as well as a Medical Advisor to the Travel Doctor New Zealand clinics. She previously worked at the CIWEC Clinic in Nepal and has a special interest in the impact of tourism on host countries. She has travelled extensively throughout Southeast and East Asia.

Joe Cummings was born in New Orleans and developed an attraction to seedy, tropical ports at a young age. An interest in Buddhism and Southeast Asian politics led him to Bangkok, where he took up residence in an old wooden house on a canal and began exploring the provinces in his spare time. He later delved more deeply into the country as Lonely Planet's *Thailand* and *Bangkok* author through the 1980s, '90s and '00s. When he's not testing mattresses and slurping *tôm yam kûng* for Lonely Planet, Joe dabbles in Thai and foreign film production as a location consultant, script reader/translator and occasional actor.

Joel Gershon applied for a newspaper job in Bangkok on a whim and got it. Joel, a life-long Brooklynite, quickly packed up his life after he was told to arrive within one week. He has been living and working as a print and broadcast journalist there ever since. He also teaches journalism at a top university and has experienced many Asian adventures. Visit www.joelgershon.com for more info.