

History

PREHISTORY

Modern linguistic theory and archaeological evidence suggest that the first true agriculturists in the world, perhaps also the first metal workers, spoke an early form of Thai and lived in what we know today as Thailand. The Mekong River valley and Khorat Plateau in particular were inhabited as far back as 10,000 years ago, and rice was grown in the Ban Chiang and Ban Prasat areas of northeastern Thailand as early as 4000 BC (China, by contrast, was growing and consuming millet at the time). The Ban Chiang culture began bronze metallurgy before 3000 BC; the Middle East's Bronze Age arrived around 2800 BC, China's a thousand years later. Ban Chiang bronze works were stronger than their Mesopotamian or Chinese counterparts, mainly due to Ban Chiang's access to the abundant tin resources of the Thai-Malay Peninsula.

Early Thais, often classified with the broader Austro-Thai group, were nomadic and their original homeland a matter of academic debate. While most scholars favour a region vaguely stretching from Guangxi in southern China to Dien Bien Phu in northern Vietnam, a more radical theory says the Thais descended from an ocean-based civilisation in the western Pacific. The oceanic proponents trace the development of symbols and myths in Thai art and culture to arrive at their conclusions.

This vast, non-unified zone of Austro-Thai influence spread all over Southeast Asia at various times. In Thailand, these Austro-Thai groups belonged to the Thai-Kadai and Mon-Khmer language families.

The Thai-Kadai is the most significant ethno-linguistic group in all of Southeast Asia, with 72 million speakers extending from the Brahmaputra River in India's Assam state to the Gulf of Tonkin and China's Hainan Island. To the north, there are Thai-Kadai speakers well into the Chinese provinces of Yunnan and Guangxi, and to the south they are found as far as the northern Malaysian state of Kedah. In Thailand and Laos they are the majority populations, and in China, Vietnam and Myanmar (Burma) they are the largest minorities. The predominant Thai half of the Thai-Kadai group includes the Ahom (Assam), the Siamese (Thailand), the Black Thai or Thai Dam (Laos and Vietnam), the Thai Yai or Shan (Myanmar and Thailand), the Thai Neua (Laos, Thailand and China), the Thai Lü (Laos, Thailand and China) and the Yuan (Laos and Thailand). The less numerous Kadai groups (under a million) include such comparatively obscure languages in southern China as Kelao, Lati, Laha, Laqua and Li.

A linguistic map of southern China, northeastern India and Southeast Asia clearly shows that the preferred zones of occupation by the Thai peoples have been river valleys, from the Red (Hong) River in the south of China and Vietnam to the Brahmaputra River in Assam, India. At one time there were two terminals for movement into what is now Thailand. The 'northern terminal' was in the Yuan Jiang and other river areas in China's modern-day Yunnan and Guangxi provinces, and the 'southern terminal' along central Thailand's Mae Nam Chao Phraya (Chao Phraya River). The human populations remain quite concentrated in these areas today, while

The US Library of Congress maintains a Thailand Studies page (<http://countrystudies.us/Thailand>) that covers history and societal structure.

Thailand is 543 years ahead of the West, at least according to their calendar, which measures the beginning of the modern era from the birth of Buddha instead of Christ.

TIMELINE 4000–3000 BC

Ban Chiang in Northeastern Thailand pioneers rice cultivation and bronze metallurgy

6th–10th centuries

Theravada Buddhism establishes itself among Mon communities in central Thailand

Thailand: A Short History (2003), by David Wyatt, offers a succinct overview from the early Thai era to the turn of the millennium.

areas between the two were merely intermediate relay points and have always been less populated.

The Mekong River valley between Thailand and Laos was one such intermediate zone, as were river valleys along the Nan, Ping, Kok, Yom and Wang Rivers in northern Thailand, plus various river areas in Laos and also in the Shan State of Myanmar. As far as historians have been able to piece together, significant numbers of Austro-Thai peoples in southern China or northern Vietnam probably began migrating southward and westward in small groups as early as the 8th century AD – most certainly by the 10th century.

These migrant Thais established local polities along traditional social schemata according to *meuang* (roughly ‘principality’ or ‘city-state’), under the rule of chieftains or sovereigns (*jào meuang*). Each *meuang* was based in a river valley or section of a valley and some were loosely collected under one *jào meuang* or an alliance of several.

Wherever Thais met indigenous populations of Tibeto-Burmans and Mon-Khmers in the move south and westward (into what is now Myanmar, Thailand and Laos), they were somehow able to displace, assimilate or co-opt them without force. The most probable explanation for this relatively smooth assimilation is that there were already Thai peoples indigenous to the area.

EARLY KINGDOMS

With no written records or chronologies it is difficult to say with certainty what kind of cultures existed in Thailand before the middle of the first millennium AD. However, by the 6th century an important network of agricultural communities was thriving as far south as modern-day Pattani and Yala, and as far north and northeast as Lamphun and Muang Fa Daet (near Khon Kaen).

Theravada Buddhism was flourishing and may have entered the region during India’s Ashoka period, in the 3rd or 2nd century BC, when Indian missionaries are said to have been sent to a land called Suvannabhumi (Land of Gold). Suvannabhumi most likely corresponds to a remarkably fertile area stretching from southern Myanmar, across central Thailand, to eastern Cambodia. Two different cities in Thailand’s central river basin have long been called Suphanburi (City of Gold) and U Thong (Cradle of Gold).

Dvaravati

Nakhon Pathom in central Thailand seems to have been the centre of Dvaravati culture. The main ethnicity of the Dvaravati peoples was Mon, whose culture quickly declined in the 11th century under the political domination of the invading Khmers, who made their regional headquarters in Lopburi. A Mon kingdom – Hariphunchai – in today’s Lamphun Province, held out until the late 12th or early 13th century, when it was annexed by northern Thais.

Dvaravati is a Sanskrit name meaning Place of Gates, referring to the city of Krishna in the Indian epic poem *Mahabharata*. The French art historian Georges Coedès discovered the name on some coins that were excavated in the Nakhon Pathom area. The Dvaravati culture is known for its art work, including Buddha images (showing Indian Gupta influence), stucco reliefs on temple walls and in caves, architecture, exquisite terracotta heads, votive tablets and various sculptures.

Dvaravati may have also been a cultural relay point for the Funan and Chenla cultures of ancient Laos and Cambodia to the northeast and east. The Chinese, through the travels of the famous pilgrim Xuan Zang, knew the area as Tuoluobodi, between Sriksetra (Myanmar) and Isanapura (Laos-Cambodia).

Khmer & Srivijaya

The Khmer kingdom, with its capital in present-day Cambodia, expanded westward into a large swath of present-day Thailand between the 9th to 11th centuries. Much of Thailand made up the Khmer frontier with administrative capitals in Lopburi, Sukhothai and Phimai. Roads and temples were built linking these centres to the capital at Angkor. As a highly developed society, Khmer culture infused the border regions with its art, language, religion and court structure. Monuments from this period located in Kanchanaburi, Lopburi and many northeastern towns were constructed in the Khmer style, most notably found in Angkor.

Elements of the Khmer religions – Brahmanism, Theravada Buddhism and Mahayana Buddhism – were intermixed as Lopburi became a religious centre, and some elements of each Buddhist school – along with Brahmanism – remain in Thai religious and court ceremonies today.

A number of Thais became mercenaries for the Khmer armies in the early 12th century, as depicted on the walls of Angkor Wat. The Khmers called the Thais ‘Syam’, and this was how the Thai kingdom eventually came to be called Syam, or Sayam. In Myanmar and northwestern Thailand the pronunciation of Syam became ‘Shan’.

Meanwhile southern Thailand – the upper Malay Peninsula – was under the control of the Srivijaya empire, the headquarters of which is believed to have been located in Palembang, Sumatra, between the 8th and 13th centuries. The regional centre for Srivijaya was Chaiya, near modern Surat Thani. Remains of Srivijaya art can still be seen in Chaiya and its environs.

Sukhothai & Lan Na Thai

Several Thai principalities in the Mekong River valley united in the 13th and 14th centuries, when Thai princes wrested the lower north from the declining Khmer empire to create Sukhothai (Rising of Happiness). They

FISH IN THE WATER, RICE IN THE FIELDS

Many Thais today have a sentimental view of the Sukhothai period, seeing it as a ‘golden age’ of Thai politics, religion and culture – an egalitarian, noble period when all the people had enough to eat and the kingdom was unconquerable. Among other accomplishments, the third Sukhothai king, Ramkhamhaeng, encouraged the use of a fledgling Thai writing system, which became the basis for modern Thai; he also codified the Thai form of Theravada Buddhism, as borrowed from the Sinhalese.

A famous passage from Sukhothai’s Ramkhamhaeng inscription reads:

This land of Sukhothai is thriving. There is fish in the water and rice in the fields... The King has hung a bell in the opening of the gate over there; if any commoner has a grievance which sickens his belly and grips his heart, he goes and strikes the bell; King Ramkhamhaeng questions the man, examines the case and decides it justly for him.

8th–10th centuries

Thai-Kadai peoples from northern Vietnam and southern China begin migrating into the Mekong River valley

9th–13th centuries

Angkor extends control across central Thailand

1238

Several Thai principalities resist Khmer suzerainty and unite to form Sukhothai, considered to be the first Thai kingdom

14th–15th centuries

Ayuthaya in central Thailand rivals and later annexes Sukhothai as the primary Thai kingdom and conquers former Khmer territory

later took the capital Hariphunchai from the Mon to form Lan Na Thai (Million Thai Rice Fields).

In 1238 the Sukhothai kingdom declared its independence under King Si Intharathit and quickly expanded its sphere of influence, taking advantage not only of the declining Khmer power but the weakening Srivijaya domain in the south. Sukhothai is considered by the Thais to be the first true Thai kingdom. Under King Ramkhamhaeng, the Sukhothai kingdom extended from Nakhon Si Thammarat in the south to the upper Mekong River valley (Laos) and to Bago (Myanmar). For a short time (1448–86) the Sukhothai capital was moved to Phitsanulok. It was annexed by Ayuthaya in 1376, by which time a national identity of sorts had been forged.

Ramkhamhaeng also supported two northern Thai *jão meuang* – Phaya Mengrai of Chiang Mai and Phaya Ngam Meuang of Phayao – in the 1296 founding of Lan Na Thai (or Lanna). Lanna extended across northern Thailand to include Wiang Chan along the middle reaches of the Mekong River. In the 14th century Wiang Chan was taken from Lanna by Chao Fa Ngum of Luang Prabang, who made it part of his Lan Xang (Million Elephants) kingdom. Wiang Chan later flourished as an independent kingdom for a short time during the mid-16th century and eventually became the capital of Laos in its royal, French and now socialist incarnations. During the French era it got its more popular international spelling ‘Vientiane’. After a period of dynastic decline, Lanna fell to the Burmese in 1558.

Ayuthaya

The Thai kings of Ayuthaya grew very powerful in the 14th and 15th centuries, taking over U Thong and Lopburi, former Khmer strongholds, and moving east in their conquests until Angkor was defeated in 1431. Even though the Khmers were their adversaries in battle, the Ayuthaya kings adopted large portions of Khmer court customs and language. One result of this acculturation was that the Thai monarch gained more absolute authority during the Ayuthaya period and assumed the title *devaraja* (god-king; *thewáràat* in Thai) as opposed to the *dhammaraja* (dharma-king; *tham-máràat*) title used in Sukhothai.

Ayuthaya was one of the greatest and wealthiest cities in Asia at the time, a thriving seaport that entertained emissaries and traders from Europe, China and beyond. In 1690 Londoner Engelbert Campfer proclaimed, ‘Among the Asian nations, the Kingdom of Siam is the greatest. The magnificence of the Ayuthaya Court is incomparable’. It has been said that London, at the time, was a mere village in comparison. The kingdom

The Legend of Suriyothai (2002), a Francis Ford Coppola re-edit of the royally financed, four-hour original (*Suriyothai*), recounts a famous 1548 battle between Bago (part of Burma) and Siam.

THE FALCON OF SIAM

An exceptional episode unfolded in Ayuthaya when Constantine Phaulkon, a Greek, became a high official in Siam under King Narai, from 1675 to 1688. Wisely courting royal favour by fending off would-be colonisation by the Dutch and the English, he nevertheless allowed the French to station 600 soldiers in the kingdom. Eventually the Thais, fearing a takeover, expelled the French and executed Phaulkon. Siam sealed itself off from the West for 150 years following this experience with the *faràng* (a Westerner or foreigner of European descent; from *faràngsèt*, meaning ‘French’).

sustained an unbroken 400-year monarchical succession through 34 reigns, from King U Thong (r 1350–69) to King Ekathat (r 1758–67).

In the mid-16th century Ayuthaya and the independent kingdom of Lanna came under the control of the Burmese, but the Thais regained rule of both by the end of the century. Later attempts by the Burmese were successful in invading Ayuthaya in 1765 and the capital fell after two years of fighting. This time the invaders destroyed everything sacred to the Thais, including manuscripts, temples and religious sculpture. But the Burmese were unable to maintain a foothold in the kingdom, and the military leader Phraya Taksin, a half-Chinese, half-Thai general, re-established order in the kingdom, claimed the vacated monarchy for himself in 1769, and began ruling from the new capital of Thonburi on the banks of the Mae Nam Chao Phraya, opposite Bangkok. Taksin eventually came to regard himself as the next Buddha; his ministers, who did not approve of his religious fantasies, deposed and then executed him.

EARLY BANGKOK ERA

Founding of the Chakri Dynasty

One of Taksin’s key generals, Chao Phraya Chakri, came to power and was crowned in 1782 as Phra Yot Fa. He moved the royal capital across the river to Bangkok and ruled as the first king of the Chakri dynasty. In 1809 his son, Loet La, took the throne and reigned until 1824. Both monarchs assumed the task of restoring the culture, which had been severely damaged by the Burmese decades earlier.

The third Chakri king, Phra Nang Klao (r 1824–51), went beyond reviving tradition and developed trade with China, while increasing domestic agricultural production. He also established a new royal title system, posthumously conferring ‘Rama I’ and ‘Rama II’ upon his two predecessors and taking the title ‘Rama III’ for himself. During Nang Klao’s reign, American missionary James Low brought the first printing press to Siam and produced the country’s first printed document in Thai script. Missionary Dan Bradley published the first Thai newspaper, the monthly *Bangkok Recorder*, from 1844 to 1845.

Modernisation

Commonly known as King Mongkut (Phra Chom Klao to the Thais), Rama IV was a colourful and innovative Chakri king. He originally missed out on the throne in deference to his half-brother, Rama III, and lived as a Buddhist monk for 27 years. During his long monastic term he became adept in Sanskrit, Pali, Latin and English, studied Western sciences and adopted the strict discipline of local Mon monks. He kept an eye on the outside world and, when he took the throne in 1851, immediately courted diplomatic relations with a few European nations, taking care to evade colonisation.

In addition, he attempted to demythologise Thai religion by aligning Buddhist cosmology with modern science, and founded the Thammayut monastic sect, based on the strict discipline he had followed as a monk.

King Mongkut loosened Thai trade restrictions and many Western powers signed trade agreements with the monarch. He also sponsored Siam’s second printing press and instituted educational reforms, developing a school system along European lines. Although the king courted the West, he did so with caution and warned his subjects, ‘Whatever they have invented or done

The Golden Jubilee Network (<http://kanchanapisek.or.th>) is the official website of the royal family.

1511

The Portuguese establish the first European mission in Ayuthaya, soon to be followed by the Dutch, English, Danish and French

1765

Ayuthaya’s wealth attracts the attention of the Burmese, whose siege reduces the city to a devastated shell

1769

Phaya Taksin rallies the Thai forces and drives out the Burmese, appointing himself king at the new capital of Thonburi

1782

Chao Phraya Chakri takes over as king, moving the capital across Mae Nam Chao Phraya to Bangkok

which we should know of and do, we can imitate and learn from them, but do not wholeheartedly believe in them'. Mongkut was the first monarch to show his face to Thai commoners in public.

Mongkut's son King Chulalongkorn (known to the Thais as Rama V or Chula Chom Klao; r 1868–1910) continued his father's tradition of reform, especially in the legal and administrative realms. Educated by European tutors, Rama V abolished prostration before the king as well as slavery and corvée (state labour). Siam further benefited from relations with European nations and the USA: railways were built, a civil service was established and the legal code restructured. Although Siam still managed to avoid European colonisation, the king was compelled to concede territory to French Indochina (Laos in 1893 and Cambodia in 1907) and British Burma (three Malayan states in 1909) during his reign.

Rama V's son King Vajiravudh (Mongkut Klao or Rama VI; r 1910–25), was educated in Britain and during his reign he introduced educational reforms, including compulsory education. He further 'Westernised' the nation by conforming the Thai calendar to Western models. His reign was clouded by a top-down push for Thai nationalism that resulted in strong anti-Chinese sentiment.

Before Vajiravudh's reign Thai parents gave each of their children a single, original name, with no surname to identify family origins. In 1909 a royal decree required the adoption of Thai surnames for all Thai citizens – a move designed to parallel the European system of family surnames and to weed out Chinese names.

In 1912 a group of Thai military officers unsuccessfully attempted to overthrow the monarchy, the first in a series of coup attempts that have plagued Thai history. As a show of support for the Allies in WWI, Vajiravudh sent 1300 Thai troops to France in 1918.

THE 20TH CENTURY 1932 Revolution

While Vajiravudh's brother King Prajadhipok (Pokkloa or Rama VII; r 1925–35) ruled, a group of Thai students living in Paris became so enamoured of democratic ideology that in 1932 they mounted a successful coup d'état against absolute monarchy in Siam. This bloodless revolution led to the development of a constitutional monarchy along British lines, with a mixed military-civilian group in power (see box text opposite).

A royalist revolt in 1933 sought to reinstate absolute monarchy, but it failed and left Prajadhipok isolated from the royalist revolutionaries and the constitution-minded ministers. One of the king's last official acts was to outlaw polygamy in 1934, leaving behind the cultural underpinnings that now support Thai prostitution.

In 1935 the king abdicated without naming a successor and retired to Britain. The cabinet promoted his nephew 10-year-old Ananda Mahidol, to the throne as Rama VIII, although Ananda didn't return from school in Switzerland until 1945. Phibul Songkhram, a key military leader in the 1932 coup, maintained an effective position of power from 1938 until the end of WWII.

Under the influence of Phibul's government, the country's English name was officially changed in 1939 from Siam to Thailand (*práthēt thai* in Thai).

'Thai' is considered to have the connotation of 'free', although in actual usage it refers to the Thai, Tai or T'ai peoples.

Ananda Mahidol came back to Thailand in 1945 but was shot dead in his bedroom under mysterious circumstances in 1946. Although there was apparently no physical evidence to suggest assassination, three of Ananda's attendants were arrested two years after his death and executed in 1954. No public charges were ever filed, and the consensus among historians today is that the attendants were 'sacrificed' to settle a karmic debt for allowing the king to die during their watch. His brother, Bhumibol Adulyadej, succeeded him as Rama IX. Nowadays no-one ever speaks or writes publicly about Ananda's death – whether it was a simple gun accident or a regicidal plot remains unclear.

Militarisation

During the Japanese invasion of Southeast Asia in 1941, the Phibul government sided with Japan and Phibul declared war on the USA and Britain in 1942. But Seni Pramoj, the Thai ambassador in Washington, refused to deliver the declaration. Phibul resigned in 1944 under pressure from the Thai underground resistance (known as Thai Seri), and after V-J Day in 1945, Seni became premier. Seni changed the English name of the country back to 'Siam' but kept 'Prathet Thai' as the official Thai name.

In 1946 Seni was unseated in a general election and a democratic civilian group took power under Pridi Phanomyong, a law professor who had been instrumental in the 1932 revolution. Pridi's civilian government survived long enough to create the 1946 Constitution of the Thai Kingdom, only to be overthrown by Phibul, then a field marshal, in 1947.

Phibul suspended the constitution and reinstated 'Thailand' as the country's official English name in 1949. He took an extreme anticommunist stance, refusing to recognise the newly declared People's Republic of China, and also became a loyal supporter of French and US foreign policy in Southeast Asia. Pridi, meanwhile, took up exile in China.

In 1951 power was wrested from Phibul by General Sarit Thanarat, who continued the tradition of military dictatorship. However, Phibul retained the actual title of premier until 1957 when Sarit finally had him exiled. Elections that same year forced Sarit to resign and go abroad for 'medical treatment'; he returned in 1958 to launch another coup. This time he abolished

In 2006 King Bhumibol Adulyadej celebrated 60 years on the throne and is the longest reigning monarch in the world.

Under Thailand's *lese majeste* laws, criticising the king carries with it a seven-year prison sentence, applicable to both Thais and foreigners. A major critic of the law is Sulak Sivaraksa, a respected Buddhist scholar and self-described monarchist.

The King Never Smiles: A Biography of Thailand's Bhumibol Adulyadej, by Paul M Handley, is the latest examination of how Thailand's democratic revolution was successfully undermined by royalists and the current king; it is banned in Thailand.

CAFÉ-BREWED COUP

As Bangkok prospered in the early 20th century, many wealthy merchant families sent their children to study abroad in Europe. Students of humbler socioeconomic status who excelled in school had access to government scholarships for overseas study as well. In 1924 a handful of Thai students in Paris formed the Promoters of Political Change, a group that met in Paris cafés to discuss ideas for a future Siamese government patterned after democratic Western models.

After completing studies in Paris and returning to Bangkok, three of the 'Promoters' – attorney Pridi Phanomyong and military officers Phibul Songkhram and Prayoon Phamonmontri – organised an underground 'People's Party' dedicated to the overthrow of the Siamese system of government. The People's Party found a willing moral accomplice in Rama VII, and a bloodless revolution in 1932 transformed Thailand from an absolute monarchy into a constitutional one.

1851

King Mongkut (Rama V) ascends the Chakra throne, instituting a period of reform and opening diplomatic relations with Europe

1902

Siam annexes Yala, Pattani and Narathiwat from the former sultanate of Pattani

1932

Following a bloodless coup, Rama VII presides over a change from absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy

1934

Polygamy, a Thai tradition, is outlawed

the constitution, dissolved the parliament and banned all political parties, maintaining effective power until he died of cirrhosis in 1963.

From 1964 to 1973 the Thai nation was ruled by the army officers Thanom Kittikachorn and Praphat Charusathien. During this time Thailand allowed the USA to establish several military bases within its borders in support of the US campaign in Vietnam.

Reacting to the political repression, 10,000 Thai students publicly demanded a real constitution in June 1973. On 14 October of the same year the military brutally suppressed a large demonstration at Thammasat University in Bangkok, but King Bhumibol and General Krit Sivara, who sympathised with the students, refused to support further bloodshed, forcing Thanom and Praphat to leave Thailand. Oxford-educated Kukrit Pramoj took charge of a 14-party coalition government and steered a leftist agenda past a conservative parliament.

Among Kukrit's lasting achievements were a national minimum wage, the repeal of anticommunist laws and the ejection of US military forces from Thailand. Kukrit's elected constitutional government ruled until 6 October 1976, when students demonstrated again, this time protesting against Thanom's return to Thailand as a monk. Thammasat University again became a battlefield as border-patrol police and right-wing paramilitary civilian groups assaulted a group of 2000 students holding a sit-in. It is estimated that hundreds of students were killed and injured in the fracas, and more than a thousand were arrested. Using public disorder as an excuse, the military stepped in and installed a new right-wing government with Thanin Kraivichien as premier.

This bloody incident disillusioned many Thai students and older intellectuals not directly involved with the demonstrations. Numerous idealists 'dropped out' of Thai society and joined the People's Liberation Army of Thailand (PLAT), a group of armed communist insurgents based in the hills who had been active since the 1930s.

In October 1977 the military replaced Thanin with the more moderate General Kriangsak Chomanand in an effort to conciliate antigovernment factions. When this failed, the military-backed position changed hands again in 1980, leaving Prem Tinsulanonda at the helm. By this time PLAT had peaked with around 10,000 members. A 1981 coup attempt by the 'Young Turks' (a group of army officers who had graduated together from the Chulachomklao Royal Military Academy and styled themselves after a 1908 military movement at the heart of the Ottoman Empire) failed when Prem fled Bangkok for Khorat in the company of the royal family.

Stabilisation

Prem served as prime minister until 1988 and is credited with the political and economic stabilisation of Thailand in the post-Vietnam War years (only one coup attempt in the 1980s!). The major success of the Prem years was a complete dismantling of the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) and PLAT through an effective combination of amnesty programmes (which brought the students back from the forests) and military action. His administration is also considered to have been responsible for a gradual democratisation of Thailand that culminated in the 1988 election of his successor, retired general and businessman Chatichai Choonhavan. Prem

continues to serve as a privy councillor and is a *rátthàbùrùt* (elder statesman) of the country.

It may be difficult for later arrivals to Thailand to appreciate the political distance Thailand covered in the 1980s. Under Prem, for example, a long-standing 1am curfew in Bangkok was lifted, and dissenting opinions were heard again in public.

Ever since 1932 every leading political figure in Thailand has needed the support of the Thai military to survive. Considering Thailand's geographic position during the Cold War years, it's not difficult to understand their influence. But as the threat of communist takeover (either from within or from nearby Indochinese states) diminished, the military gradually began loosening its hold on national politics.

Under Chatichai Thailand enjoyed a brief period of unprecedented popular participation in government. Around 60% of Chatichai's cabinet members were former business executives rather than the ex-military officers in the previous cabinet. Thailand entered a new era in which the country's double-digit economic boom ran concurrently with democratisation. Critics praised the political maturation of Thailand, even if they also grumbled that corruption seemed as rife as it ever was. By the end of the 1980s, however, certain high-ranking military officers had become increasingly dissatisfied, complaining that Thailand was being run by a plutocracy.

The Return of the Military

On 23 February 1991 the military overthrew the Chatichai administration in a bloodless coup and handed power to the newly formed National Peace-Keeping Council (NPKC), headed by General Suchinda Kraprayoon. Although it was Thailand's 19th attempted coup and one of 10 successful coups since 1932, it was only the second coup to overthrow a democratically elected civilian government. The NPKC abolished the 1978 constitution and dissolved the parliament, charging Chatichai's civilian government with corruption and vote buying. Rights of public assembly were curtailed but the press was only closed down for one day.

Following the coup, the NPKC appointed a handpicked civilian prime minister, Anand Panyarachun, former ambassador to the USA, Germany, Canada and the UN, to dispel public fears that the junta was planning a return to 100% military rule. Anand claimed to be his own man, but like his predecessors – elected or not – he was allowed the freedom to make his own decisions only insofar as they didn't affect the military. In spite of obvious constraints, many observers felt Anand's temporary premiership and cabinet were the best Thailand has ever had, either before or since.

In December 1991 Thailand's national assembly passed a new constitution that guaranteed a NPKC-biased parliament – 270 appointed senators in the upper house stacked against 360 elected representatives. Under this constitution, regardless of who was chosen as the next prime minister or which political parties filled the lower house, the government would remain largely in the hands of the military.

A general election in March 1992 ushered in a five-party coalition government with Narong Wongwan, whose Samakkhitham (Justice Unity) Party received the most votes, as premier. But amid US allegations that Narong was involved in Thailand's drug trade, the military exercised its constitutional

'Ever since 1932 every leading political figure in Thailand has needed the support of the Thai military to survive'

Now in his 80s, General Prem Tinsulanonda serves as privy council (or chief advisor) to the king and is believed to have orchestrated the 2006 coup. He also has his own website (www.generalprem.com).

1939

Siam changes its name to 'Thailand'

1941–45

Japanese forces occupy parts of Thailand until they're defeated at the close of WWII

1946

The present king, Rama IX, ascends the throne; Thailand's first democratically elected government comes to power

1973

Thai students, workers and farmers unite to repel military dictatorship and install a democratic government

prerogative and replaced Narong with (surprise, surprise) General Suchinda in April 1992.

In May 1992 several huge demonstrations demanding Suchinda's resignation – led by the charismatic Bangkok governor, Chamlong Srimuang – rocked Bangkok and larger provincial capitals. Chamlong won the 1992 Magsaysay Award (a humanitarian service award issued by a foundation in the Philippines) for his role in galvanising the public to reject Suchinda. After street confrontations between the protesters and the military near Bangkok's Democracy Monument resulted in nearly 50 deaths and hundreds of injuries, Suchinda resigned, having been premier for less than six weeks. Anand Panyarachun was reinstated as interim premier, winning praise for his fair and efficient administration.

Musical Chairs & a New Constitution

The September 1992 elections squeezed in veteran Democrat Party leader Chuan Leekpai, who helmed a four-party coalition government. A food vendor's son and native of Trang Province instead of a general, tycoon or academic, the new premier didn't fit the usual mould. Although well regarded for his honesty and high morals, Chuan accomplished little in the areas of concern to the majority of Thais, most pointedly Bangkok traffic, national infrastructure and the undemocratic NPKC constitution.

After Chuan was unseated in a vote of no confidence, a new general election ushered in a seven-party coalition led by the Chart Thai (Thai Nationality) Party. At the helm was billionaire Banharn Silapa-archa, whom the press called a 'walking ATM'; they immediately attacked his tendency to appoint from a reservoir of rural politicians known to favour big business over social welfare. In September 1996 the Banharn government collapsed amid a spate of corruption scandals and a crisis of confidence.

The November 1996 national election, marked by electoral violence and accusations of vote buying, saw the former deputy prime minister and army commander Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, of the New Aspiration Party, secure premiership with a dubious mix of coalition partners.

In July 1997, following several months of warning signs that almost everyone in Thailand and in the international community chose to ignore, the Thai currency fell into a deflationary tailspin and the national economy crashed and screeched to a virtual halt. Along with Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and South Korea, Thailand had huge current-account deficits, massive external debt and low foreign-exchange reserves. Asia was borrowing billions more than it could afford on the basis of optimistic predictions of future growth.

On 27 September 1997 the Thai parliament voted in a new constitution, Thailand's 16th since 1932 and the first to be decreed by a civilian government. Known as *rátthàthamanun práchaachon* (people's constitution) it put new mechanisms in place to monitor the conduct of elected officials and political candidates and to protect civil rights, achieving many of the aims of the prodemocracy movement.

Hope faded as Chavalit, living up to everyone's low expectations, failed to deal effectively with the economy and was forced to resign in November 1997. An election brought Chuan Leekpai back into office, where he did a reasonably decent job as an international public-relations man for the crisis.

THE NEW MILLENNIUM

The Rise of Thaksin

Self-made billionaire and former police colonel Thaksin Shinawatra capitalised on the country's rising nationalism after the Asian currency crisis by forming the Thai Rak Thai (Thais Love Thais; TRT) political party in 1998. He was named prime minister in 2001 after winning a landslide victory in compulsory nationwide elections – the first in Thailand to be held under strict guidelines established by the 1997 constitution – on a platform of eliminating corruption, investing in impoverished villages and instituting affordable health care.

The working class adored his Western-style accessibility – he shook hands, listened to constituents and responded to opinion polls. He was also rich (having established the country's largest telecommunication empire), a factor that carries a lot of political weight in Thailand. But his supporters were more impressed that he delivered on his campaign promises, a marked departure from old-fashioned Thai politics. Ambitious and charismatic, Thaksin was also intolerant of the press and demonstrated little appreciation for democratic civil liberties, earning him many enemies among the urban intelligentsia. To avoid charges of conflict of interest, Thaksin took the nominal steps of transferring ownership of Shin Corp to his family and domestic employees, an ominous gesture according to his critics.

In 2003 Thaksin announced a 'war on drugs' intended to rid the country of illicit drug use within 90 days. Lists of drug dealers and users were compiled in every province and the police were given arrest quotas to fulfil or else lose their jobs. Within two months over 2000 Thais on the government blacklist had been killed. The Thaksin administration denied accusations by the UN, the US State Department, Amnesty International and Thailand's own human rights commission that the deaths were extrajudicial killings by Thai police. Independent observers claim that the 'war on drugs' has succeeded in increased prices but not reduced drug use.

On 26 December 2004 a magnitude 9.3 earthquake – the second-largest quake in recorded history – erupted on the floor of the Indian Ocean off the northwest coast of Sumatra. Along Thailand's Andaman coast the tsunami waves struck six provinces, reaching as high as 10m in the worst-hit areas. Thailand's tsunami toll reached 5000 confirmed dead. Relief and reconstruction efforts moved quickly and aggressively to restore normal living conditions. Prime Minister Thaksin's speedy handling of the tsunami disaster, along with yet more promises of rural development, brought the TRT a landslide victory in the general election of February 2005.

Muslim Insurgency

In the south during 2001–02, a decades-old Muslim nationalist movement, perhaps responding to the Thaksin administration's authoritarianism, began reheating. Sporadic attacks were staged on police stations, schools, military installations and other government institutions. Discontent in the south picked up momentum after the storming of the Krue Se Mosque, in which police gunned down 112 Muslim militants inside an historic mosque in Pattani. Then in October 2004 police broke up a large demonstration in Tak Bai, and while they were transporting around 1300 arrestees in overcrowded trucks, at least 78 died of suffocation or from being crushed under the weight of other arrestees.

'Asia was borrowing billions more than it could afford on the basis of optimistic predictions of future growth'

'the tsunami waves struck six provinces, reaching as high as 10m in the worst-hit areas'

1982

A general amnesty reduces the ranks of the armed insurgency to a handful; the communist movement is vanquished; martial law ends

1991–92

A military coup lands General Suchinda in power and when protestors are shot, King Rama IX intervenes and democracy is restored

1997

After a decade of energetic economic growth, the Thai economy crashes and the national currency suffers precipitous deflation

2001

Thaksin Shinawatra, the richest man in Thailand, is elected prime minister on a populist platform

Global Terrorism Analysis (www.jamestown.org/terrorism) publishes online articles about the southern Thai insurgency as well as other international hot spots.

By 2005 the region was declared an emergency zone as attacks increased and became more sophisticated, suggesting involvement from outside militant groups, such as Jemaah Islamiyah (JI). In mid-2006 simultaneous explosions at 22 banks in Yala and later timed explosions in Hat Yai did more to convince the government that the insurgency was maturing than the previous bloodshed had. Sonthi Boonyaratglin, a Muslim army commander assigned to the region, criticised the Thaksin administration for refusing to negotiate with the insurgents, but to this date the government has not identified a leading group responsible for the attacks. There are six known separatist groups that may be acting in the region and it is believed that they are acting in competition with each other rather than in concert.

Following the ouster of Thaksin it was hoped that peace negotiations in the south would gain strength, but after a brief break, violence continued. In late 2006 schools were forced to close in Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat after arson fires, shootings of teachers and threatening phone calls.

2006 Coup

But the violence in the south would not be Thaksin's downfall; he would ultimately lose at the public-relations campaign, his usual forte. At the beginning of 2006 a series of lawsuits filed against his critics spawned a popular anti-Thaksin campaign. The movement gained more support when the Thaksin family sold all shares of Shin Corporation to the Singaporean government for a profit of 73 billion baht (US\$1.88 billion), tax-free thanks to new telecommunications legislation that exempted individuals from capital gains tax. But what stuck most with urban Thais was Thaksin's perceived ambitions for the monarchy. He presided over a ceremony traditionally reserved for the monarch, attempted to place allies in key military positions loyal to the crown and, according to online rumours, enlisted the help of Khmer witch doctors. The upper-class royalists feared that Thaksin's consolidation of political power would unseat an ageing king with an heir apparent of marginal popularity.

Thaksin responded to the growing discontent by first dissolving the parliament, calling for re-elections to occur one month later and announcing massive populist measures aimed directly at the rural poor. The opposition chose to boycott the election. When all the ballots were tallied, Thaksin proclaimed victory for one momentous day, but after a private council with the king, he announced that he would not accept the prime minister position. The constitutional court decided that new elections would take place later in the year, a vote that many assumed Thaksin would win handily.

Some five months later on 19 September 2006, a military coup led by army chief Sonthi Boonyaratglin took control of the government and blocked Thaksin's return from a UN general assembly session in New York. This was the 18th coup in Thailand's modern history but the first in 15 years. The coup leadership threw out the 1997 constitution, dissolved the parliament and suspended activity of political parties. But Bangkok citizens and Thaksin critics were overjoyed and soldiers guarding government buildings were presented with flowers and gifts. An interim government was appointed and general elections set for October 2007; the military leadership assured the public that they had no intention to rule the country but rather wanted to ensure 'national unity' by removing a divisive figure.

Monitor current events by visiting Asia Times (www.atimes.com) and 2Bangkok.com (www.2bangkok.com).

2004

Devastating tsunami hits Thailand's Andaman Coast, killing 5000 and temporarily paralysing tourist and fishing industries

2006

Thailand's democratically elected government is dismantled by a military coup, and Prime Minister Thaksin is forced into exile

Thailand & You Making the most of your trip

RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL

Thailand is an easy country to love: the pace of life is unhurried, the people are generally friendly and the pressures on the short-term visitor are relatively few. A smile goes a long way here, chitchat is more important than a to-do list and doling out compliments is a national sport.

That doesn't mean that every Thai is a cheery Pollyanna. So many foreigners pass through the country completely oblivious of the culture and customs that many Thais, especially in the tourist industry, suffer from 'foreigner fatigue'. They have used up their patience on penny-pinchers, neocolonialists and paranoiacs.

Keep in mind that the demographics of this country are just as complex as those of your own, plus you're handicapped by language and culture from being able to spot the genuine sweethearts from the shysters. By and large, the tourist industry has a thick veneer of fast operators, but step outside of the trail and you'll meet a gentler sort. Emanate a sense of warmth and happiness and the Thais will instinctively respond in kind. Know how to behave politely in public and you'll coax a smile from the schoolmarm types. Learn some of the language and you'll become a fast friend with everyone from the noodle vendor to the taxi driver.

THE CULTURE

Thais are generally tolerant of most kinds of behaviour and assume that the majority foreigners know nothing about their country. When you do exhibit the slightest bit of etiquette mastery, Thais will beam with gratitude. For information on how to understand Thai culture as a whole, see p49.

www.responsible-travel.org offers common-sense advice on how to travel with a conscience.

Monarchy Etiquette

If you do nothing else, remember to treat the monarchy and the religion with extreme deference. Thais regard any image of the king and the royal family

STOPPING CHILD-SEX TOURISM IN THAILAND *ECPAT and Child Wise Australia*

Sadly, Thailand has become a destination for a significant number of foreigners seeking to sexually exploit local children. A range of socioeconomic factors renders many children vulnerable to such abuse, and some depraved individuals seem intent to prey upon this vulnerability.

The sexual abuse and exploitation of children has serious, lifelong and even life-threatening consequences. Child-sex tourism is a crime and an intolerable violation of the rights of a child. Strong laws exist in Thailand to prosecute offenders. Many countries also have extraterritorial legislation that allows nationals to be prosecuted in their own country for such crimes.

Responsible travellers can help to stop the scourge of child-sex tourism by reporting suspicious behaviour. Don't ignore it! Your actions may be critical in helping to protect children from future abuse and exploitation.

In Thailand, travellers can report on a dedicated hotline number: ☎ 1300.

If you know the nationality of the individual, you can report them directly to their embassy.

ECPAT (End Child Prostitution & Trafficking; ☎ 0 2215 3388 in Bangkok; www.ecpat.net) is a global network focusing on these issues with more than 70 affiliate organisations around the world. Its head office is located in Bangkok. ECPAT is actively working to combat child-sex tourism in Thailand and around the world.

Child Wise (www.childwise.net) is the Australian member of ECPAT. Child Wise has been involved in providing training to the tourism industry in Thailand to counter child-sex tourism.

Culture Shock: Thailand, by Robert and Nanthapa Cooper, explains Thailand's quirky, curious and practical customs.

with religious devotion. This means that postage stamps bearing the king's image are never licked for adhesion to letters; use the provided sponge or glue station. Money, which also bears images of the king, is never stepped on (in the case of a dropped bill) or kept in one's shoe.

In addition avoid criticising or disparaging the royal family. Thais are very guarded about discussing negative aspects of the monarchy for fear of offending someone or worse, being charged for lese-majesty, which carries a punishment of seven years' imprisonment.

It's also considered a grave insult to Thai nationhood, and to the monarchy, not to stand when you hear the national or royal anthems. Radio and TV stations in Thailand broadcast the national anthem daily at 8am and 6pm; in towns and villages this can be heard over public loudspeakers in the streets or in bus and train stations. In Bangkok, the national anthem is played in Skytrain and subway stations. The Thais stop whatever they're doing to stand during the anthem and visitors are expected to do likewise. The royal anthem is played just before films are shown in public cinemas; again, the audience always stands until it's over.

Temple Etiquette

When visiting a temple, it is very important to dress neatly and to take your shoes off when you enter any building that contains a Buddha image. Buddha images are sacred objects, so don't pose in front of them for pictures and definitely do not clamber upon them. When sitting in a religious edifice, keep your feet pointed away from any Buddha images. The usual way to do this is to sit in the 'mermaid' pose in which your legs are folded to the side, with your feet pointing backwards.

Shorts or sleeveless shirts are considered improper dress for both men and women when visiting temples. At some temples, there will be trousers or long sarongs for rent so that tourists dressed in shorts may enter the compound.

Monks are not supposed to touch or be touched by women. If a woman wants to hand something to a monk, the object should be placed within reach of the monk or on the monk's 'receiving cloth' and not handed directly to him.

Since most temples are maintained from the donations received, when you visit a temple please remember to make a contribution.

Social Conventions

The traditional Thai greeting is with a prayer-like palms-together gesture known as a *wái*. If someone shows you a *wái*, you should return the gesture, unless the greeting comes from a child or a service person. Overusing the *wái* or placing your hands too low in respect to your face trivialises a very intricate and respected custom.

A smile and a cheery *sàwàt-dii khráp* if you're male or *sàwàt-dii khâ* if you're female (the all-purpose Thai greeting) goes a long way towards calming the initial trepidation that locals may feel upon seeing a foreigner, whether in the city or the countryside.

In the more traditional parts of the country, it is not proper for members of the opposite sex to touch one another, either as lovers or as friends. Hand-holding is not acceptable behaviour outside of the major cities such as Bangkok or the prostitute cities such as Pattaya. But same-sex touching is quite common and is typically a sign of friendship, not sexual attraction. Older Thai men might grab a younger man's thigh in the same way that buddies slap each other on the back. Thai women are especially affectionate with female friends, often sitting close to one another or linking arms.

Payap University in Chiang Mai (p293) offers a well-regarded academic programme in Thai culture and language.

When hailing a bus or a taxi, Thais extend their arms slightly, with their hand below their waists and wave downward. The same hand gesture – the palm facing downward with a slight wave – is used to call a person. Turning the palm upward, as is common in Western cultures, is only used on animals.

When handing an object to another person or receiving something, the ultimate in polite behaviour is to extend the right hand out while the left hand gently grips the right elbow.

Dress & Hygiene

Thailand is a very modest country. Shorts above the knee, sleeveless shirts, tank tops (singlets) and other beach-style attire are not appropriate when you're not at the beach or sporting events, or when you're outside Bangkok. First-time visitors can't believe that we would make such a controversial fashion stand, especially in a tropical country but we really do mean it. If you insist on wearing less, do it in Bangkok where international standards of skin exhibition are more accepted. And don't exempt yourself because of the humid climate. Covering up with light, loose fabric offers protection from the sun, and frequent showers act as better natural air-conditioning than spaghetti-strap tops.

The importance of modesty extends to the beach as well. Except for urban Bangkokians, most Thais swim fully clothed. For this reason, sunbathing nude or topless is not acceptable and in some cases is even illegal. Baring private parts helps promote the misconception that Western women and men are advertising themselves for sex.

Thais are fastidious in their personal appearance and even in the hottest weather rarely sweat, whereas new arrivals are in a constant state of perspiration and body odour. One way to avoid the continual drip is to bathe often. Talcum powder is another antidote to moisture and stink, and helps prevent prickly heat.

Sandals or slip-on shoes are perfectly acceptable for almost any but the most formal occasions.

Head & Feet Taboos

From practical and spiritual viewpoints, Thais regard the head as the highest and most sacred part of the body and the feet as the dirtiest and

Thai for Beginners, by Benjawan Poomsan Becker, is a good primer for learning the basics of spoken and written Thai.

Green Leaf Foundation (www.greenleafthai.org) has established environmental operating standards for the hotel industry in Thailand; search the online directory for qualifying hotels.

BANGKOK'S STREET WALKERS

The heat, the hawkers, the hookers – Bangkok is already a zoo at night, and then you'll spot a baby elephant plodding down the road with a flashing light tied to its tail. And its skinny mahout will thrust a bunch of bananas in your hands to feed to the animal in exchange for a fistful of baht. Surreal, indeed. Heartbreaking, most certainly.

Thailand has a pachyderm crisis. Throughout Thai history, these animals were revered for their strength, endurance and intelligence. And then the modern world invaded and promptly made the elephant redundant.

The elephants and their dependent mahouts came to the big city, like the rest of the country's economic refugees, in search of work. And what can an elephant do in the time of planes, trains and automobiles? One option is to roam the streets like a beggar. This isn't an example of ignorant cruelty, but of economic desperation.

A promising alternative to street walking is the elephant rescue preserves that support themselves through volunteer tourism. Guests learn how to bathe, feed and train the elephant in the tradition of a mahout. Pattaya's Eco Explorer (p236) and Lampang's Thai Elephant Conservation Center (p348) are two possibilities.

VISITING HILL-TRIBE VILLAGES

It is especially important to 'tread lightly' in hill-tribe villages as many of these places had little or no interaction with mainstream society before being yanked abruptly into the modern era. While these communities may appreciate the revenue source brought by trekkers, the pressures of ill-informed visitors who are invariably more affluent than the average villager introduces many social strains beyond polite and impolite behaviour. Talk to your guide about village taboos and carefully observe protocol before acting. Here is a rough sketch of the general precautions you should take when visiting a hill-tribe village:

- Always ask for permission before taking any photos of tribespeople, especially at private moments inside their dwellings. Many traditional belief systems view photography with suspicion.
- Show respect for religious symbols and rituals. Don't touch totems at village entrances or other sacred items. Don't participate in ceremonies unless invited to join.
- Avoid cultivating a tradition of begging, especially among children. Definitely avoid handing out candy unless you can also arrange for modern dentistry. Talk to your guide about donating to a local school instead.
- Set a good example by not using drugs.
- Don't litter while trekking or staying in villages.
- Speak quietly, and smile at villagers even if they stare at you.

lowest part of the body. Many of the taboos associated with the feet are also directly related to a consideration of cleanliness. Traditionally Thais ate, slept and entertained on the floor of their homes with little in the way of furniture.

To keep their homes and eating surfaces clean, the feet (and shoes) contracted a variety of rules. All feet and head taboos in Thailand come with certain qualifiers and exceptions that will make more sense the more familiar you are with the culture. In the meantime, err on the side of caution with the following tips.

One of the most considerate things you can do in Thailand is to remember to take off your shoes inside private homes or some guesthouses and businesses. (When entering temple buildings, removing your shoes is an absolute must.) Not every establishment asks for shoe removal, but a good sign that this is required is a pile of shoes left at or near the entrance. Several Thais have confided in us that they can't believe how oblivious some foreigners seem to be of this simple and obvious custom. To them wearing shoes indoors is just plain disgusting and rude.

Don't prop your feet on chairs or tables while sitting, especially at a restaurant or in a guesthouse. This is an obvious one as you wouldn't treat a public place back home like your living room, so why start now in a culture that is footphobic? On some buses and 3rd-class trains, you'll see Thais prop up their feet; while this isn't the height of propriety, do notice that they always remove their shoes before doing so. Thais also take off their shoes if they need to climb up onto a chair or seat.

Never step over someone or their personal belongings, even on a crowded 3rd-class train; instead squeeze around them or ask them to move. The same holds for food that might be served on a mat or on the floor, as is commonly seen in rural areas or at temple fairs. When sitting with a group of Thais, remember to use the mermaid pose, with your feet tucked behind you to one side so that the bottoms of your feet aren't pointed at sacred images or people of high status.

Also avoid tying your shoes to the outside of your backpack where they might accidentally brush against someone (like, totally gross) or worse touch someone's head (shame on you).

Westerners often use their feet informally as secondary hands: we might close the refrigerator door with our feet, stop something from blowing away with our feet or point at something with our feet. These are all no-nos in Thailand and will cause gasps from onlookers. If you need to move, motion or touch something, do it with your hands. With enough consideration, all of this will become second nature and you'll soon feel embarrassed when you see these conventions broken.

Now for the head taboos: don't touch Thais on the head or ruffle their hair. This is perceived as an insult, not a sign of affection. Occasionally you'll see young people touching each other's head, which is akin to a 'tittie-twist', a teasing gesture between friends. Don't sit on pillows meant as headrests, as this represents a variant of the taboo against head touching.

To be superpolite, lower your head slightly when passing between two people having a conversation or when passing near a monk.

LOCAL COMMUNITIES

Hair-raising adventures and postcard snapshots make great souvenirs from a trip, but the travel experiences that become lifelong companions are the moments when you stop being an invading alien and connect with someone who may not speak your language or share your culture. A conversation at a bus stop or an invitation to join a family picnic – these are all open doors for 'snapshot' friendships, a temporary connection between strangers that teaches appreciation or shares a good joke. These unscripted interactions aren't available in the midst of a tourist ghetto. You must first place yourself in local communities where people have the time and the curiosity to befriend a stranger.

Community immersion can range from a solo foray into a town or an area of town off the tourist circuit, or better yet you can temporarily adopt a Thai address while giving something back through a volunteer programme.

Volunteering

If you speak a little bit of the language, invariably Thais will ask if you are a teacher, a profession that carries a great amount of respect. Some will even assume the case and will be on their 'Sunday-best' behaviour. Taking on a teaching position in Thailand not only elevates your status from forgettable tourist to honourable guest, but it gives you insight and access into a community pleased to have you.

Finding a teaching job is fairly easy, as native English speakers are always in demand. But finding an experience that suits your interests takes some research. If you want more of a cultural challenge than just a job overseas, look into programmes in rural areas where English is limited and foreigners are few. In these situations, you'll learn Thai more quickly and observe a way of life with deeper connections to the past. The following organisations provide volunteers with jobs and accommodation for a modest weekly or monthly fee:

The **Mirror Art Foundation** (☎ 05373 7412; www.mirrorartgroup.org) is a nongovernmental organisation working in Chiang Rai Province in the Mae Yao hill-tribe villages. Because many villagers here are not recognised as Thai citizens, their children do not have access to public education. This foundation provides basic education in Thai and English languages and places volunteers directly within the community. Mirror Art also offers trekking opportunities (p354).

Thais are more likely to yield a seat on a crowded bus to a child than an elderly person.

Thai Tribal Crafts (www.ttcrafts.co.th) is a fair-trade outlet for hill-tribe handicrafts.

Volunthai (www.volunthai.com; 1739 Soi Mookmontree 13, Nakhon Ratchasima) is a homy operation that places volunteers in teaching positions at local schools with homestay accommodation. No previous teaching experience is necessary and the programme is best suited for cultural chameleons who want to experience a radically different way of life in a nontouristed part of the country. The programme is based in the northeast (the poorest part of Thailand) and offers a fascinating glimpse into the country's agricultural heart.

Travel to Teach (☎ 0 8424 60351; www.travel-to-teach.org; 1161/2 Soi Chitta Panya, Nong Khai) offers flexible volunteering positions from two weeks to six months in schools, English camps or in temples teaching monks. Many volunteers end up in this programme after travelling around Thailand and deciding that they just aren't ready to go home yet. Volunteers receive training so that they are equipped to assume responsibility in a classroom where English may be very limited. There are also homestay options and placements in the charming tourist towns of Nong Khai, Pai and Ko Chang.

Open Mind Projects (☎ 0 4241 3578; www.openmindprojects.org; 1039/3 Th Keawworawut, Nong Khai) offers a lengthy list of volunteering options, including English-teaching and IT/computer-teaching positions in schools, temples and orphanages throughout the country.

Homestays

You can still travel independently without isolating yourself from the culture by staying at one of Thailand's quickly expanding networks of local homestays. More popular with domestic tourists, these homestays differ from guesthouses in that visitors are temporarily 'adopted' by a host family, who provides lodging, meals and sometimes sightseeing or cultural activities for a flat daily fee. Accommodation can range from a mat on the floor to a private room, and cultural activities often highlight a region's traditional way of life, from rice farming to silk weaving. English fluency varies, so homestays are also an excellent way to exercise your spoken Thai.

Every regional Tourist Authority of Thailand (TAT) office has a list of registered homestays; however, do note that the term 'homestay' is sometimes loosely applied to generic guesthouses rather than cultural immersions. The majority of genuine homestays are in the northeast, including the award-winning Ban Prasat programme (p463) outside Khorat. The homestay programme on Ko Yao Noi (p690), a Muslim fishing island, has also been recognised as a sustainable alternative to beach-style tourism, or you could work up a sweat helping out an ethnic Akha family in northern Thailand through the Akha Association for Education and Culture in Thailand (p354), a hybrid programme that combines aspects of volunteering and a homestay.

BUYING LOCAL

Cottage industries are widespread in Thailand. To provide supplemental income, a housewife might open up a snack shop in her living room or set up a vendor stall on a busy corner. Tourist centres are especially big draws for these scrappy entrepreneurs who, with minimal overheads, crank out business selling fresh-squeezed orange juice, cold water, pad Thai and even dreadlocks. But these little businesses are vulnerable to pressures from the trends of modern economics: larger corporations. The first on the endangered species list is the corner sundry shop, where neighbourhood kids typically load up on after-school snacks and drinks. As 7-Elevens and other air-conditioned convenience stores become more prolific, mom-and-pop shops close down because they can't compete with the prices or variety. Keep this in mind the next time you pass through the chiming 7-Eleven door: is there a local shop nearby where you could buy water? The prices might be a little higher, but perhaps it is worth it.

A great ice-breaker is to find out how different cultures reproduce the sounds of everyday animals, such as cats, dogs and cows. The website www.hilltribe.org has an audio guide to a rooster's crow in different mountain languages.

RESPONSIBLE DIVING TIPS

The popularity of Thailand's diving industry places immense pressure on fragile dive sites. To help preserve the ecology, adhere to these simple rules:

- Avoid touching living marine organisms, standing on coral or dragging equipment (such as fins) across the reef. Coral polyps can be damaged by even the gentlest contact.
- When treading water in shallow reef areas, be careful not to kick up clouds of sand, which can easily smother the delicate reef organisms.
- Take great care in underwater caves where your air bubbles can be caught within the roof and leave previously submerged organisms high and dry.
- Take home all your rubbish and any litter you may find as well. Plastics are a particularly serious threat to marine life.
- Resist the temptation to feed fish.
- Avoid collecting or buying corals or shells.
- Encourage dive operators not to use anchors on the reef or ground boats on coral.

THE ENVIRONMENT

Along the Thai coastline, the oceans and the beaches are postcard perfect. But wake up before the vendors have had time to clean the beach and you'll see all the litter left behind by high tide. And those streams that feed into the open water: this is the island's sewage system. Although Thailand has made great headway in outlawing coral dynamiting and limiting the fishing industry, the country has not yet begun to address the damaging effects of coastal development on its greatest tourist draw: the coastal and marine environment. Also, the environmental and conservation movement in Thailand is often undermined by larger economic forces and a rush to modernise. See p85 for more information on Thailand's natural environment.

The conscientious visitor might hope for do-it-yourself measures to reduce the impact of tourism, but the solution requires a more powerful agent: the widespread enforcement of environmental controls such as proper sewage treatment and the adoption of smart-growth principles. In short, the Thai government has to seriously limit either development or tourism – both are unlikely.

The individual's greenest option is a holiday downer: avoid the islands where you'll be yet another trash-maker, freshwater-user or gas-guzzler. Even more radical is the argument that the next paradise is not worth discovering because of the environmental impact. Phuket, Phi-Phi, Samui and Samet are better equipped to deal with tourism than the islands that aren't on the tourist map, but many islandhoppers love the thrill of conquering virgin territory. Typically these emerging tourism islands have very fragile ecosystems and very little infrastructure. Sewage and garbage is either dumped into the ocean or a fire pit, and vital mangrove forests are ripped out if the landowners can make more money with new bungalows. Before you know it the sleepy fishing village is yet another resource-swallowing resort. Travellers call this the Lonely Planet syndrome, but it is often unregulated market forces.

There is no easy formula for the overused term of ecotourism. But we do suggest visiting the well-known beaches where the infrastructure exists to accommodate visitors. While on the developed beaches, practise common-sense conservation: use public transport (if possible) to cut down on road traffic and petrol consumption, reduce your generation of trash and opt for a cold shower. If you must visit the less-developed islands, do so with a volunteer programme so that you are giving back environmental awareness as well as economic development.

Tending to the emotional scars of the 2004 tsunami, Insight Out! organises photography and storytelling workshops for affected children. View its online gallery at www.insightout-project.org.

Planes, trains and automobiles generate CO₂ emissions that contribute to global climate change. To determine the 'carbon footprint' generated by your flight to Thailand, click on the CO₂ calculator at www.co2balance.com.

REDUCING THE IMPACT ON THE ENVIRONMENT. HOW?

- Don't buy coral or sea shells – it's illegal in Thailand to buy or sell either.
- Avoid all restaurants serving 'exotic' wildlife species.
- When using hired boats near coral reefs, insist that boat operators don't lower anchor onto coral formations.
- Refrain from purchasing or accepting drinking water offered in plastic bottles wherever possible. When there's a choice, request glass water bottles, which are recyclable in Thailand. The deposit is refundable when you return the bottle to any vendor who sells drinking water in glass bottles.
- In outdoor areas where rubbish has accumulated, consider organising an impromptu cleanup crew to collect plastic, Styrofoam and other nonbiodegradables for delivery to a regular rubbish pick-up point.
- Volunteer to collect (and later dispose of) rubbish when trekking or boating.

In the larger cities, you can abide by many of your at-home ecomeasures: forgo plastic bags at shops, rent a bicycle rather than a motorcycle for touring and team up with other travellers for chartered transport. The rural areas of northern Thailand are in many ways as fragile as the undeveloped beaches of the south. In some cases, sticking to the well-worn path is more considerate towards the threatened environment than forging into virgin territory. When trekking in the north, be a hospitable guest of the natural environment by keeping your distance from wild animals, staying on trails and taking out what you brought in.

Volunteering

The following programmes offer conservation, animal rescue or community-building work along Thailand's famed coastline.

Wild Animal Rescue Foundation (WAR; www.warthai.org), a Thai NGO, operates the Phuket Gibbon Rehabilitation Project (p671) and a sea-turtle conservation project in Ranong Province on the Andaman Coast. Volunteers at the gibbon sanctuary help care for the animals that are being rehabilitated for life in the wild, while sea-turtle volunteers help count and monitor nests.

Wildlife Friends of Thailand Rescue Centre (p560) puts volunteers to work caring for sun bears, macaques and gibbons who have been rescued from animal shows or abusive owners.

Starfish Ventures (☎ 44 800 1974817; www.starfishventures.co.uk; PO Box 9061, Epping, CM16 7WU, UK) arranges for volunteers to assist in the Turtle Conservation Centre (p243), a Thai-run, sea-turtle conservation programme on a protected island off the coast of Rayong on the Upper Southern Gulf.

Naucrates (www.naucrates.org) is an Italian NGO that works on a sea-turtle conservation project on Ko Phra Thong, an offshore Andaman island in Phang Nga province. Volunteers help in collecting scientific data that is used in the protection of three different marine turtle species (leatherback, olive ridley and green). The island is fairly undeveloped with one resort and several fishing villages.

Tsunami Volunteer Project (☎ 0 9882 8840; www.tsunamivolunteer.net; 26/61 Moo 7, Tambon Khuk Khak Takuapa, Phang Nga) is a Thai-led NGO based in Khao Lak, a coastal area that was severely affected by the 2004 tsunami. The organisation works primarily on rebuilding the affected communities through English education, construction projects, small business development and other community-based initiatives. Homestays with local villagers are also available.

The Culture

THE NATIONAL PSYCHE

Traditional Culture

Thais don't have a word that corresponds with the English term 'culture'. The nearest equivalent, *wáthánátham*, emphasises fine arts and ceremonies. Ask Thais to define their culture and they'll often talk about architecture, food, dance and festivals. Religion – a big Western influence on culture – is considered more or less separate from *wáthánátham*.

When outsiders speak of 'Thai culture' they're referring to behavioural modes rooted in the history of Tai migration throughout Southeast Asia, with commonalities shared by the Lao people of neighbouring Laos, the Shan of northeastern Myanmar (Burma) and the numerous tribal Thais found in isolated pockets from Dien Bien Phu (Vietnam) all the way to Assam (India). These modes are most prevalent in Thailand, the largest of the Tai homelands.

In the most 'modernised' of the existing Tai societies, the cultural underpinnings are evident in virtually every facet of life. 'Westernised' aspects (eg the wearing of trousers instead of a *phâakhamáa* or sarong, the presence of automobiles, cinemas and 7-Eleven stores) show how Thailand has adopted and adapted elements from other cultures. Nevertheless there are certain aspects of Thai society that virtually everyone recognises as 'Thai'.

SÀNÙK

The Thai word *sànúk* means 'fun' and anything worth doing – even work – should have an element of *sànúk*, otherwise it automatically becomes drudgery. This doesn't mean Thais don't want to work, just that they approach tasks with a sense of playfulness. Nothing condemns an activity more than *mái sànúk* – 'not fun'. While you're in Thailand, sit down beside a rice field and watch workers planting, transplanting or harvesting rice. That it's back-breaking labour is obvious, but there's generally lots of *sànúk* – flirtation between the sexes, singing, trading insults and cracking jokes. The famous Thai smile comes partially out of this desire to make *sànúk*.

SAVING FACE

Thais believe strongly in the concept of saving face, ie avoiding confrontation and endeavouring not to embarrass yourself or other people (except when it's *sànúk* to do so). The ideal face-saver doesn't bring up negative topics in conversation, and when they notice stress in another's life, they usually won't say anything unless that person asks for help. Laughing at minor accidents – such as when someone trips and falls down – may seem callous but it's really just an attempt to save face on behalf of the person undergoing the mishap. This is another source of the Thai smile – it's the best possible face for almost any situation.

Talking loudly is perceived as rude by cultured Thais, whatever the situation. When encounters take a turn for the worse, try to refrain from getting angry – it won't help matters, since losing your temper means a loss of face for everyone present.

STATUS & OBLIGATION

All relationships in traditional Thai society – and those in the modern Thai milieu as well – are governed by connections between *phûu yài* ('big person' or senior) and *phûu náyw* ('little person' or junior). *Phûu náyw* defer to *phûu*

Very Thai (2005), by Philip Cornwell-Smith, is an exhaustive effort to uncover every mystery and explain all the quirks in Thailand that you ever wondered about, accompanied by evocative photos shot by John Goss.

www.thaivisa.com is where to look if you want to live/work in Thailand, with answers to questions you might have along with numerous colourful posts.

www.faqs.org/faqs/thai/culture is the newsgroup's informative digest on Thai culture.

yài following simple lines of social rank defined by age, wealth, status, and personal and political power. Some examples of 'automatic' *phúu yài* status include adults (versus children), bosses (versus employees), elder classmates (versus younger classmates), elder siblings (versus younger siblings), teachers (versus pupils), members of the military (versus civilians), Thais (versus non-Thais) and so on.

Although this tendency towards social ranking is to some degree shared by many societies around the world, the Thai twist lies in the set of mutual obligations linking *phúu yài* to *phúu náyw*. *Phúu náyw* are supposed to show a degree of obedience and respect (together these concepts are covered by the single Thai term *kreng jai*) towards *phúu yài*, but in return *phúu yài* are obligated to care for or 'sponsor' the *phúu náyw* they have frequent contact with. In such relationships *phúu náyw* can, for example, ask *phúu yài* for favours involving money or job access. *Phúu yài* reaffirm their rank by granting requests when possible; to refuse would be to risk a loss of face and status.

Age is a large determinant where other factors are absent or weak. In such cases the terms *phúi* (elder sibling) and *náwng* (younger sibling) apply more than *phúu yài* and *phúu náyw*, although the intertwined obligations remain the same. Even people unrelated by blood quickly establish who's *phúi* and who's *náwng*. This is why one of the first questions Thais ask new acquaintances is 'How old are you?'

When dining, touring or entertaining, the *phúu yài* always picks up the tab; if a group is involved, the person with the most social rank pays the bill for everyone, even if it empties his or her wallet. For a *phúu náyw* to try and pay would risk loss of face.

Money plays a large role in defining *phúu yài* status in most situations. A person who turned out to be successful in his or her post-school career would never think of allowing an ex-classmate of lesser success (even if they were once on an equal social footing) to pay the bill. Likewise a young, successful executive will pay an older person's way in spite of the age difference.

The implication is that whatever wealth you come into is to be shared, at least partially, with those less fortunate. This doesn't apply to strangers, but always comes into play with friends and relatives.

LIFESTYLE

Tune in to any Thai TV channel around 8pm and let soap opera plots draw a rough outline of the Thai story. Most series are set in the capital and although they are hardly realistic – the men are always handsome, the women beautiful, their automobiles are spotless – the plotlines are propped up by Thai realities. A young Thai Isan girl from the northeastern countryside takes a cleaning job in a wealthy Bangkok household, and the resulting weekly culture clashes keep Thai viewers glued to the screen. In another, a college student argues with his father, a *khào ràatchákaan* (government civil servant), over whether he should spend a Saturday afternoon at a fashionable shopping area notorious for tattoo parlours, punk hair salons and the abundance of unaccompanied girls in revealing spaghetti-strap tops.

Individual lifestyles vary tremendously according to family background and income. If you could sneak a peek at what Thais eat for breakfast, you'd have a fighting chance at guessing both. *Khào tòm phúi*, an array of small dishes of dried fish, peanuts and pickled vegetables eaten with hot rice soup, indicates probable Chinese ancestry. Add a plate of pricey sweet cured sausage and they're middle-class Chinese Thai. Spot a bowl of steaming *kaeng khiaw-wáan* (sweet-green curry) or *kaeng phèt* (Thai red curry) over rice and it's likely your diner comes from mostly Thai genes, and prefers a basic,

economic diet. The same Thai choosing ham, eggs and toast, accompanied by espresso, has money and has probably travelled abroad. Meanwhile a *thai pàk tái* in southern Thailand might be digging into *khào yam*, a spicy salad of rice, shaved lemongrass, toasted coconut and tamarind sauce.

Walk the streets early in the morning and you'll catch the flash of shaved heads bobbing above bright ochre robes, as monks engage in *bindabàat*, the daily house-to-house alms food gathering. Thai men are expected to shave their heads and don monastic robes at least once in their lives. Some enter the monkhood twice, first as 10-vow novices in their pre-teen years and again as fully ordained, 227-vow monks after the age of 20.

Green-hued onion domes looming over lower rooftops belong to mosques and mark the neighbourhood as Muslim, while brightly painted and ornately carved cement spires indicate a Hindu temple. A handful of steepled Christian churches, including a few historic ones, have taken root over the centuries in Chanthaburi and other places near the borders of former French Indochina – Cambodia and Laos – as well as in Bangkok. In urban centres, large round doorways topped with heavily inscribed Chinese characters and flanked by red paper lanterns mark the location of *sāan jào*, Chinese temples dedicated to the worship of Buddhist, Taoist and Confucian deities.

Thai royal ceremonies remain almost exclusively the domain of one of the most ancient religious traditions still functioning in the kingdom, Brahmanism. White-robed, top-knotted priests of Indian descent keep alive an arcane collection of rituals that, it is believed, must be performed regularly to sustain the three pillars of Thai nationhood, namely sovereignty, religion and the monarchy. Such rituals are performed regularly at a complex of shrines near Wat Suthat in Bangkok.

Animism predated the arrival of all other religions in Thailand and still plays an important role in the everyday life of most residents who believe that *phrá phuum* (guardian spirits) inhabit rivers, canals, trees and other natural features. The Thais build shrines to house the displaced spirits. These dollhouse-like structures perch on wood or cement pillars next to their homes and receive daily offerings of rice, fruit, flowers and water. Peek inside the smaller, more modest spirit homes and you'll typically see a collection of ceramic or plastic figurines representing the property's guardian spirits.

Larger, more elaborate spirit shrines stand alongside hotels and office buildings and may contain bronze images of Brahma or Shiva. Day and night you'll see Thais kneeling before such shrines to offer flowers, incense and candles, and to pray for favours from these Indian 'spirit kings' (see p58).

One in 10 citizens lives and works in Bangkok and some 60% of the country's wealth is concentrated here. The legal minimum daily wage in Bangkok and the adjacent provinces of Samut Prakan, Samut Sakhon, Pathum Thani, Nonthaburi and Nakhon Pathom amounted to 170B (US\$4.50) in 2004, roughly 35B higher than the rest of Thailand.

A typical civil servant at an entry-level government job earns around 7000B per month, but with promotions and extra job training may earn up to 15,000B. In the private sector an office worker starts at about the same level but will receive quicker pay rises.

In rural areas, female members of a family typically inherit the land and throughout Thailand women tend to control the family finances. Women constitute 55% of all enrolments in secondary and tertiary schools and about half of the workforce, outranking many countries in both categories. In economics, academia and health services, women hold most of the administrative positions – 80% of all Thai dentists are female.

Visit www.thaifolk.com/Doc/culture2_e.htm for details on Thai festivals, folk rituals and common Buddhist ceremonies.

Thailand has a penchant for Guinness World Records, including: man with longest hair, largest aerobics workout, largest mass scuba dive, biggest hamburger, and most linked skydivers.

Fun Bar Karaoke (1997) – this cinematic satire of Bangkok life received critical acclaim for its realistic depiction of modern urban living mixed with sage humour.

Check out www.thai-blogs.com to peek into the lives of various Thais and expats and link to sites translating Thai music or offering free Thai cooking video downloads.

www.thaiworldview.com/culture/htm is a useful website, with photos covering everything from housing to Thai TV and cinema.

So much for the good news. Although women generally fare well in education, the labour force and in rural land inheritance, their cultural standing is less than that of men. An oft-repeated Thai saying reminds us that men form the front legs of the elephant, women the hind legs (at least they're pulling equal weight). Parts of some Buddhist temples may be off limits to women, and when hanging laundry, the custom is always to place female underwear lower than men's!

Thailand's commercial sex industry actually caters far more to the local market (about 95%) than to foreign visitors. The infamous red-light districts that have perpetually captivated Western media attention are limited to a few areas of Bangkok, Pattaya and Phuket.

Tolerance towards sex extends to homosexuality, and Thailand has a relatively open and liberal attitude towards gay orientations, compared to most other nations.

POPULATION

Estimated at 65 million the population of Thailand is currently growing at just under 1% per annum, because of a vigorous nationwide family-planning campaign.

Over one-third of all Thais live in urban areas. Bangkok is by far the largest city with around six million people in the city proper, or eight million including the adjacent provinces.

Ranking the nation's other cities by population depends on whether you look at the rather limited municipal districts (*thetsabaan*) or more realistic metropolitan districts (*meuang*). Using the *meuang* measure, after Bangkok, the five most-populated cities in descending order (not counting the densely populated 'suburb' provinces of Samut Prakan and Nonthaburi, which rank second and third if considered separately from Bangkok) are: Udon Thani (population 244,000), Chonburi (221,000), Nakhon Ratchasima (210,000), Chiang Mai (196,000) and Hat Yai (191,000). Most other towns have populations below 100,000.

On the 2002 UN Human Development Index, Thailand received an overall ranking of 76, falling in the upper half of the UN-designated 'medium human development' range. The average life expectancy is 70 years, the highest in mainland Southeast Asia. It has a relatively youthful population; only about 12% are older than 50 years and 6% are aged over 65.

The Thai Majority

Some 75% of citizens are ethnic Thais, who can be divided into four groups: Central Thais, or Siamese, of the Chao Phraya Delta (the most densely populated region of the country); Thai Lao of northeastern Thailand; Thai Pak Tai of southern Thailand; and northern Thais. Each group speaks its own dialect and to a certain extent practises customs unique to its region. Politically and economically the Central Thais are the dominant group, although they barely outnumber the Thai Lao.

Small minority groups who speak Thai dialects include the Lao Song (Phetchaburi and Ratchaburi); the Phuan (Chaiyaphum, Phetchaburi, Prachinburi); the Phu Thai (Sakon Nakhon, Nakhon Phanom, Mukdahan); the Shan (Mae Hong Son), the Thai Khorat or Suay (Khorat); the Thai Lü (Nan, Chiang Rai); the Thai-Malay (Satun, Trang, Krabi); and the Yaw (Nakhon Phanom, Sakon Nakhon).

The Chinese

People of Chinese ancestry – second- or third-generation Hakka, Chao Zhou, Hainanese or Cantonese – make up 11% of the population. In northern

Thailand there is also a substantial number of Hui-Chinese Muslims who emigrated from Yunnan in the late 19th century to avoid religious and ethnic persecution during the Qing dynasty.

Ethnic Chinese in Thailand probably enjoy better relations with the majority of the population than they do in any other country in Southeast Asia – although there was a brief spell of anti-Chinese sentiment during the reign of Rama VI (1910–25; see p34). Wealthy Chinese also introduced their daughters to the royal court as consorts, developing royal connections and adding a Chinese bloodline that extends to the current king.

Other Minorities

The second-largest ethnic minority are the Malays (3.5%), most of whom reside in the provinces of Songkhla, Yala, Pattani, Satun and Narathiwat. The remaining 10.5% of the population is divided among smaller non-Thai-speaking groups like the Vietnamese, Khmer, Mon, Semang (Sakai), Moken (*chao leh* or 'sea gypsies'), Htin, Mabri, Khamu and a variety of hill tribes.

A small number of Europeans and other non-Asians reside in Bangkok and the provinces.

Hill Tribes

Ethnic minorities in the mountainous regions of northern Thailand are often called 'hill tribes', or in Thai vernacular, *chao khão* (mountain people). Each hill tribe has its own language, customs, mode of dress and spiritual beliefs.

Most are of seminomadic origin, having come from Tibet, Myanmar, China and Laos during the past 200 years or so. They are 'fourth world' people in that they belong neither to the main aligned powers nor to the developing nations. Rather, they have crossed and continue to cross national borders, often fleeing oppression by other cultures, without regard for recent nationhood.

Language and culture constitute the borders of their world. Some groups are caught between the 6th and 21st centuries, while others are gradually being assimilated into modern life. Many tribes people are also moving into lowland areas as montane lands become deforested by both traditional swidden (slash-and-burn) cultivation and illegal logging.

The Tribal Research Institute in Chiang Mai recognises 10 different hill tribes but there may be up to 20. The institute estimates the total hill-tribe population to be around 550,000.

The tribes most likely to be encountered by visitors fall into three main linguistic groups: the Tibeto-Burman (Lisu, Lahu, Akha), the Karenic (Karen, Kayah) and the Austro-Thai (Hmong, Mien). Within each group there may also be several subgroups, eg Blue Hmong, White Hmong; these names usually refer to predominant elements of clothing that vary between the subgroups.

Hill tribes tend to have among the lowest standards of living. Although it's tempting to correlate this with traditional lifestyles, their situation is compounded, in most cases, by a lack of Thai citizenship. Without the latter, they don't have the right to own land or even to receive the minimum wage, plus they may be denied access to health care and schooling. In the last couple of decades efforts to integrate hill tribes into Thai society via free education and the issuing of Thai identity cards may have improved the lot of a minority of tribes people. Of course, the irony is that further Thai assimilation will threaten their cultural identities.

The Shan (Thai Yai, meaning 'large Thai') are not included in the following descriptions as they are not a hill-tribe group per se – they have permanent habitations and speak a language similar to Thai. The Shan are considered by

www.bangkokrecorder.com is your up-to-the-minute guide to Bangkok activities and nightlife, with cheeky bar and restaurant reviews and photo galleries of the coolest parties.

Child of the North-East (Luk Isan), by Wichit Khunawut, follows the ups and downs of a farming family living in drought-ridden Isan; it became one of the first films to offer urban Thais an understanding of the hardships endured in the country.

www.hilltribe.org teaches you about the hill tribes of northern Thailand and how to behave yourself in hill-tribe villages.

Thai scholars to have been the original inhabitants of the area. Nevertheless, Shan villages are often common stops on hill-tribe treks.

The following comments on dress refer mostly to the females as hill-tribe men tend to dress like rural Thais. The population figures are taken from the most recent estimates.

AKHA (I-KAW)

Population: 48,500

Origin: Tibet

Present locations: Thailand, Laos, Myanmar, Yunnan

Economy: rice, corn, opium

Belief system: animism, with an emphasis on ancestor worship

Cultural characteristics: Headdress of beads, feathers and dangling silver ornaments are common adornments. Villages are along mountain ridges or on steep slopes 1000m to 1400m in altitude. The well-known Akha Swing Ceremony takes place from mid-August to mid-September, between planting and harvest. The Akha are among the poorest of Thailand's ethnic minorities and tend to resist assimilation into the Thai mainstream. Like the Lahu, they often cultivate opium for their own use.

Akha houses are constructed of wood and bamboo, usually atop short wooden stilts and roofed with thick grass. At the entrance of every traditional Akha village stands a simple wooden gateway consisting of two vertical struts joined by a lintel. Akha shamans affix various charms made from bamboo strips to the gateway to prevent malevolent spirits from entering. Standing next to the gateway are crude wooden figures of a man and a woman, each bearing exaggerated sexual organs, in the belief that human sexuality is abhorrent to the spirit world.

LAHU (MUSOE)

Population: 73,200

Origin: Tibet

Present locations: south China, Thailand, Myanmar

Economy: rice, corn, opium

Belief system: theistic animism (supreme deity is Geusha); some groups are Christian

Cultural characteristics: Black-and-red jackets with narrow skirts are worn by women, bright green or blue-green baggy trousers are worn by men. The Lahu tend to live at about 1000m altitude. There are five main groups – Red Lahu, Black Lahu, White Lahu, Yellow Lahu and Lahu Sheleh. Known to be excellent hunters, the Thai term for this tribe, *musoe*, is derived from a Burmese word meaning 'hunter'.

Houses are built of wood, bamboo and grass, and usually stand on short wooden posts. Intricately woven Lahu shoulder bags (*yâam*) are prized by collectors. Lahu food is probably the spiciest of all the cuisines.

LISU (LISAW)

Population: 28,000

Origin: Tibet

Present locations: Thailand, Yunnan

Economy: rice, corn, opium, livestock

Belief system: animism with ancestor worship and spirit possession

Cultural characteristics: The women wear long multicoloured tunics over trousers and sometimes black turbans with tassels. Men wear baggy green or blue pants pegged in at the ankles. Premarital sex is said to be common (although some observers dispute this), along with freedom in choosing

marital partners. Patrilineal clans have pan-tribal jurisdiction, which makes the Lisu unique among hill-tribe groups (most of which have power centred with either a shaman or a village headman). Lisu villages are usually in the mountains at about 1000m. Homes are built on the ground and consist mostly of bamboo and grass. Older homes – today quite rare – may be made from mud brick or mud-and-bamboo thatch.

MIEN (YAO)

Population: 40,300

Origin: central China

Present locations: Thailand, south China, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam

Economy: rice, corn, opium

Belief system: animism with ancestor worship and Taoism

Cultural characteristics: Women wear trousers and black jackets with intricately embroidered patches and red furlike collars, along with large dark-blue or black turbans. The Mien are heavily influenced by Chinese traditions and they use Chinese characters to write their language. They settle near mountain springs at between 1000m and 1200m. Kinship is patrilineal and marriage is polygamous. They are highly skilled at crafts such as embroidery and silver-smithing. Houses are built at ground level, out of wood or bamboo thatch.

HMONG (MONG OR MAEW)

Population: 124,000

Origin: south China

Present locations: south China, Thailand, Laos, Vietnam

Economy: rice, corn, opium

Belief system: animism

Cultural characteristics: Tribespeople wear simple black jackets and indigo or black baggy trousers (White Hmong) with striped borders or indigo skirts (Blue Hmong) and silver jewellery. Sashes may be worn around the waist, and embroidered aprons draped front and back. Most women wear their hair in a large bun. They usually live on mountain peaks or plateaus above 1000m. Houses, made of wood or thatch, sit on the ground. Kinship is patrilineal and polygamy is permitted. The Hmong are Thailand's second-largest hill-tribe group and are especially numerous in Chiang Mai Province.

KAREN (YANG OR KARIANG)

Population: 322,000

Origin: Myanmar

Present locations: Thailand, Myanmar

Economy: rice, vegetables, livestock

Belief system: animism, Buddhism, Christianity, depending on the group

Cultural characteristics: Thickly woven V-neck tunics of various colours (unmarried women wear white) are typically worn. Kinship is matrilineal and marriage is monogamous. They tend to live in lowland valleys and practise crop rotation rather than swidden agriculture. Karen homes are built on low stilts or posts, with the roofs swooping quite low. There are four distinct Karen groups – the Skaw (White) Karen, Pwo Karen, Pa-O (Black) Karen and Kayah (Red) Karen. These groups number about half of all hill-tribe people.

EDUCATION

At 92.6%, Thailand's literacy rate is one of the highest in Southeast Asia. Free public schooling is compulsory for nine years. Although high value is placed on education as a way to achieve material success, at most levels the system itself tends to favour rote learning over independent thinking.

'The Mien are heavily influenced by Chinese traditions and use Chinese characters to write their language'

'Akha shamans affix various charms made from bamboo strips to the gateway to prevent malevolent spirits from entering'

Check out www.thailandlife.com – created by a Thai student, this site is one of the most comprehensive online collections of Thai cultural vignettes.

The energy boosting beverage Red Bull has its origins in Thailand and was originally called Krating Daeng, or Red Gaur (a type of ox).

Ong Bak: *Muay Thai Warrior* (2003; Prachya Pinkaew) is a film that harkens back to early Jackie Chan. A sacred Buddha is stolen from a Thai village, and one of the villagers uses his incredible *muay thai* skills to retrieve the image from mafioso in Bangkok.

Thailand's public school system is organised around six years at the *pràthôm* (primary) level, beginning at the age of six, followed by either three or six years of *mátháyom* (secondary) education. The three-year course is for those planning to follow school with three to five years of *wi-chaa-chiít* (trade school), while the *mátháyom* (six-year course) is for students planning to continue at the *údóm* (tertiary) level ie university. Less than nine years of formal education is the national norm.

Private and international schools for the foreign and local elite are found in Bangkok and Chiang Mai, and in the other large provincial cities. The country boasts over 30 public and five private universities, as well as numerous trade schools and technical colleges.

A teaching certificate may be obtained after attending a two-year, post-secondary programme at one of the many teachers' colleges. Two of Thailand's universities, Thammasat and Chulalongkorn, are considered to be among the top 50 in Asia.

SPORT Muay Thai

Almost anything goes in this martial sport, both in the ring and in the stands. If you don't mind the violence (in the ring), a *muay thai* (Thai boxing) match is worth attending for the pure spectacle – the wild musical accompaniment, the ceremonial beginning of each match and the frenzied betting throughout the stadium.

All surfaces of the body are considered fair targets and any part of the body, except the head, may be used to strike an opponent. Common blows include high kicks to the neck, elbow thrusts to the face and head, knee hooks to the ribs and low crescent kicks to the calf. Punching is considered the weakest of all blows and kicking merely a way to 'soften up' one's opponent; knee and elbow strikes are decisive in most matches.

A *ram muay* (boxing dance) precedes every match. This ceremony usually lasts about five minutes and expresses obeisance to the fighter's guru (*khruu*), as well as to the guardian spirit of Thai boxing. The complex series of gestures and movements is performed to the ringside musical accompaniment of Thai *píi* (oboe) and percussion.

Fighters wear sacred headbands and armbands into the ring for good luck and divine protection. The headband is removed after the *ram muay*, but the armband, which contains a small Buddha image, is worn throughout the match.

With around 60,000 full-time boxers in Thailand, matches are staged at provincial rings and temple fairs all over the country. The most competitive are fought at two Bangkok stadiums, Ratchadamnoen and Lumpini.

For more on *muay thai* courses, see p740.

Kràbii-Kràbawng

Another traditional martial art still practised in Thailand is *kràbii-kràbawng*. It focuses on hand-held weapons, in particular the *kràbii* (sword), *phlawng* (quarter-staff), *ngáo* (halberd), *dàap sàwng meu* (a pair of swords held in each hand) and *mái sun-sàwk* (a pair of clubs). Although for most Thais *kràbii-kràbawng* is a ritual to be displayed during festivals or at tourist venues, the art is still solemnly taught according to a 400-year-old tradition handed down from Ayuthaya's Wat Phutthaisawan. The king's elite bodyguards are trained in *kràbii-kràbawng*; many Thai cultural observers perceive it as a 'purer' tradition than *muay thai*.

Modern matches are held within a marked circle, beginning with a *wái khruu* ceremony and accompanied throughout by a musical ensemble. Thai-

SIAMESE FOOTBALL

Football (soccer) is very popular throughout Thailand as both a spectator and participatory sport. In 2004 Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra tried to buy a majority share in Liverpool Football Club, but public aversion to the idea persuaded him not to follow through on the purchase.

boxing techniques and judo-like throws are employed in conjunction with weapons techniques. Although sharpened weapons are used, the contestants refrain from striking their opponents – the winner is decided on the basis of stamina and the technical skill displayed.

Tàkrâw

Sometimes called Siamese football in old English texts, *tàkrâw* refers to games in which a woven rattan ball about 12cm in diameter is kicked around. The rattan (or sometimes plastic) ball itself is called a *lúuk tàkrâw*. Popular in several neighbouring countries, *tàkrâw* was introduced to the Southeast Asian Games by Thailand, and international championships tend to alternate between the Thais and Malaysians. In Thailand the traditional way to play is for players to stand in a circle (the size depends on the number of players) and simply try to keep the ball airborne by kicking it soccer-style. Points are scored for style, difficulty and variety of kicking manoeuvres.

A popular variation on *tàkrâw* – and the one used in intramural or international competitions – is played like volleyball, with a net, but with only the feet and head permitted to touch the ball. It's amazing to see the players perform aerial pirouettes, spiking the ball over the net with their feet. Another variation has players kicking the ball into a hoop 4.5m above the ground – basketball with feet, and no backboard!

MEDIA

Thailand's 1997 constitution guarantees freedom of the press, although the Royal Police Department reserves the power to suspend publishing licences for national security reasons. Newspaper editors nevertheless exercise self-censorship in certain realms, particularly with regard to the monarchy.

Thai press freedom reached its high watermark in the mid-1990s, while Chuan Leekpai's Democrat Party was in power. After the 1997 economic downturn and the ascension of Thaksin Shinawatra's Thai Rak Thai (TRT) Party, Thailand's media have found themselves increasingly subject to interference by political and financial interests.

Before the 2001 general election, Shin Corp, a telecommunications conglomerate owned by former prime minister Thaksin's family, bought a controlling interest in iTV, Thailand's only independent TV station. Shortly thereafter the new board sacked 23 iTV journalists who complained that the station was presenting biased coverage of the election to favour Thaksin and TRT. Almost overnight, the station transformed from an independent, in-depth news channel to an entertainment channel with flimsy, pro-Thaksin news coverage.

The country's international reputation for press freedom took another serious dent in 2002 when two Western journalists were nearly expelled for reporting on a public address presented by the Thai king on his birthday, a portion of which was highly critical of then-prime minister Thaksin. In 2004 Veera Prateepchaikul, editor-in-chief of the *Bangkok Post*, lost his job due to direct pressure from board members with ties to Thaksin and TRT. Allegedly the latter were upset with *Post* criticism of the way in which Thaksin handled the 2003–04 bird flu crisis.

'It's amazing to see the players perform aerial pirouettes, spiking the ball over the net with their feet'

Observers agree that Thai press freedom has reached its lowest ebb since the 1970s era of Thai military dictatorship, and will probably remain there as long as TRT are in power.

During office, Thaksin's disdain for criticism, along with his vast riches, led him and TRT to file a litany of 'defamation' lawsuits against critical individuals, publications and media groups who printed embarrassing revelations about his regime.

The interim regime after the 2006 coup didn't start off so well either, as they strongly advocated that news outlets should go easy on them, and the government even blocked Thai cable from transmitting a CNN interview Thaksin gave months after the coup.

RELIGION Buddhism

Approximately 95% of Thai people are Theravada Buddhists. Scholars sometimes refer to the religion as Lankavamsa (Sinhalese lineage) Buddhism because this form of Buddhism came from Sri Lanka during the Sukhothai period. Prior to the arrival of Sinhalese monks in the 13th century, an Indian form of Theravada existed at the kingdom of Dvaravati (6th to 10th centuries), while Mahayana Buddhism of the Tantric variety was known in pockets of the northeast under Khmer control in the 10th and 11th centuries. One of the most complete selections of material on Theravada Buddhism available on the web can be found at www.accessinsight.org.

Since the Sukhothai period (13th to 15th centuries), Thailand alone has maintained an unbroken canonical tradition and 'pure' ordination lineage. Ironically, when the ordination lineage in Sri Lanka broke down during the 18th century under Dutch persecution, it was Thailand that restored the *sangha* (Buddhist monastic community) there.

Theravada doctrine stresses the three principal aspects of existence: *dukkha* (stress, unsatisfactoriness, disease), *anicca* (impermanence, transience of all things) and *anatta* (insubstantiality or nonessentiality of reality – no permanent 'soul'). These three concepts, when 'discovered' by Siddhartha Gautama in the 6th century BC, were in direct contrast to the Hindu belief in *paramatman*, an eternal, blissful self. Hence Buddhism was originally a 'heresy' against India's Brahmanic religion. Gautama, an Indian prince-turned-ascetic, subjected himself to many years of severe austerity before he realised that this was not the way to reach the end of suffering. He became known as Buddha, 'the enlightened' or 'the awakened' and as Gautama Buddha he spoke of four noble truths that had the power to liberate any human being who could realise them.

The ultimate end of Theravada Buddhism is *nibbana* ('nirvana' in Sanskrit), which literally means the 'blowing out' or extinction of all grasping and thus of all suffering (*dukkha*). Effectively, *nibbana* is also an end to the cycle of rebirths (both moment-to-moment and life-to-life) that is existence.

In reality, most Thai Buddhists aim for rebirth in a 'better' existence rather than the supramundane goal of *nibbana*. By feeding monks, giving donations to temples and performing regular worship at the local wat they hope to improve their lot, acquiring enough merit (*puñña* in Pali; *bun* in Thai) to prevent or at least reduce their number of rebirths. The concept of rebirth is almost universally accepted in Thailand, even by non-Buddhists, and the Buddhist theory of karma is well expressed in the Thai proverb *tham dii, dai dii; tham chua, dai chua* (good actions bring good results; bad actions bring bad results).

All the Tiratana (Triple Gems) revered by Thai Buddhists – the Buddha, the *dhamma* (the teachings) and the *sangha* (the Buddhist community) – are quite visible in Thailand. The Buddha, in his myriad sculptural forms, is found on a high shelf in the lowliest roadside restaurants as well as in the lounges of expensive Bangkok hotels. The *dhamma* is chanted morning and evening in every wat and taught to every Thai citizen in primary school. The *sangha* is seen everywhere in the presence of orange-robed monks, especially in the early morning hours when they perform their alms rounds.

Thai Buddhism has no particular 'Sabbath' or day of the week when Thais are supposed to make temple visits. Instead, Thai Buddhists visit the wat whenever they feel like it, most often on *wan phrá* (excellent days), which occur every 7th or 8th day depending on phases of the moon. On such visits typical activities include: the traditional offering of lotus buds, incense and candles at various altars, and bone reliquaries around the wat compound; the offering of food to the temple *sangha* (monks always eat first); meditating (individually or in groups); listening to monks chanting *suttas* or Buddhist discourse; and attending a *thét* or *dhamma* talk by the abbot or some other respected teacher.

MONKS & NUNS

Socially, every Thai male is expected to become a monk (*bhikkhu* in Pali; *phrá* or *phrá phíksù* in Thai) for a short period in his life, optimally between the time he finishes school and the time he starts a career or marries. Men or boys under 20 years of age may enter the *sangha* as novices (*samanera* in Pali; *naen* in Thai) – this is not unusual since a family earns great merit when one of its sons 'takes robe and bowl'. Traditionally, the length of time spent in the wat is three months, during the *phansaá* (Buddhist lent), which begins in July and coincides with the rainy season. However, nowadays men may spend as little as a week to accrue merit as monks. There are about 32,000 monasteries in Thailand and 460,000 monks; many of these monks are ordained for a lifetime.

Monks who live in the city usually emphasise study of the Buddhist scriptures, while those living in the forest tend to emphasise meditation.

At one time India had a separate Buddhist monastic lineage for females. The fully ordained nuns were called *bhikkhuni* and observed more vows than monks did – 311 precepts as opposed to the 227 followed by monks. The *bhikkhuni sangha* travelled from its birthplace in India to Sri Lanka around two centuries after the Buddha's lifetime, taken there by the daughter of King Ashoka, Sanghamitta Theri. However, the tradition died out there following the Hindu Chola invasion in the 13th century. Monks from Siam later travelled to Sri Lanka to restore the male *sangha*, but because there were no ordained *bhikkhuni* in Thailand at the time, Sri Lanka's *bhikkhuni sangha* wasn't restored until recent years.

In Thailand, the modern equivalent is the *mâe chii* (mother priest) – women who live the monastic life as *atthasila* (eight-precept) nuns. They are largely outnumbered by male monastics (by 46 to one). Thai nuns shave their heads, wear white robes and take vows in an ordination procedure similar to that of the monks. Generally speaking, *mâe chii* nunhood in Thailand isn't considered as 'prestigious' as monkhood. The average Thai Buddhist makes a great show of offering new robes and household items to the monks at the local wat but pays much less attention to the nuns. This is mainly due to the fact that nuns generally don't perform ceremonies on behalf of lay people, so there is often less incentive for people to make offerings to them. Furthermore, many Thais equate the number of precepts observed with

Being Dharma: The Essence of the Buddha's Teachings (2001) is an inspiring and informative collection of talks on Buddhist practice given by the late Thai forest monk Ajahn Chan.

The novel *Bangkok 8* (2003), by John Burdett, is a thriller told in the first person by a half-*faràng* (half-Westerner), half-Thai police officer, whose mind is paradoxically divided between Buddhism and the dangerous Bangkok underworld.

OK Baytong (2003), by Nonzee Nimibutr, is set in the Thai-Malaysian border town of Betong, Yala, and follows a man who leaves the Buddhist monkhood to care for his niece after his sister dies; it's full of insights into southern Thai ways of life and the Thai Muslim nationalist movement.

Thai Buddhist nun Chatsumarn Kabilisingsh writes about what it means to be Thai, female and Buddhist in *Thai Women in Buddhism* (1991).

THAILAND'S FIRST FEMALE ORDINATION

In February 2002 Mae Chee Varangghana Vanavichayen underwent a *samanera* (novice Buddhist nun) ordination at Wat Songthamkalayanee in Nakhon Pathom. The ordination was conducted in the Sinhalese style by eight *bhikkhuni* (fully ordained nuns) hailing from Sri Lanka, Indonesia and Taiwan. Four years earlier, two Thai women had been ordained in Sri Lanka but this was the first female ordination ever to take place on Thai soil. The tradition was revived in Sri Lanka via ordination from Mahayana Buddhist nuns.

Thailand's clerical leaders publicly criticised the ordination as contrary to tradition, but did nothing to obstruct the ceremony or annul the ordination afterwards, leading many to believe that the hierarchy views the new lineage as inevitable.

the total merit achieved; hence nunhood is seen as less 'meritorious' than monkhood because *māe chii* keep only eight precepts.

A movement to ordain *bhikkhuni* in Sri Lanka, however, has provided new opportunities, and in 2002 a Thai woman was fully ordained in Thailand for the first time.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Wat Bowonniwet A Buddhist bookshop across the street from the north entrance to this temple (p132) in Bangkok sells a variety of English-language books on Buddhism.

World Fellowship of Buddhists (☎ 0 2661 1284-87; www.wfb-hq.org; 616 Soi 24, Th Sukhumvit, Bangkok). Senior *faràng* (Westerner) monks hold English-language *dhamma*/meditation classes here on the first Sunday of each month from noon to 6pm.

Other Religions

A small percentage of Thais, and most of the Malays in the south (which amounts to about 4% of the total population), are followers of Islam. Half a per cent of the population – primarily missionised hill tribes and Vietnamese immigrants – profess Christian beliefs, while the remaining 0.5% are Confucianists, Taoists, Mahayana Buddhists and Hindus. Mosques (in the south) and Chinese temples are common enough that you will probably come across some while travelling throughout Thailand. Before entering any temple, sanctuary or mosque you must always remove your shoes, and in a mosque your head must be covered.

Arts

Thailand's emphasis on artistic beauty infuses the audacious temples, the humble traditional houses, the religious offerings and the high arts developed for the royal court. Many of the country's ancient handicrafts and traditions reflect some of Asia's dominant cultures – Khmer, Indian and Chinese – that passed through Thailand. The global exchange continues today with a maturing world of modern Thai artists adapting outside techniques and themes on canvas and in multimedia.

ARCHITECTURE

Traditional Residential Architecture

A harmonious blend of function and style, traditional Thai homes accommodated the weather and the family. A typical home would consist of a wooden single-room house raised on stilts; more elaborate homes might link a series of single rooms by elevated walkways. Since many Thai villages were built near rivers, the elevation provided protection for the home from the flooding during the annual monsoon. During the dry season the space beneath the house was used as a hideaway from the heat of the day, an outdoor kitchen or as a barn for farm animals. Later this all-purpose space would shelter bicycles and motorcycles. Once plentiful in Thai forests, teak was always the material of choice for wooden structures and typically indicates that a house is at least 50 years old.

Rooflines in central, northern and southern Thailand are steeply pitched and often decorated at the corners or along the gables with motifs related to the *naga*, a mythical sea serpent long believed to be a spiritual protector of Thai-speaking cultures throughout Asia. In southern Thailand bamboo and palm thatch have always been more common building materials than wood, and even today these renewable plant sources remain important construction elements.

In Thailand's four southernmost provinces it's not unusual to come upon houses of entirely Malay design, in which high masonry pediments or foundations, rather than wood stilts, lift the living areas well above the ground. Roofs of tile or thatch tend to be less steeply pitched, and hipped gables – almost entirely absent in traditional Thai architecture – can be found further north.

Temple Architecture

Most striking of Thailand's architectural heritage is the Buddhist temple that dazzles in the tropical sun with wild colours and soaring lines.

Thai temples (*wat*) are a compound of different buildings serving specific religious functions. The most important structures include the *uposatha* (*bòt* in central Thai, *sím* in northern and northeastern Thai), which is a conse-

The Arts of Thailand (1999), by Steven Van Beek, is a thorough account of artistic movements in Thailand from the Bronze Age to the Ratanakosin era.

HOUSES OF THE HOLY

Every building or working space in Thailand has an associated 'spirit house', built to provide a home for the *phrá phuum* (earth spirits) that reside at that location. These spirits ensure good fortune, but they must be persuaded to stay in the spirit houses through daily offerings of food, flowers and incense. If the house is enlarged the spirit house must also be enlarged, so the spirits do not feel slighted. Spirit houses must be consecrated by a Brahman priest, dating the tradition back to the Khmer period, when the region was predominantly Hindu. However, the idea of guardian spirits is probably older still – a leftover from the original animist faith of the region.

crated chapel where monastic ordinations are held, and a *wihāan*, where important Buddha images are housed.

The architectural symbolism of these temple buildings relies heavily on Hindu-Buddhist iconography: naga, the mythical serpent that guarded Buddha during meditation, is depicted in the temple roofline where the green and gold tiles are said to represent the serpent's scales and the soaring eaves that of its diamond-shaped head. On the tip of the roof is the silhouette of the *chāwfáh*: often bird-shaped decorations the colour of gold. Rooflines are usually tiered into three levels, representing the triple gems of Buddhism: the Buddha, the *dhamma* (Buddhist philosophy) and the *sangha* (the Buddhist community).

Another classic component of temple architecture is the presence of one or more stupa (*chedi* in Thai), a solid mountain-shaped monument that pays tribute to the enduring stability of Buddhism. Stupas come in a myriad of styles, from simple inverted bowl-shaped designs imported from Sri Lanka to the more elaborate multisided stupas of northern Thailand that are influenced by the great Thai-Lao kingdoms of Lan Na and Lan Xang. Many stupas are believed to contain 'relics' (pieces of bone) belonging to the historical Buddha. In northern and northeastern Thailand such stupas are known as *thāat*. A variation of the stupa inherited from the Angkor kingdom is the corn cob-shaped *prang*, a feature in the ancient Thai temples of Sukhothai and Ayuthaya.

Other structures typically found in wat compounds include one or more *sāalaa* (open-sided shelters) that are used for community meetings and *dhamma* lectures; a number of *kùti* (monastic quarters); a *hāw trai* (Tripitaka library), where Buddhist scriptures are stored; a *hāw klawng* (drum tower), sometimes with a *hāw rákhang* (bell tower); various stupas, including the smaller squarish ones known as *thāat kràduuk* (bone reliquaries), where the ashes of deceased worshippers are interred; plus various ancillary buildings, such as schools or clinics.

Contemporary Architecture

Thailand's modern cities aren't its artistic selling point as postmodern concrete construction often blots out the stylishly functional aspects of traditional architecture. There are, however, a few inspirational exceptions that fuse together Thai, Chinese and Western techniques.

Thais began mixing traditional Thai with European forms in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as exemplified by Bangkok's Vimanmek Teak Mansion (p133), the Author's Wing of the Oriental Hotel (p155) and certain buildings of the Grand Palace (p108).

The port cities of Thailand, including Bangkok and Phuket, acquired fine examples of Sino-Portuguese architecture – buildings of stuccoed brick

decorated with an ornate façade – a style that followed the sea traders during the colonial era. In Bangkok this style is often referred to as 'old Bangkok' or 'Ratanakosin'.

Buildings of mixed heritage in the north and northeast exhibit French and English influences, while those in the south typically show Portuguese influence. Shophouses (*hāwng thāew*) throughout the country, whether 100 years or 100 days old, share the basic Chinese shophouse design, where the ground floor is reserved for trading purposes while the upper floors contain offices or residences.

In the 1960s and '70s the trend in modern Thai architecture, inspired by the European Bauhaus movement, moved towards a boring functionalism – the average building looked like a giant egg carton turned on its side. The Thai aesthetic, so vibrant in the pre-WWII era, almost entirely disappeared in this characterless style of architecture.

When Thai architects finally began experimenting again during the building boom of the mid-1980s, the result was hitech designs such as ML Sumet Jumsai's famous 'Robot Building' on Th Sathon Tai in Bangkok that formerly housed the Bank of Asia. Rangsan Torsuwan, a graduate of Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), introduced the neoclassic (or neo-Thai) style; the best example is the Grand Hyatt Erawan (p153) in Bangkok. Another architect using traditional Thai architecture in modern functions is Pinyo Suwankiri, who has designed a number of Bangkok's government buildings.

PAINTING & SCULPTURE

Traditional Art

While Westerners go to museums to admire the masters, Thais go to temple, where ornate and stylised murals depict Hindu-Buddhist mythology and religious sermons. Always instructional in intent, such painted images ranged from the depiction of the *jataka* (stories of the Buddha's past lives) and scenes from the Indian Hindu epic *Ramayana*, to elaborate scenes detailing daily life in Thailand.

Reading the murals requires both knowledge of these religious tales and an understanding of the murals spatial relationship to chronology. Most murals are divided into scenes, in which the main theme is depicted in the centre with resulting events taking place above and below the central action. Usually in the corner of a dramatic episode between the story's characters are independent scenes of Thai village life: women carrying food in bamboo baskets, men fishing or a happy communal get-together; all of these simple village folk wear the ubiquitous Thai smile of contentment.

Lacking the durability of other art forms, pre-20th century religious painting is limited to very few surviving examples. The earliest surviving temple examples are found at Ayuthaya's Wat Ratburana (1424; p197), Wat Chong Nonsi in Bangkok (1657–1707; p139) and Phetchaburi's Wat Yai Suwannaram (late 17th century).

Nineteenth-century religious painting has fared better. Ratanakosin-style temple art is, in fact, more highly esteemed for painting than for sculpture or architecture. Typical temple murals feature rich colours and lively detail. Some of the finest are found at Bangkok's National Museum (p111) in the Wihan Buddhaisawan, and at Thonburi's Wat Suwannaram (p140).

However, the study and application of mural painting techniques have been kept alive, and often use improved techniques and paints that promise to hold fast much longer than the temple murals of old.

Temple murals have regained the interest of a privileged few who receive handsome sums for painting the interior walls of well-endowed ordination halls. Chakrabhand Posayakrit's postmodern murals at Wat Tritosathep

Clay and terracotta engravings found on cave walls and on votive tablets date as far back as the 6th century in Thailand, but the bronze culture of Ban Chiang sculptural endeavours began at least 4000 years ago.

'naga, the mythical serpent that guarded Buddha during meditation, is depicted temple rooflines'

LOTUS LANGUAGE

For 600 years after the death of the Buddha, artists used only nonhuman symbols to depict the Buddha. These included the lotus bud, the bodhi tree, the Buddha footprint and the Wheel of Law, which contains eight spokes representing the eight-fold path to truth. The lotus symbol survived the switch to human images and carries with it a shorthand reminder of the tenets of Buddhism. The lotus plant can create a dramatic flower in the most rancid pond. This natural phenomenon becomes a parable for religious perfection and symbolises a cooling effect on the fires of passion that bring about suffering. The lotus motif is used atop the veranda columns of many temple buildings or the spires of Sukhothai-era *chedi* (stupa), and images of the Buddha, the enlightened one, is often depicted meditating in the cup of a lotus blossom. The lotus flowers are used solely for merit-making in Thailand not as secular decorations.

Mahawarawihan in Banglamphu, Bangkok, only half completed, are being hailed as a masterwork of Thai Buddhist art of any era. Continued renovation of older murals also encourages the study of these ancient techniques in young art students.

In the sacred temple spaces alongside the brilliant murals are revered Buddha images that depict Thailand's most famous contribution to the world of religious art. The country's sculptural legacy encapsulates the Thai artistic traditions of serenity and grace. Like other Buddhist cultures, Thailand borrowed and adapted the iconography and symbolism that first developed in India. Based on rules defined by Indian artists, the Buddha is depicted in various poses (*mudra*), which are symbolic gestures based on a significant period in his life or certain religious precepts. The most common poses found in Thai art include the following:

Dispelling fear Typically a standing Buddha with one or both hands raised with palms facing forward and fingers pointed upwards.

Meditation Buddha sitting in the lotus position with hands folded and palms facing upwards.

Subduing Mara Buddha sitting in the lotus position with his right hand pointing towards the earth. (During meditation the Buddha resisted the temptations of Mara by pointing his fingers to the ground and calling on the earth goddess Mae Thorani.)

Contemporary Art

Adapting traditional themes and aesthetics to the secular canvas began around the turn of the 20th century as Western influence in the region became more powerful. In general, Thai painting favours abstract over realism and continues to preserve the one-dimensional perspective of traditional mural paintings. There are two major trends in Thai art: the updating of religious themes and tongue-in-cheek social commentary. With some of the younger artists the two trends often overlap.

Italian artist Corrado Feroci is often credited as the father of modern Thai art. He was first invited to Thailand by Rama VI in 1924 and built the Bangkok's Democracy Monument and Western-classical statues, such as the bronze statue of Rama I that stands at the entry to Memorial Bridge. Feroci founded the country's first fine arts institute in 1933, a school that eventually developed into Silpakorn University, Thailand's premier training ground for artists. In gratitude, the Thai government made Feroci a Thai citizen, with the Thai name Silpa Bhirasri.

In the 1970s Thai artists began to tackle the modernisation of Buddhist themes through abstract expressionism. Leading works in this genre include the colourful surrealism of Pichai Nirand, the mystical pen-and-ink drawings of Thawan Duchanee, and the fluid naturalist oil and watercolours of Pratuang Emjaroen. Receiving more exposure overseas than at home, Montien Boonma used the ingredients of Buddhist merit-making, like gold leaf, bells and candle wax, to create abstract temple spaces within museum galleries. Other recognised names include Songdej Thipthong and his spare mandalas, Surasit Saokong and his realist paintings of rural temples, and Monchai Kaosamang and his ephemeral watercolours. Jitr (Prakit) Buabusaya painted in the French impressionist style but is most remembered as an art teacher.

Politically motivated artwork defines a parallel movement in Thai contemporary art. As a quickly industrialising society, many artists have watched as the rice fields became factories, the forests became asphalt and the spoils went to the politically connected. During the student activist days of the 1970s, the Art for Life Movement was the banner under which creative discontents – including musicians, intellectuals and painters – rallied against the military dictatorship and embraced certain aspects of communism and

'The country's sculptural legacy encapsulates the Thai artistic traditions of serenity and grace'

workers' rights. Sompote Upa-In and Chang Saetang are two important artists from that period.

During and after the boom times of the 1980s, a punk-style, anti-authority attitude emerged in the work of the artists known as the 'Fireball' school. Manit Sirwanichpoom is best known for his 'Pink Man On Tour' series, in which he depicted artist Sompote Thawee in a pink suit and a shopping cart amid Thailand's most iconic attractions. Less famous are Manit's evocative black-and-white photographic pieces denouncing capitalism and consumerism, typically identified as unwelcome Western imports. Vasan Sitthiket is more blatantly controversial and uses mixed-media installations to condemn the players he views as corrupt. His works have been banned in Thailand and widely criticised as 'anti-Thai'.

Less cynical and more pop are the works of Thaweesak Srithongdee. He paints flamboyantly cartoonish human figures with an element of traditional Thai handicrafts or imagery. Jirapat Tasanasomboon pits traditional Thai figures in comic book-style fights or sensua embraces with Western icons.

Flavours – Thai Contemporary Art (2003), by Steven Pettifor, focuses on the work of some of Thailand's most prominent contemporary artists.

ART IN-SITU

The development of Thai religious art is broken into different periods or schools typically defined by the patronage of the ruling capital. Today the greatest collection of religious sculpture is contained at Bangkok's National Museum (p111). As you travel around the country, you can visit the important *uthayaan prawatit'at* (historical parks), temples and museums for an appreciation of the geographic setting of these artistic periods. Below are the key periods and their relevant sites:

Dvaravati Period (7th–11th centuries) Borrowing heavily from the Indian periods of Amaravati and Gupta, the distinctive sculptural characteristics of this period include large hair curls on the Buddha's head, eyebrows arched to represent a flying bird, protruding eyes, thick lips and a flat nose. Examples can be seen at Phra Pathom Chedi (p186).

Srivijaya Period (7th–13th centuries) Depictions of Buddha and bodhisattvas were closely linked to Indian forms, and were more sensual and stylised than central and northern Thai art. Examples can be found in Chaiya's Wat Phra Boromathat and Nakhon Si Thammarat's Wat Mahathat.

Khmer Period (9th–13th centuries) Generally, the signature characteristics of this period include images of Buddha meditating under the canopy of the seven-headed naga or on a lotus pedestal. In the U-Thong style, the Buddha is frequently depicted in the pose of subduing Mara. The signature temple feature of the Khmer style is a central corncob-shaped stupa (called a *prang*); it represents Mt Meru in the Buddhist cosmology.

Chiang Saen-Lanna Period (11th–13th centuries) The northern Thai kingdom drew inspiration from its Lao, Shan and Burmese neighbours in depicting Buddha, who appears with a plump figure and round, smiling face. Standing Buddhas were often in the pose of dispelling fear or giving instruction. Lanna-style temples are typically made of teak and the *chedi* often resembles a tiered pagoda. Examples can be found in and around Chiang Mai (p284) and at Chiang Saen National Museum (p287).

Sukhothai Period (13th–15th centuries) One of the first Thai capitals, Sukhothai set forth the underlying aesthetic of successive Thai art. Buddha images were depicted with serenity and grace but without anatomical human detail. The intention was to highlight the Buddha's spiritual qualities rather than his human status. The pose of the walking Buddha is a signature Sukhothai style and best viewed at Sukhothai Historical Park (p403). Glazed ceramics, known as *sānghālōh*, were important during this time in nearby Si Satchanalai–Chaliang Historical Park (p408).

Ayuthaya Period (14th–18th centuries) Incorporating elements inherited from the Khmer and Sukhothai kingdoms, important departures included Buddha images that depicted a king wearing a gem-studded crown and regalia, instead of an austere monk's robe, and the bell-shaped *chedi*. Ayuthaya Historical Park (p195) offers an introduction to this period.

Bangkok-Ratanakosin Period (19th century–) The religious artwork of the modern capital is noted for merging traditional Thai styles with Western influences. Wat Phra Kaew and the Grand Palace (p108) is a good starting point.

In *Hanuman is Upset!*, the monkey king chews up the geometric lines of Mondrian's famous gridlike painting.

Kritsana Chaikitwattana is considered an up-and-coming artist working in moody paint-and-collage abstracts, including a series of self-portraits inspired during his years as a Buddhist monk. Jaruwat Boonwaedlom explores modern realism, a genre not well populated by Thai artists, with her prismlike paintings of Bangkok street scenes.

Although lacking in commercial attention, Thai sculpture is often considered to be the strongest of the contemporary arts, not surprising considering the country's long involvement in Buddha figures. Moving into nonreligious arenas, Khien Yimsiri is the classic master of the modern era creating elegant human and mythical forms out of bronze. Sakarin Krue-On is often applauded for adapting sculpture and installation. His work *Phawang Si Leuang* (Yellow Simple) fashioned a huge, hollow Buddha head from a mixture of clay, mud, papier-mâché and turmeric. Manop Suwanpinta similarly moulds the human anatomy into fantastic shapes that often intersect with technological features, such as hinged faces that open to reveal inanimate content.

To view Thailand's contemporary art scene, visit the Bangkok modern museums (p136) and commercial galleries (p176).

MUSIC

Throughout Thailand you'll find a diversity of musical genres and styles, from the serene court music that accompanies classical dance-drama to the chest-thumping house music played at dance clubs.

Traditional Music

Classical *phleng thai doem* (central-Thai music) features a dazzling array of textures and subtleties, hair-raising tempos and pastoral melodies. The classical orchestra is called the *pii-phâat* and can include as few as five players or more than 20. Among the more common instruments is the *pii*, a woodwind instrument that has a reed mouthpiece; it is heard prominently at Thai-boxing matches. The four-stringed *phin*, plucked like a guitar, lends subtle counterpoint, while the *rânâat êhk*, a bamboo-keyed percussion instrument resembling the xylophone, carries the main melodies. The slender *saw*, a bowed instrument with a coconut-shell soundbox, provides soaring embellishments, as does the *khlui* (wooden Thai flute).

One of the more attention-drawing *pii-phâat* instruments, the *khâwng wong yâi*, consists of tuned gongs arranged in a semicircle and played in simple rhythmic lines to provide a song's underlying fabric. Several types of drums carry the beat, often through multiple tempo changes in a single song. The most important is the *tâ-phon* (*thon*), a double-headed hand-drum that sets the tempo for the entire ensemble. Prior to a performance the players offer incense and flowers to the *tâ-phon*, considered to be the 'conductor' of the music's spiritual content.

The standard Thai scale divides the eight-note octave into seven full-tone intervals, with no semitones. Thai scales were first transcribed by the Thai-German composer Peter Feit (also known by his Thai name, Phra Chen Duriyanga), who composed Thailand's national anthem in 1932.

The *pii-phâat* ensemble was originally developed to accompany classical dance-drama and shadow theatre, but can be heard these days in straightforward performances at temple fairs and concerts.

Classical Thai music has not been forgotten in the dusty annals of history, but has been fused with international jazz elements. Fong Nam, a Thai orchestra led by American composer Bruce Gaston, performs an inspiring blend of Western and Thai classical motifs that have become a favourite choice

Rama IX Art Museum (www.rama9.org) is an online reference focusing on top Thai contemporary artists, galleries and collections.

The Overture (2004), by Ittisoontorn Vichailak, is a melodrama inspired by the life of composer Luang Pradit Phairao, a *rânâat êhk* artist who protects Thai classical music from the influx of European music.

PI BIRD

You are unlikely to become a devotee, but you've got to give kudos to Thongchai 'Bird' Macintyre (also known as Pi Bird) for pop longevity. His first album hit in 1986 and he has followed up with an album almost every year since. He has Madonna's staying power coupled with the nice-guy factor, which appeals to a broad audience from kids in nappies to toothless grannies. Backed by GMM Grammy Entertainment, Thailand's leading music producer, Bird fast-tracks into every emerging pop trend ensuring radio and disco airtime.

for movie soundtracks, TV commercials and tourism promotion. Another leading exponent of this genre is the composer and instrumentalist Tewan Sapsanyakorn (also known as Tong Tewan), who plays soprano and alto sax, violin and *khlui* with equal virtuosity. Tewan's compositions are often based on Thai melodies, but the improvisations and rhythms are drawn from such diverse jazz sources such as Sonny Rollins and Jean-Luc Ponty.

Lûuk Thûng & Măw Lam

The bestselling of all modern musical genres in Thailand remains *lûuk thûng* (literally 'children of the fields'), which dates back to the 1940s. Analogous to country-and-western music in the USA, it's a genre that tends to appeal most to working-class Thais. Subject matter almost always cleaves to tales of lost love, tragic early death, and the dire circumstances of farmers who work day in and day out and at the end of the year are still in debt.

There are two basic styles: the original Suphanburi style, with lyrics in standard Thai; and an Ubon style sung in Isan dialect.

Thailand's most famous *lûuk thûng* singer, Pumpuang Duangjan, rated a royally sponsored cremation when she died in 1992, and a major shrine at Suphanburi's Wat Thapkradan receives a steady stream of worshippers. When she died many feared that the genre passed with her, but gravely voiced Siriporn Amphaipong helped carry the tradition and is one of the most beloved *lûuk thûng* superstars. Other big names include ex-soap opera star Got Chakraband, and Monsit Khamsoi, whose trademark silky – almost sleazy – vocal style has proved enormously popular.

If *lûuk thûng* is Thailand's country-and-western, then *măw lam* is the blues. *Măw lam* is a folk tradition firmly rooted in the northeast of Thailand and based on the songs played on the Lao-Isan *khaen* (a wind instrument devised of a double row of bamboo-like reeds fitted into a hardwood soundbox). The oldest style is most likely heard at a village gathering or parade and it has a simple but very insistent bass beat topped by plaintive vocal melodies. Unlike Thai classical music, *măw lam* has jumped the generational fence and now has an electrified pop version.

Jintara Poonlap and Chalermphol Malaikham are the current reigning queen and king of *măw lam*. These singers and others also perform *lûuk thûng prá-yúk*, a blend of *lûuk thûng* and *măw lam* that's emerging as *măw lam* loses its 'country bumpkin' image. Purists, however, eschew the latter in favour of rootsier, funkier *măw lam* artists such as Rumpun Saosanon. Sommainoi Duangcharoen goes in a completely different direction, mixing a bit of jazz and even rap into his *măw lam*. Tune into Bangkok radio station Luk Thung FM (FM95.0) for large doses of both *lûuk thûng* and *măw lam*. For more information about *măw lam*, see the Northeastern Thailand chapter (p492).

Thai Rock & Pop

The 1970s ushered in a new style inspired by the politically conscious folk rock of the USA and Europe, which the Thais dubbed *phleng phêua chii-wit*

'If lûuk thûng is Thailand's country-and-western, then măw lam is the blues'

RECOMMENDED THAI POP CDS

- *That Song* (Modern Dog) – Latest album from Thailand's grunge gurus containing the hit song 'Tar Sawang' (Clear Eyes).
- *Khaw Du Jai Kawn* (Banyen Raggan) – A good introduction to *măw lam*.
- *Made in Thailand* (Carabao) – Carabao's most classic and internationally popular album.
- *Khon Kap Khwai* (Caravan) – The album that kicked off the *phleng phêua chii-wit* movement.
- *The Nang Hong Suite* (Fong Nam) – Brilliant Thai funeral music, but think New Orleans second-line cheer rather than dirge.
- *Sorry I'm Happy* (Joey Boy) – Thailand's hip-hop bad-boy Joey Boy delivers dance and ska-rap.
- *The Best of Loso* (Loso) – Thai anthems of teen angst.
- *Best* (Pumpuang Duangjan) – Compilation of the late *lúuk thúng* diva's most famous tunes.

(music for life). Most identified with the Thai band Caravan, this style remains the most major musical shift in Thailand since *lúuk thúng* arose in the 1940s. Songs of this nature have political and environmental topics rather than the usual love themes. During the authoritarian dictatorships of the '70s many of Caravan's songs were officially banned. Another durable example of this style, Carabao, took *phleng phêua chii-wit*, fused it with *lúuk thúng*, rock and heavy metal, and spawned a whole generation of imitators as well as a chain of barnlike performance venues seating a thousand or more.

Thailand also has a thriving teen-pop industry – sometimes referred to as T-Pop – centred on artists who have been chosen for their good looks and then mated with syrupy song arrangements. Singers who are *lúuk khréung* – half-Thai, half-*faràng* (Westerner) – and sport English names have been dancing across the top 10 charts since the mid-1980s. Thongchai 'Bird' Macintyre is the undisputed yet ageing pop king. Once sending conservative Thais into fits of outrage, Tata Young and her sexy dance moves have made a jump across the pond in the hopes of landing on the US pop charts. Teen-girl pop singers Palmy and Mint are top-selling darlings, while Bie The Star holds up the boy-band end of the market. The latest pop craze has been for hip-hop, more accurately classified as radio rap, and best epitomised by Thaitanium and Joey Boy.

The 1990s saw an emergence of an alternative pop scene – known as *klawng sêhrii* (free drum) or *phleng tái đin* (underground music) in Thailand. The independent record label Bakery Music, which has since been absorbed by a larger corporation, helped promote the 'indie' scene and found a successful conduit in Modern Dog, a Brit-pop inspired band of four Chulalongkorn University graduates, now one of the leading alternative bands in Thailand. Bakery label's founding members also took to the stage in the band Pru, which upstaged the pop aristocracy of Grammy music at the 2002 MTV Asia awards.

Crowd-pleasers Loso (from 'low society' as opposed to the Bangkok clique of 'hi-so' or high-society) updated Carabao's affinity for Thai folk melodies and rhythms with indie guitar rock. Their songs have anthem status – every young Thai can sing 'Som Sarn' (Hesitant) and others by heart. Other indies that lead the pack include Photo Sticker Machine, Day Tripper, punk-metal Ebola and electronica/underground Futon.

In 2006 many of Bakery Music's alumni plus other leading Thai musicians went to New York City to stage an ambitious rock-opera adaptation

of the *Ramakian*, which slightly confused an audience unfamiliar with Bangkok rock.

For the latest indie Thai hits, tune into Fat Radio, FM104.5.

THEATRE & DANCE

Traditional Thai theatre consists of six dramatic forms: *khöhn* (formal masked dance-drama depicting scenes from the *Ramakian* – the Thai version of India's *Ramayana*); *lákhn* (a general term covering several types of dance-drama); *lí-keh* (a partly improvised, often bawdy folk play featuring dancing, comedy, melodrama and music); *mánohraa* (the southern Thai equivalent of *lí-keh*, but based on a 2000-year-old Indian story); *năng* (shadow plays limited to southern Thailand); *lákhn lék* or *hùn lúang* (puppet theatre); and *lákhn phũut* (contemporary spoken theatre).

Khöhn

In all *khöhn* performances, four types of characters are represented – male humans, female humans, monkeys and demons. Monkey and demon figures are always masked with the elaborate head coverings often seen in tourist promotional material. Behind the masks and make-up, all actors are male. Traditional *khöhn* is a very expensive production – Ravana's retinue alone (Ravana is the *Ramakian*'s principal villain) consists of over 100 demons, each with a distinctive mask.

Perhaps because it was once limited to royal venues and hence never gained a popular following, the *khöhn* or *Ramakian* dance-drama tradition nearly died out in Thailand. Bangkok's National Theatre (p172) was once the only place where *khöhn* was regularly performed for the public, but now the renovated Chalerkrung Royal Theatre (p172) hosts occasional performances.

Scenes performed in traditional *khöhn* (and *lákhn* performances) come from the 'epic journey' tale of the *Ramayana*, known as the *Ramakian* in Thai. The central story revolves around Prince Rama's search for his beloved Princess Sita, who has been abducted by the evil 10-headed demon Ravana and taken to the island of Lanka.

Lákhn

The more formal *lákhn nai* ('inner' *lákhn*, performed inside the palace) was originally performed for lower nobility by all-female ensembles. Today it's a dying art, even more so than royal *khöhn*. In addition to scenes from the *Ramakian*, *lákhn nai* performances may include traditional Thai folk tales; whatever the story, text is always sung. *Lákhn năwk* ('outer' *lákhn*, performed outside the palace) deals exclusively with folk tales and features a mix of sung and spoken text, sometimes with improvisation. Both male and female performers are permitted. Like *khöhn* and *lákhn nai*, performances are becoming increasingly rare.

Much more common these days is the less-refined *lákhn chaatrii*, a fast-paced, costumed dance-drama usually performed at upcountry temple festivals or at shrines (commissioned by a shrine devotee whose wish was granted by the shrine deity). *Chaatrii* stories have been influenced by the older *mánohraa* theatre of southern Thailand.

A variation on *chaatrii* that has evolved specifically for shrine worship, *lákhn kâe bon* involves an ensemble of around 20 members, including musicians. At an important shrine like Bangkok's Lak Meuang, four different *kâe bon* troupes may alternate performances, each for a week at a time, as each performance lasts from 9am till 3pm and there is usually a long list of worshippers waiting to hire them.

'Monkey and demon figures are always masked with elaborate head coverings'

Among the disc-buying public, karaoke CDs and VCDs comprise a huge share of the market. Many major Thai artists – even alternative rock groups – release VCDs specially formatted for karaoke-style sing-alongs.

Listen to and buy popular Thai songs (with English and Thai lyrics) at www.ethaimusic.com.

Lí-Keh

In outlying working-class neighbourhoods in Bangkok you may be lucky enough to come across the gaudy, raucous *lí-keh*. This theatrical art form is thought to have descended from drama rituals brought to southern Thailand by Arab and Malay traders. The first native public performance in central Thailand came about when a group of Thai Muslims staged a *lí-keh* for Rama V in Bangkok during the funeral commemoration of Queen Sunantha. *Lí-keh* grew very popular under Rama VI, peaked in the early 20th century and has been fading slowly since the 1960s.

Most often performed at Buddhist festivals by troupes of travelling performers, *lí-keh* presents a colourful mixture of folk and classical music, outrageous costumes, melodrama, slapstick comedy, sexual innuendo, and up-to-date commentary on Thai politics and society. Foreigners – even those who speak fluent Thai – are often left behind by the highly idiomatic, culture-specific language and gestures.

Marionettes

Lákhon lék (little theatre), also known as *hùn lüang* (royal puppets), like *khòhn*, was once reserved for court performances. Metre-high marionettes made of *khòi* paper and wire, wearing elaborate costumes modelled on those of the *khòhn*, are used to convey similar themes, music and dance movements.

Two to three puppetmasters are required to manipulate each *hùn lüang* by means of wires attached to long poles. Stories are drawn from Thai folk tales, particularly *Phra Aphaimani*, and occasionally from the *Ramakian*. The *hùn lüang* puppets themselves are highly collectable; the Bangkok National Museum has only one example in its collection. A smaller, 30cm court version called *hùn lék* (little puppets) are occasionally used in live performances.

Another Thai puppet theatre, *hùn kràbàwk* (cylinder puppets) is based on popular Hainanese puppet shows. It uses 30cm hand puppets carved from wood. The best place to see *lákhon lék* is at the Natayasala (Joe Louis Puppet Theater; p172) in Bangkok.

Năng

Shadow-puppet theatre – in which two-dimensional figures are manipulated between a cloth screen and a light source at night-time performances – has been a Southeast Asian tradition for perhaps five centuries. Originally brought to the Malay Peninsula by Middle Eastern traders, the technique eventually spread to all parts of mainland and peninsular Southeast Asia; in Thailand it is mostly found in the south. As in Malaysia and Indonesia, shadow puppets in Thailand are carved from dried buffalo or cow hides (*năng*).

Two distinct shadow-play traditions survive in Thailand. The most common, *năng tálung*, is named after Phattalung Province, where it developed around Malay models. Like their Malay-Indonesian counterparts, Thai shadow puppets represent an array of characters from classical and folk drama, principally the *Ramakian* and *Phra Aphaimani* in Thailand. A single puppetmaster manipulates the cut-outs, which are bound to the ends of buffalo-horn handles. *Năng tálung* is still occasionally seen at temple festivals in the south, mostly in Songkhla and Nakhon Si Thammarat Provinces. Performances are also held periodically for tour groups or visiting dignitaries from Bangkok.

The second tradition, *năng yài* (big hide), uses much larger cut-outs, each bound to two wooden poles held by a puppetmaster; several masters may

participate in a single performance. *Năng yài* is rarely performed nowadays because of the lack of trained *năng* masters and the expense of the shadow puppets. Most *năng yài* that are made today are sold to interior designers or tourists; a well-crafted hide puppet may cost as much as 5000B.

In addition to the occasional performance in Nakhon Si Thammasat or Bangkok, *năng yài* can be seen at Wat Khanon in Amphoe Photharam, Ratchaburi Province, where *năng yài* master Khru Chalut is passing the art along to younger men. There's usually a performance at the wat from 10am to 11am Saturday.

CINEMA

When it comes to Thai cinema, there are usually two concurrent streams: the movies that are financially successful and the movies that are considered cinematically meritorious; only occasionally do these overlap.

Popular Thai cinema ballooned in the 1960s and '70s, especially during the period when the government levied a tax on Hollywood imports thus spawning a home-grown industry. The majority were cheap action flicks that were often dubbed 'nám náo' (stinking water); but the fantastic, even nonsensical, plots and rich colours left a lasting impression on modern-day Thai filmmakers, who have inserted these elements with distinctive measure.

The leading couple of the action genre was Mit Chaibancha and Petchara Chaowaraj, a duo who starred in some 75 films together. One of their last films was *Insee Thong* (Golden Eagle), in which Mit, playing the film's hero, was inadvertently killed during the filming of a helicopter stunt. Another beloved film of the era was *Mon Rak Luk Thung*, a musical rhapsodising Thai rural life. Isan musicals were a theatre darling during this era and re-emerged in 2001 with *Monpleng Luk Thung FM* (Hoedown Showdown) and Pen-Ek Ratanaruang's *Monrak Transistor*, which paid tribute to the music of Suraphol Sombatcharoen. In 2005 comedian-actor-director Petchtai Wongkamlao wrote, directed and starred in *Yam Yasothon*, a colourful homage to the 1970s musicals.

For a country renowned for its sense of fun, comedy will always be a guaranteed local money maker, and the classic flick of the 1960s was *Ngern Ngern Ngern* (Money, Money, Money), starring comedian Lor Tork. The modern comedies invariably feature *kàthoey* (transvestites and transsexuals), always a comic element in Thai humour. The 2000 film *Satree Lek* (Iron Ladies) dramatised the real-life exploits of a Lampang volleyball team made up almost entirely of *kàthoey*. At home, this Yongyoot Thongkongtoon-directed film became Thai cinema's second-largest grossing effort to date.

More important as an artiste than as an entrepreneur, the director Rattana Pestonji is often credited as the father of Thai new wave. His 1957 movie *Rong Raem Nark* (Country Hotel) is a dark comedy set in a Bangkok bar and guesthouse and filmed using only one camera.

Although sad endings rarely attract Thai moviegoers, Vichit Kounavudhi carved a niche for himself as one of the first socially conscious filmmakers. His 1983 movie *Luk Isan* (Child of the North-East), based on a Thai novel of the same name, followed the ups and downs of a farming family living in drought-ridden Isan and became one of the first popular films to offer urban Thais an understanding of the hardships of the impoverished farmers.

The current era boasts a new generation of seriously good Thai directors, several of whom studied film abroad during Thailand's '80s and early '90s boom period. Nonzee Nimibutr is regarded as the most mainstream (and profitable) of the new crop. His 1998 release of *Nang Nak* was a retelling of a famous Thai spirit tale that had seen no fewer than 20 previous cinematic renderings. The film became the largest-grossing film in Thai history,

'*lí-keh* presents a colourful mixture of folk and classical music, outrageous costumes, melodrama, slapstick comedy and sexual innuendo'

'For a country renowned for its sense of fun, comedy will always be a guaranteed local money maker'

out-earning even *Titanic*, and earned awards for best director, best art director and best sound at the 1999 Asia-Pacific Film Festival.

A popular player in the foreign-film circuit is the director Pen-Ek Ratanaruang. His films are gritty and satirical, and garner fans of film not just fans of Thailand. His debut film was *Fun Bar Karaoke*, a 1997 satire of Bangkok life in which the main characters are an ageing Thai playboy and his daughter. But it will be his 2003 *Ruang Rak Noi Nid Mahasan* (Last Life in the Universe), written by Prabda Yoon, that will secure him a position in the vault of cinema classics.

One of Thai cinema's proudest moments arrived when Cannes 2002 chose *Sut Sanaeha* (Blissfully Yours) for the coveted Un Certain Regard (Of Special Consideration) screening. Helmed by Apichatpong Weerasethakul, the film dramatises a romance between a Thai woman and an illegal Burmese immigrant. Just two years later Apichatpong's dreamlike *Sut Pralat* (Tropical Malady) won the Cannes Jury Prize, although his avant-garde films have generated little interest in Thailand.

Colourful tales that merge myth and reality are vital parts of the Thai imagination and this theme appears in both popular and indie movies. *Fah Talai Jone* (Tears of the Black Tiger; 2000), directed by Wisit Sasanatieng, bridged the gap between new wave and the 1960s action genre with a campy homage. Jira Malikul's *Mekhong Sipha Kham Deuan Sip-et* (Full Moon Party; 2002) juxtaposes folk beliefs about mysterious 'dragon lights' emanating from Mekong River with the scepticism of Bangkok scientists.

Back in the box-office world of Thai cinema, Prachya Pinkaew's *Ong Bak* (2004) and his follow-up *Tom-Yum-Goong* (2005) created a *muay thai* hero in Tony Jaa. Otherwise, horror flicks are eating up the majority of movie-watchers' budgets in Thailand, averaging three or four per year with a wealth of ghost stories and occult arts to mine for material. A few recent frightfests include *Shutter* (2004), about the aftermath of a hit-and-run, and the *Art of the Devil* series (2005) by the Ronin Team, a collection of Thai filmmakers specialising in ghouls and suspense. A little artier than the usual fare, Wisit Sasanatieng's most recent film, *The Unseeable* (2006), is a ghost story set in the 1930s, written by one of the members of the Ronin Team.

LITERATURE

The written word has a long history in Thailand, dating back to the 11th or 12th century when the first Thai script was fashioned from an older Mon alphabet. The first known work of literature to be written in Thai is thought to have been composed by Sukhothai's Phaya Lithai in 1345. This was *Traiphum Phra Ruang*, a treatise that described the three realms of existence according to a Hindu-Buddhist cosmology. According to contemporary scholars, this work and its symbolism was, and continues to be, of considerable influence on Thailand's artistic and cultural universe.

Classical

The 30,000-line *Phra Aphaimani*, composed by poet Sunthorn Phu in the late 18th century, is Thailand's most famous classical literary work. Like many of its epic predecessors around the world, it tells the story of an exiled prince who must complete an odyssey of love and war before returning to his kingdom in victory.

But of all classical Thai literature, *Ramakian* is the most pervasive and influential in Thai culture. The Indian source, *Ramayana*, came to Thailand with the Khmers 900 years ago, first appearing as stone reliefs on Prasat Hin Phimai and other Angkor temples in the northeast. Eventually, however, the Thais developed their own version of the epic, which was first written down

during the reign of Rama I. This version contained 60,000 stanzas and was a quarter longer than the Sanskrit original.

Although the main theme remains the same, the Thais embroidered the *Ramayana* by providing much more biographical detail on arch-villain Ravana (Dasakantha, called Thotsakan, or '10-necked' in the *Ramakian*) and his wife Montho. Hanuman, the monkey-god, differs substantially in the Thai version in his flirtatious nature (in the Hindu version he follows a strict vow of chastity). One of the classic *Ramakian* reliefs at Bangkok's Wat Pho depicts Hanuman clasping a maiden's bared breast as if it were an apple.

Also passed on from Indian tradition are the many *jataka*: life stories of the Buddha (*chaa-dòk* in Thai). Of the 547 *jataka* in the Pali *Tipitaka* (Buddhist canon), each one chronicling a different past life, most appear in Thailand almost word for word as they were first written down in Sri Lanka.

A group of 50 'extra' stories, based on Thai folk tales of the time, were added by Pali scholars in Chiang Mai 300 to 400 years ago. The most popular *jataka* in Thailand is one of the Pali originals known as the *Mahajati* or *Mahavessantara*, the story of the Buddha's penultimate life. Interior murals in the ordination chapels of Thai wat typically depict this *jataka* and nine others: Temiya, Mahajanaka, Suvannasama, Nemiraja, Mahosatha, Bhuridatta, Candakumara, Narada and Vidhura.

Poetry

During the Ayuthaya period, Thailand developed a classical poetic tradition based on five types of verse – *chan*, *kàap*, *khlóng*, *klawn* and *rài*. Each of these forms uses a set of complex, strict rules to regulate metre, rhyming patterns and number of syllables. Although all of these poetic systems use the Thai language, *chan* and *kàap* are derived from Sanskrit verse forms from India, while *khlóng*, *klawn* and *rài* are native forms. The Indian forms have all but disappeared from 21st-century use.

During the political upheavals that characterised the 1970s, several Thai newspaper editors, most notably Kukrit Pramoj, composed lightly disguised political commentary in *klawn* verse. Modern Thai poets seldom use the classical forms, preferring to compose in blank verse or with song-style rhyming.

Contemporary

The first Thai-language novel appeared only around 70 years ago, in direct imitation of Western models. Unfortunately much of Thai fiction, both past and present, has not been translated into English. The following are a few exceptions.

Considered the first Thai novel of substance, *The Circus of Life* (Thai 1929; English 1994), by Arkartdamkeung Rapheephat, follows a young, upper-class Thai as he travels the world in the 1920s. The fact that the author, himself a Thai prince, took his own life at the age of 26 has added to the mystique surrounding this work.

The late Kukrit Pramoj, former ambassador and Thai prime minister, novelised Bangkok court life from the late 19th century through to the 1940s in *Four Reigns* (Thai 1935; English 1981), the longest novel ever published in Thai. *The Story of Jan Darra* (Thai 1966; English 1994), by journalist and short-story writer Utsana Phleungtham, traces the sexual obsessions of a Thai aristocrat. Praphatsorn Seiwikun's well-tuned, rapid-paced *Time in a Bottle* (Thai 1984; English 1996) turned the life dilemmas of a fictional middle-class Bangkok family into a bestseller.

Writing under the pen name Siburapha, a common conceit with Thai writers, Kulap Saipradit spun romantic tales, including the novel *Behind the*

'Colourful tales that merge myth and reality are vital parts of the Thai imagination'

Buy English translations of Thai literature from DCO Thai (www.dcothai.com).

COMIC CULTURE

When it comes to reading, Thailand claims a high literacy rate, but don't expect to find folks buried in books. Comic books, mainly from Japan, account for a larger market share than paperbacks and the average provincial 'bookstore' is really a comic-book trading post. Of the few home-grown series, *Cartoon Maha Sanuk* (Super Fun Cartoon) introduced readers to the character Noo Hin, the Amelia Bedelia of Thailand. She's a country girl from Isan who's best intentions result in chaos. In the later series *Noo Hin Inter*, the trouble-making heroine goes to Bangkok to work as a maid for a refined family. In the manga genre, Suttichart Sarapaiwanich has attracted the attention of Nike advertisers with his crime-solving octopus character named Joe. Even the ousted Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra has been the subject of a 212-page graphic novel in which Thaksin returns to finish his mission of helping the poor; the comic was published by a citizen supporter shortly after the coup. But Thaksin's exploits have sold very little compared to the king's own comic book about Tongdaeng (meaning copper), a stray dog the palace adopted.

Painting, about a student who falls in love with a married aristocrat during the postwar era.

For a look at rural life in Thailand, the books of Pira Sudham are unparalleled. Sudham was born into a poor family in northeastern Thailand and has written *The Force of Karma*, *Monsoon Country*, *People of Esarn* and his latest, *Shadowed Country*. These books are not translations – Sudham writes in English in order to reach a worldwide audience.

Thai wunderkind SP Somtow has written and published more titles in English than any other Thai writer. Born in Bangkok, he was educated at Eton and Cambridge. The most accessible Somtow novel, and the one most evocative of Thai culture, is *Jasmine Nights*, a coming-of-age novel set in 1960 Bangkok.

Chart Korbjitti is a two-time winner of the Southeast Asian Writers Award (Seawrite), in 1982 for *The Judgement*, about a young village man wrongly accused by his nosy neighbours; and in 1994 for *Time*. The writer Sri Daoruang adapted the *Ramakian* into modern-day Bangkok in *Married to the Demon King*. Other short stories by modern Thai women writers appear in the collection *A Lioness in Bloom*, translated by Susan Kepner. *Of Time & Tide*, by Atsiri Thammachaoat, chronicles the lives of inhabitants of a coastal community dealing with changing times.

The leading postmodern writer is Prabda Yoon, whose short story 'Probability' won the 2002 SEA Write award. Although his works have yet to be translated, he wrote the screenplay for the movie *The Last Life in the Universe* and other Pen-ek Ratanaruang-directed films. Ngarmpun Vejajiva and her first novel, *The Happiness of Kati*, is another SEA Write award winner and follows the story of a young girl growing up on the banks of the Mae Nam Chao Phraya.

Food & Drink

Thai food is currently the pin-up model of international cuisine with outpost kitchens in little towns across the globe. A culinary pilgrimage to the mother country will expand your appreciation of the cuisine's versatility, simplicity and communal traditions. Food is everywhere in Thailand and you will quickly discover that eating is one of the country's great preoccupations. The average Thai takes time out to eat, not three times per day, but four or five. Sitting down at a roadside *rót khên* (vendor cart) after an evening of cinema or nightclubbing, a Thai may barely have finished one steaming bowl of noodles before ordering a second round, just to revel in the experience a little longer. At the market stalls across Thailand, you'll witness first-hand the interbreeding of numerous foreign contributions from India, China and Asian Oceania, and how Thailand has adapted these cooking techniques and ingredients.

STAPLES & SPECIALITIES

Rice

Rice is so central to Thai food culture that the most common term for 'eat' is *kin khào* (literally, 'consume rice') and one of the most common greetings is '*Kin khào láew rêu yang?*' ('Have you consumed rice yet?'). To eat is to eat rice, and to many traditionalists a meal is not acceptable without this staple. You may even detect a hint of pity from an older Thai who thinks Westerners have to survive without rice in their daily diet.

There are many varieties of rice in Thailand and the country has been among the world leaders in rice exports since the 1960s. The highest grade is *khào hăwm máli* (jasmine rice), a fragrant long grain that is so coveted by neighbouring countries that there is allegedly a steady underground business in smuggling out fresh supplies.

Rice is customarily served alongside main dishes, like curries, stir-fries or soups typically classified as *kàp khào* (with rice).

If you're eating with Thai friends, leaving a little rice on your plate will indicate that you are full. A clean plate means you're ready for another helping.

Noodles

Although Thai culture admires conformity, Thais are rugged individualists when it comes to food choices, a trait best observed in the noodle department. Descendent from China, noodles come in four basic varieties. The most popular is referred to as *küaytiaw*, which is made from pure rice flour mixed with water to form a paste that is then steamed to form wide, flat sheets. These are then folded and sliced into noodles of varying widths – for example, *sên lék* (thin) and *sên yài* (broad). Already you've got two choices to make. Now on to the type of noodle dish you're after.

The simplest and most ubiquitous is *küaytiaw nám*, a bowl of noodles served with chicken or beef stock along with bits of meat and various vegetables, including a garnish of *phàk chii* (coriander leaf). This dish is eaten round the clock as a quick snack before work, after shopping, post-clubbing or in between the real meal. *Küaytiaw phât* involves the quick stir-frying of the noodles in a wok with sliced meat, *phàk kha-náa* (Chinese kale), soy sauce and various seasonings. Chilli-heads must give *küaytiaw phât khii mao* (drunkard's fried noodles) a try. A favourite lunch or late-night snack, this spicy stir-fry consists of wide rice noodles, fresh basil leaves, chicken or pork, seasonings and a healthy dose of fresh sliced chillies.

It Rains Fishes: Legends, Traditions and the Joys of Thai Cooking, by Kasma Loha-Unchit, is both a cookbook and a cultural exposé on Thai food.

The most famous *küaytiaw* dish among foreigners is *phàt thai*, a plate of thin rice noodles stir-fried with dried or fresh shrimp, bean sprouts, fried tofu, egg and seasonings. On the edge of the plate the cook usually places little piles of ground peanuts and ground dried chilli, along with lime halves and a few stalks of spring onion, for self-seasoning.

Another kind of noodle, *khànmò jiin*, is produced by pushing rice-flour paste through a sieve into boiling water, much the way Italian-style pasta is made. *Khànmò jiin* is a popular morning market meal that is eaten doused with various spicy curries and loaded up with a self-selection of fresh and pickled vegetables.

The third genre of noodle, *bà-mii*, is made from wheat flour and sometimes egg. It's yellowish in colour and round in shape. *Bà-mii* is typically an alternative option in noodle soups and is a good companion with duck or red pork.

Finally there's *wún-sèn*, an almost clear noodle made from mung-bean starch and water. *Wún-sèn* (literally, 'jelly thread') is used for only three dishes in Thailand: *yam wún-sèn*, a hot and tangy salad made with lime juice, fresh sliced *phrik khii núu* (mouse-dropping peppers), mushrooms, dried or fresh shrimp, ground pork and various seasonings; *wún-sèn òp puu*, bean thread noodles baked in a lidded clay pot with crab and seasonings; and *kaeng jèut*, a bland, Chinese-influenced soup with ground pork, soft tofu and a few vegetables. All of these dishes are most easily found in simple restaurants and sometimes at night markets. If you're ordering a Thai meal, *wún-sèn* dishes are treated a lot like an appetiser.

Curries & Soups

Green, red, panang, matsaman – the average traveller arrives on Thai shores with a menu's worth of Thai curry knowledge. And just wait till you try the real McCoy, a curry that is made from fresh, handmade curry paste, a light dab of coconut milk, and a pretty assortment of chillies, aubergines and meat.

A Thai curry is usually light and fresh in flavour with more heat than sweet. The Thai word for curry is *kaeng* (it rhymes with the English 'gang') and is used much more broadly than the English translation to describe any dish with a lot of liquid. What foreigners know as red curry is *kaeng phèt* (literally, 'spicy curry') and derives its colour from the paste's primary ingredient of red chillies. Green curry (*kaeng khiaw wàan*) uses green chillies instead and is a kiss sweeter than red; many green curries prepared for Westerners tend to exaggerate the sugar flavour at the expense of the subtle interplay of sour and salty notes.

All chilli-based *kaeng* start as fresh – not powdered – ingredients that are smashed, pounded and ground in a stone mortar and pestle to form a thick, aromatic and extremely pungent paste. Typical ingredients include dried chilli, galangal (also known as Thai ginger), lemongrass, kaffir lime (peel, leaves, or both), shallots, garlic, shrimp paste and salt.

During cooking, most *kaeng* are blended in a heated pan with coconut cream, to which the chef adds the rest of the ingredients along with coconut

'fresh ingredients are pounded in a stone mortar and pestle to form a thick, aromatic and extremely pungent paste'

MASTER YOUR NOODLES

Sit down to a bowl of noodle soup and you'll be presented with the four fundamentals of Thai flavours: spicy, sweet, sour and salty. Every Thai dish displays this interplay using different ingredients to achieve the balance. In the case of *küaytiaw nám*, the diner is the mixologist sprinkling a little bit of the chillies, sugar, vinegar and fish sauce to reach an individual standard of perfection. Omit one of the seasonings – such as sugar – based on food misconceptions and you'll never join the noodle cult. Employ each seasoning option at your own discretion and be your own master, if only for one meal.

milk to thin and flavour the *kaeng*. Some recipes omit coconut milk entirely to produce a particularly fiery *kaeng* known as *kaeng pàa* (forest curry).

Kaeng jèut (literally, 'bland soup'), in contrast, is a soothing broth seasoned with little more than soya or fish sauce and black pepper. It is rarely eaten on its own, but is a nice counterpoint to a large meal or accompaniment to a simple lunch of fried fish. Although the number of variations on *kaeng jèut* are seemingly endless, common ingredients include *wún-sèn* (mung-bean starch noodles), *tào hàu* (tofu), *húa chai thào* (Chinese radish) and *múu sàp* (ground pork).

Another food celebrity that falls into the soupy category is *tôm yam* – a spicy and sour soup made with seafood or chicken. Although it looks like an ordinary soup, *tôm yam* is actually a *faux amie* in that it is filled with ingredients (like lemongrass, galangal and kaffir lime peel) intended only for flavouring not ingestion. The convention of eating *tôm yam* also differs from what its appearance would suggest. *Tôm yam* is typically served in a large metal bowl heated by a small sterno flame underneath. The most polite way to tackle this contraption is to spoon the edible bits (meat or seafood and mushrooms) along with some broth into a small bowl. Diners can then sip the broth and spoon the chewables on to a plate of rice. It might seem like a lot of wasted steps to feed yourself, but a classic Thai dish like *tôm yam* is often adorned with ritualistic pageantry. Eating *tôm yam* with rice also helps quell the fiery flavours from fresh *phrik khii núu* or *nám phrik phào* (a paste of dried chillies roasted with shrimp paste).

Hot & Tangy Salads

Less well-known outside of the country, the dish commonly translated as 'salad' (*yam*) is a combination of lime, chilli, fresh herbs and a choice of seafood, noodles or meat. Thais prize *yam* dishes so much that they are often eaten on their own like an appetiser without rice, or as snack food to accompany a night of boozing.

This is the closest that you'll come to raw or lightly cooked vegetables in Thailand. Aromatic herbs like mint, lemongrass, kaffir lime leaves and Chinese celery give *yam* a dynamic flavour that will make an ordinary lettuce and tomato salad look pale and predictable. And then there is the chilli factor. It is a common trick in Thailand to offset the burn of chillies with fresh vegetables; this technique is used in the assembly of *yam*, often in dare-devil proportions. The spiciest of the genre is *yam phrik chíu fáa* (spur-chilli *yam*), while a more mild incarnation is *yam wún-sèn* (bean-thread noodles tossed with shrimp, ground pork, coriander leaf, lime juice and fresh sliced chillies).

Stir-fries & Deep-Fries

To really appreciate Thai food, you need to develop a rapport with the vendor stalls, many of whom can whip up a handful of stir-fry standards. There is also an undeniable entertainment factor in the visual spectacle of a stir-fry cook clanging the ingredients around the wok, teasing with the open flame and moving on to the next order in rapid succession. In a matter of minutes the plate is set before you along with a ceramic bowl of *phrik nám plaa* (fish sauce with sliced chillies), which is used as a condiment much like soy sauce is used in Chinese cuisine.

Ordering a stir-fry dish is a lot like making a radio request: the name-your-dish routine is based on whatever ingredients the vendor has on hand, not a pre-set menu. The vegetable and meat options are usually displayed in a plastic case beside the wok – it is your job as the eater to name a tasty combination. A no-fail option is *khào phàt* (fried rice), which, when done well, is better than any version you've encountered back home.

'a classic Thai dish like *tôm yam* is often adorned with ritualistic pageantry'

DOUGH BOY

The macho staple of the West has been reduced to a prissy dessert in Thailand. Forget about finding Indochinese baguettes or even a chewy multigrain, Thais like bread to be sweet and airy and it is often served toasted with sweetened condensed milk. Even the Thai word for bread – *khànm* (meaning ‘sweet pastry or dessert’) *bang* – reveals its status in the food end.

Many of the techniques for Thai stir-fries (*phát*) were imported by the Chinese, who are famous for being able to prepare a whole banquet in a single wok. There is also a sub-set of Thai stir-fries that are often classified as Thai-Chinese and served in simple open-air restaurants run by families of Chinese descent. Such dishes include *néua phát nàam-man hāwy* (beef in oyster sauce) or *kài phát mét māmúang himáphaan* (sliced chicken stir-fried in dried chillies and cashews).

Thailand wouldn't be able to cultivate a global cuisine fan base without a well-developed repertoire of fried foods. Usually prepared by street vendors, deep-fried snacks include *klúay tháwt* (fried bananas) or *pàw-pía* (fried spring rolls). You'll never step foot in a KFC after trying Thailand's *kài tháwt* (fried chicken), typically served with a spicy dipping sauce and sticky rice.

Fruits & Sweets

Being a tropical country, Thailand excels in the fruit department with exceptionally delicious *sàppàrót* (pineapple), *málákaw* (papaya) and *taeng moh* (watermelon) sold from ubiquitous vendor carts, often accompanied by a dipping mix of salt, sugar and ground chilli. You'll find more exotic fruits sold in produce markets. The king of fruits is the spiky-shelled *thúrian* (durian), an acridly pungent delicacy in Southeast Asia. The fruit smells so strong that it is banned from airlines, air-conditioned buses and some hotels. Other seasonal fruits that you deserve to meet include creamy *náwy náa* (custard apple), the Velcro tennis-ball shaped *ngáw* (rambutan), the purplish skinned *mang-khút* (mangosteen), and the grape-shaped *lámút* (sapodilla) and *lam yai* (longan).

Mámúang (mangoes) come in a dozen varieties that are eaten at different stages of ripeness. Some are served green and crisp and taste like apples, while others are ripe and luscious and served in the intoxicating dessert *khào niaw māmúang* (mangoes and sticky rice).

Khāwng wáan (Thai desserts) stay true to their literal translation as ‘sweet things’. The typical ingredients might appear to be savoury components – like rice flour, tapioca and corn kernels – but are arranged in such a sugary nest that no one could blur the line between meal and dessert. Most of the traditional desserts are ancient and elaborate recipes, like *fáwy thawng*, which imitates the appearance of golden threads with an egg-yolk batter.

DRINKS**Coffee, Tea & Fruit Drinks**

Thais are big coffee drinkers, and good-quality arabica and robusta are cultivated in the hilly areas of northern and southern Thailand. The traditional filtering system is nothing more than a narrow cloth bag attached to a steel handle. The bag is filled with ground coffee, and hot water poured through producing *kaafae thúng* (bag coffee) or *kaafae boh-raan* (traditional coffee). The usual *kaafae thúng* is served in a glass, mixed with sugar and sweetened with condensed milk – if you don't want either, be sure to specify *kaafae dam* (black coffee) followed with *mái sài nàam taan* (without sugar).

Black tea, both local and imported, is available at the same places that serve real coffee. *Chaa thai* derives its characteristic orange-red colour from ground

tamarind seed added after curing. *Chaa ráwn* (hot tea) and *chaa yen* (iced tea) will almost always be sweetened with condensed milk and sugar.

Fruit drinks appear all over Thailand and are an excellent way to rehydrate after water becomes unpalatable. Most *nàam phôn-lá-mái* (fruit juices) are served with a touch of sugar and salt and a whole lot of ice. Many foreigners object to the salt, but it serves a metabolic role in helping the body to cope with tropical temperatures.

Beer & Spirits

Advertised with such slogans as *pràthêht rao, bia rao* (Our Land, Our Beer), the Singha label is considered the quintessential ‘Thai’ beer and is a strong-tasting pilsner. Pronounced sing (not ‘sing-ha’), it claims about half the domestic market, and has an alcohol content of 6%. Beer Chang matches the hoppy taste of Singha but pumps the alcohol content up to 7%. There are other varieties of beer, like Leo, that offer more alcohol for the baht. Dutch-licensed but Thailand-brewed Heineken and Singapore's Tiger brand are also popular selections. Beer Lao is now available in some cities and Phuket Beer is one of Thailand's only microbrews.

When in the company of Thais, beer is rarely consumed directly from the bottle but instead enjoys yet another communal ritual. Each drinker gets a glass, filled with ice, into which the elixir is poured. A toast goes round and the younger member of the group is usually in charge of keeping everyone's glass filled with ice and beer. The ice helps keep the beverage cool in a hot climate and combats the dehydrating effects of a hangover.

Rice whisky is a favourite of the working class, struggling students and family gatherings as it's more affordable than beer. Most rice whiskies are mixed with distilled sugarcane spirits and thus have a sharp, sweet taste not unlike rum. The most famous brands are Mekong and Sang Som, which are typically sold in a large bottle (*klom*) or a flask-sized bottle (*baen*), and are mixed with ice, soda water and a splash of Coke.

Once spending money becomes a priority, Thais prefer to upgrade to the whiskies produced from barley. Johnnie Walker is of course an immediate status symbol, but for more modest means there are the Thai versions branded as Blue Eagle, 100 Pipers and Spey Royal.

CELEBRATIONS

Food plays an important part in many Thai religious festivals and merit-making occasions. Before dawn the Buddhist monks travel the streets barefoot collecting alms from the devout. Housewives wait by their front doors to dispense fresh-cooked rice and curries for the temple's meals. The spiritual world requires daily feeding as well. Every morning business owners set out small offerings of food – such as rice, fruit and water or tea – in hopes that their day will be prosperous. When gaining merit at important temples or shrines, there are a variety of important offertory foods such as roasted pig's head, pomelo, or liquor.

During important landmark events, like weddings, house blessings or ordinations, certain auspicious foods are used to invite good fortune on the participants. The long and chewy texture of *khànm jín* will encourage the longevity of a marriage. The complicated dish of *hàw mòk* bundles together many disparate ingredients, such as fish and herbs, into a creamy coconut custard wrapped in a banana leaf, and signifies a loving and cooperative family. The egg yolk-based desserts that look like gold are always invited to the celebratory table because of their association with wealth.

Community festivals of food often centre around an agricultural region's principal crop: eastern provinces of Chanthaburi, Rayong and Trat celebrate

News and views about Southeast Asia's leading brews can be found at www.beerasia.blogspot.com.

Thailand has a burgeoning wine industry centred around the cool hills of Khao Yai where *chenin blanc* grapes prosper.

‘The king of fruits is the spiky-shelled *thúrian* (durian), an acridly pungent delicacy in Southeast Asia’

TRAVEL YOUR TASTEBUDS

Need to break out of the *phát thai* rut? Try these quintessential Thai dishes that don't always register on the tourist radar:

- **kaeng phèt kài nàw mái** – chicken and bamboo-shoot curry, a working-class mainstay usually pre-made at rice-and-curry shops.
- **küaytiaw pla** – rice noodles with fish balls (boiled ground-fish balls) available at most noodle shops or stalls.
- **tôm yam pò tàek** – when you tire of *tôm yam kung*, try *pò tàek* (broken fish trap), which has a similar broth with the addition of basil and assorted seafood; available at some restaurants.
- **miang kham** – tiny chunks of lime, ginger and shallot, toasted grated coconut, roasted peanuts, fresh sliced chillies and dried shrimp, all wrapped up in a wild-tea leaf with sweet-sour tamarind sauce; available at some restaurants.
- **nám phrik pla thu** – chilli dip made with shrimp paste and served with steamed mackerel and parboiled vegetables; available at vendor carts and restaurants.
- **plaa dàet diaw** – ‘once-sunned fish’, a whole fish split down the middle, sundried for half a day, then deep-fried and served with a mango-peanut sauce; usually available from day markets as a takeaway dish.
- **sangkhyáa fák thâwng** – creamy egg-and-palm-sugar custard baked inside a Thai pumpkin; usually available from day markets.
- **yam hua plii** – spicy banana-flower salad; available at restaurants.
- **yam phrik chí fáa** – hot and tangy salad centred on fresh *phrik chí fáa* (very spicy ‘sky-pointing’ chillies); available at restaurants.

the durian, mangosteen, rambutan and pomelo harvest; Chiang Mai trumpets the mango season; and Nan marks the ripening of its signature citrus, the golden orange.

The most famous food festival in Thailand is tied with the beliefs of the Chinese Buddhists. The annual Vegetarian Festival (late September or early October; see p746) is hosted throughout the country with abstinence from meat, and a proliferation of street stalls selling vegetarian food. But Phuket moves the festival beyond a dietary shift to religious frenzy with a street procession that involves ritualistic self-mutilation.

WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

For a culture that eats almost every meal outside the home, dining is incredibly informal, at least in terms of setting.

The majority of meals in Thailand come from the *rót khèn* (vendor cart), which specialises in a particular type of dish and if done well cultivates a local following. These vendors can be found clustered together at the day markets as energy builders for grocery-shopping housewives, or the carts make up the main event at night markets. The changing landscape of the vendor cart provides a sun-dial service for judging the time of day. In the mornings stalls selling coffee and Chinese-style doughnuts spring up along busy commuter corridors. At lunchtime, midday eaters might grab a plastic chair at yet another stall for a simple stir-fry or plate of noodles. In most small towns, night markets are the provincial equivalent of a restaurant row. These hawkers centres set up in the middle of town with a cluster of vendors, metal tables and chairs, and some shopping as an after-dinner mint.

Fresh fruits, vegetables and meat are still sold from the old-fashioned open-air warehouse markets (*tàlàat*), despite the influx of Western-style

Visit www.realthai.blogspot.com for profiles of local mom-and-pop restaurants in Bangkok and beyond.

supermarkets. For many of Thailand's working mothers, the markets are also a stand-in cook, selling a variety of wholesome dishes that are spooned into takeaway plastic bags and shuttled off to hungry mouths at home.

There are, of course, restaurants (*ràan aahàan*) in Thailand that range from simple food stops to formal affairs. Lunchtime is the right time to point and eat at the *ràan khào kaeng* (rice-and-curry shop), which sells a selection of pre-made dishes. The more generic *ràan aahàan taam sàng* (food-to-order shop) can often be recognised by one or more tall refrigerated cabinets with clear glass windows at the front of the shop. These will be filled with many of the raw ingredients – Chinese kale, tomatoes, chopped pork, fresh or dried fish, noodles, eggplant, spring onions – for a standard repertoire of Thai and Chinese dishes. As the name implies, the cooks attempt to prepare any dish you can name, including any kind of rice or noodle dish as well as more complex multidish meals.

All standard restaurants, large and small, typically have a simple collection of utilitarian tables and chairs lined up along the walls. Decoration may be limited to a few Singha or Sang Som posters, or something more incongruous, such as a faded picture of the Swiss Alps. Fluorescent lighting – cheap and cool – is the norm. Such restaurants typically specialise in a single cuisine, whether local or regional. Ambience and entertainment is provided by the diners, not by the setting.

For many years, Thais celebrated special occasions with a meal at a Chinese banquet restaurant, a cuisine viewed as more refined than their own, or Chinese-style seafood restaurant. Depending on the region, there are semi-formal Thai restaurants that might have a waterfront setting or a flashy lounge singer who takes requests from the crowd. Rarely do Thais refer to a menu, preferring instead to order their favourite dishes from memory. Bangkok, Chiang Mai and other internationally influenced cities tend to have more of a Western-style restaurant scene with hip décor and nouveau or imported cuisine.

VEGETARIANS & VEGANS

Vegetarianism isn't a widespread trend in Thailand, but many of the tourist-oriented restaurants cater to vegetarians. That doesn't mean that all Thais are monogamous carnivores; there are, however, home-grown practices of vegetarianism and veganism rooted in a strict interpretation of Buddhism made popular by Bangkok's ex-Governor Chamlong Srimuang. Now there are several nonprofit *ràan aahàan mangsàwirát* (vegetarian restaurants) in Bangkok and several provincial capitals where the food is served buffet-style and is very inexpensive. Dishes are almost always 100% vegan (ie no meat, poultry, fish or fish sauce, dairy or egg products).

During the Vegetarian Festival, celebrated by Chinese Buddhists, many restaurants and street stalls in Bangkok, Phuket and in the Chinese business districts of most Thai towns go meatless for one month. Other easy, though less common, venues for vegetarian meals include Indian restaurants, which usually feature a vegetarian section on the menu.

USING THE RIGHT TOOL FOR THE JOB

If you're not offered chopsticks, don't ask for them. Thais only use chopsticks to eat noodle soups or other dishes inherited from China. Most rice dishes are eaten with a fork and spoon. When it comes to certain northern and northeastern Thai dishes, the fingers are a diner's best friend. You can go *sans* utensils with *khào niaw* (sticky rice), rolling it into a ball and dipping it into a chilli sauce. Do note that the fingers or a utensil is used to eat fried or grilled chicken, unlike the Western style of meeting mouth to flesh.

Thai Hawker Food, by Kenny Yee and Catherine Gordon, is an illustrated guide to recognising and ordering street food in Thailand.

Find vegetarian restaurants across Thailand at www.happycow.net.

The phrase 'I'm vegetarian' in Thai is *phôm kin jeh* (for men) or *dì-chân kin jeh* (for women). Loosely translated this means 'I eat only vegetarian food', which includes no eggs and no dairy products – in other words, total vegan.

HABITS & CUSTOMS

Like most of Thai culture, eating conventions appear relaxed and informal but are orchestrated by many implied rules. Dining is considered an important social occasion not only to chat with friends but to enjoy many different dishes, which is made easier if there are more mouths interested in sampling. Solo diners are more common at Thailand's original version of 'fast-food' restaurants: places that serve one-plate dishes.

Whether at home or in a restaurant, Thai meals are always served 'family-style', that is from common serving platters, and the plates appear in whatever order the kitchen can prepare them. This tends to frustrate Western diners unaware that the kitchen presumes the party will share whatever dish arrives first. Another factor in a Thai meal is achieving a balance of flavours and textures. Traditionally, the party orders a curry, a steamed or fried fish, a stir-fried vegetable dish and a soup, taking care to balance cool and hot, sour and sweet, salty and plain. Thais tend to over-order at social occasions – the more food is left, the more generous the host appears.

When eating Thai family-style, all the dishes are arranged on the table and everyone digs in rather than passing the plates to each diner. Reaching over someone to a plate is customary, but picking up a plate to serve yourself is considered rude. If you can't reach the platter at all, it's best to hand your plate to someone near the serving platter, who can then place some food on your plate. Most Thais will do this automatically if they notice you're out of platter range. In fact, Thais are very conscientious of fellow diners and will pass the best part of the fish to the honoured guest or the clueless *faràng*.

In most cases, the elder or honoured guest is the first to reach toward the communal dishes to commence the meal. When serving yourself from a common platter, put no more than one spoonful onto your plate at a time. Heaping your plate with all the options will look greedy to Thais unfamiliar with Western conventions. It's also customary at the start of a shared meal to eat a spoonful of plain rice first – a gesture that recognises rice as the most important part of the meal.

Getting the food from your individual plate to your mouth requires more specific instructions. For dishes served over rice, like curries and stir-fries, the locals use a fork and spoon, but not in the way you think. Thais use a fork like we use a knife, to push food on to the spoon, which then enters the mouth. From the Thai standpoint, sticking a fork in the mouth is just plain strange.

EAT YOUR WORDS

While some restaurants in Thailand may have English-language menus, most will not. So you'll need to have some stock phrases on hand to tell *phàt thai* from *khào phàt*. For pronunciation guidelines, see p781.

You could learn the secrets of a Thai kitchen through a cooking course. Formal and informal classes are widespread in Bangkok, Chiang Mai and other tourist centres.

SCHOOLS IN SESSION

Do you spend more time hanging around the markets than the temples? Are you packing in three or more meals a day? Then you are a good candidate for a cooking course, which can range from formal, equipment-oriented instructions to simple chop-and-talk introductions. Bangkok, Chiang Mai and the popular tourist islands offer different types of cooking classes, most of which include a market tour. See the respective destination chapters for more information.

Useful Phrases

EATING OUT

I'd like...

Not too spicy please.

glass

cup

fork

spoon

plate

napkin

Thank you, that was delicious.

Bring the bill, please.

khǎw...

khǎw mǎi phèt mǎak

kǎew

thúay

sǎwm

chǎwn

jaan plào

kràdàat chét pàak

khǎwp khun mǎak, aràwy mǎak

khǎw bin

VEGETARIAN & SPECIAL MEALS

Does this dish have meat?

I'm allergic to...

I don't eat...

meat

chicken

fish

seafood

pork

Please don't use fish sauce.

Please don't use MSG.

Don't add salt.

aahǎan jaan nǐ sài néua sàt mǎi

phôm/dì-chân phǎe...

phôm/dì-chân kin... mǎi dǎi

néua sàt

kài

plaa

aahǎan thǎle

mǔu

karúnaa mǎi sài nám plaa

karúnaa mǎi sài phông-chuu-rót

mǎi sài kleua

Food Glossary

STAPLES

ah-hǎan thǎ-leh

jóhk

kài

khài

khànôm

khào jǎo

khào klǎwng

khào phàt

khào plào

khào

kúaytiaw

kúng

mǔu

néua

pèt

plaa

plaa mèuk

puu

อาหารทะเล

โจ๊ก

ไก่

ไข่

ขนม

ข้าวเจ้า

ข้าวกล้อง

ข้าวผัด

ข้าวเปล่า

ข้าว

ก๋วยเตี๋ยว

กุ้ง

หมู

เนื้อ

เป็ด

ปลา

ปลาหมึก

ปู

seafood

thick rice soup or congee

chicken

egg

sweet pastries or desserts

white rice

brown rice

fried rice

plain rice

rice

rice noodles

variety of shrimp, prawn and lobster

pork

beef, meat

duck

fish

squid; cuttlefish (generic)

crab

VEGETABLES

phàk

hèt

mǎkhèua

mǎkhèua-thèht

man faràng

tào-húu

thùu fàk yao

ผัก

เห็ด

มะเขือ

มะเขือเทศ

มันฝรั่ง

เต้าหู้

ถั่วงอกยาว

vegetables

mushrooms

eggplant/aubergine

tomatoes

potatoes

tofu

long bean, yard bean, green bean

<i>thùa lêuang</i>	ถั่วเหลือง	soybean
<i>thùa ngắwkw</i>	ถั่วงอก	mung bean sprouts
<i>thùa pòn</i>	ถั่วป่น	ground peanuts
<i>thùa thắwt</i>	ถั่วทอด	fried peanuts

CONDIMENTS & SEASONINGS

<i>khing</i>	พริก	ginger
<i>kleua</i>	เกลือ	salt
<i>nám jim</i>	น้ำจิ้ม	dipping sauces
<i>nám plaa</i>	น้ำปลา	fish sauce
<i>nám sji-íw</i>	น้ำซีอิ้ว	soy sauce
<i>nám sóm sǎi chuu</i>	น้ำส้มสายชู	vinegar
<i>námtaan</i>	น้ำตาล	sugar
<i>phák chii</i>	ผักชี	coriander leaf
<i>phǎng-chuu-rót</i>	ผงชูรส	monosodium glutamate (MSG)
<i>phrik</i>	พริก	chilli
<i>sàránǎe</i>	สะระแหน่	mint

FRUIT

<i>phòn-lá-mái</i>	ผลไม้	fruit
<i>faràng</i>	ฝรั่ง	guava
<i>klúay</i>	กล้วย	banana
<i>mákhǎam</i>	มะขาม	tamarind
<i>málákaw</i>	มะละกอ	papaya
<i>mámúang</i>	มะม่วง	mango
<i>mánao</i>	มะนาว	lime
<i>mang-khút</i>	มังคุด	mangosteen
<i>máphráo</i>	มะพร้าว	coconut
<i>ngáw</i>	เงาะ	rambutan
<i>taeng moh</i>	แตงโม	watermelon

DRINKS

<i>bia</i>	เบียร์	beer
<i>chaa</i>	ชา	tea
<i>kaafae</i>	กาแฟ	coffee
<i>khreuang dèum</i>	เครื่องดื่ม	beverages
<i>nám</i>	น้ำ	water or juice
<i>nám áwy</i>	น้ำอ้อย	raw, lumpy cane sugar/sugar-cane juice
<i>nám dèum</i>	น้ำดื่ม	drinking water
<i>nám khǎeng</i>	น้ำแข็ง	ice
<i>nám sóm</i>	น้ำส้ม	orange juice
<i>nám tǎo-húu</i>	น้ำเต้าหู้	soy milk
<i>nom jèut</i>	นมจืด	milk

METHODS OF PREPARATION

<i>díp</i>	ดิบ	raw
<i>nèung</i>	นึ่ง	steamed
<i>phào</i>	เผา	grilled (chillies, vegetables, fish and shrimp only)
<i>phát</i>	ผัด	stir-fried
<i>tóm</i>	ต้ม	boiled
<i>thắwt</i>	ทอด	deep fried
<i>yáng</i>	ย่าง	grilled or roasted

Thailand's Natural Wonders

THE LAND

The land lying to the east of India was poetically referred to as Suvarnabhumi, a Sanskrit term meaning 'Land of Gold', before it was carved up into independent states and strung together as the geographic region of Southeast Asia. Although Thailand is not known for the namesake element, the country has woven much of the majesty and prestige associated with gold into its cultural and geographic identity.

The shape of the country is often likened to two important national themes: sometimes described as a golden axe or as the head of an elephant with the shaft or the trunk represented by the Malay Peninsula. More practically, the Thai boundary encompasses 514,000 sq km, making it about the size of France. The capital of Thailand, Bangkok, sits at about 14° latitude north – level with Madras, Manila, Guatemala City and Khartoum. Needless to say, the golden land of Thailand is tropical and fecund, stretching from lush mountains in the north to an endless coastline in the south.

In the north of the country, the Tibet Plateau has planted a petite offshoot of its heaven-poking mountains into a more benevolent climate, the southernmost occurrence of this mighty Himalayan range. The topography mellows into the central region's rice basket, which is fed by rivers that are as revered as the national monarchy. Thailand's most exalted river is the Mae Nam Chao Phraya. The country's early kingdoms emerged around the Chao Phraya basin, still the seat of the monarchy today. The river delta spends most of the year in cultivation – from muddy plots of land to emerald green fields of youthful rice shoots, to the golden bows of the mature plant. Shore birds from the not-too-distant coast break the irregular paddy patterns with their elegant white profiles, hunting for fish that live among the flooded fields.

A Land on Fire: The Environmental Consequences of the Southeast Asian Boom (2003), by James David Fahn, reports on the environmental outcome of Thailand and Southeast Asia's conversion into modern, tourist-oriented areas.



Giant karst formations tower over emerald waters along the coast of Krabi Province (p690)

SARA-JANE CLELAND

FOR BEACHES & CORAL GARDENS: THAILAND'S BEST NATIONAL PARKS

- Similan Islands (p655): a well-protected preserve famed for snorkelling and diving; it is best visited from November to May
- Ko Tarutao (p730): a series of islands ranging from deserted to developed for back-to-naturists, coral exploration and hiking; best visited from November to May
- Khao Lak/Lamru (p653): coastal park with blonde beaches, crystal-clear water for snorkelling, and rainforest hikes; it is best visited from January to May
- Ko Lanta (p714): a low-key island combining rainforest hiking with beach-bum activities
- Khao Sam Roi Yot (p564): a coastal mangrove forest filled with birdlife

Outlining the contours of Thailand's northern and northeastern border is another celebrated river: the Mekong River. The artery of Southeast Asia, the Mekong both physically separates and culturally fuses Thailand with its neighbours. It is a workhorse river that has been dammed for hydroelectric power, and swells and contracts based on the seasonal rains. In the dry season, riverside farmers plant vegetables in the muddy floodplain, harvesting the fruits of their labour before the river reclaims its territory.

Thailand's northeastern border sits on an arid plateau rising some 300m above the central plain. This is a hardscrabble land where the rains are meagre, the soil anaemic and the red dust stains as stubbornly as betel nuts chewed by ageing grandmothers.

The kingdom's rivers dump their odd assortment of mountain minerals and upstream fresh water into the Gulf of Thailand, a shallow basin distinct from the neighbouring South China Sea. The warm, gentle waters of the gulf are an ideal cultivation ground for brilliantly coloured coral reefs that further temper the rollicking tendencies of the open ocean.

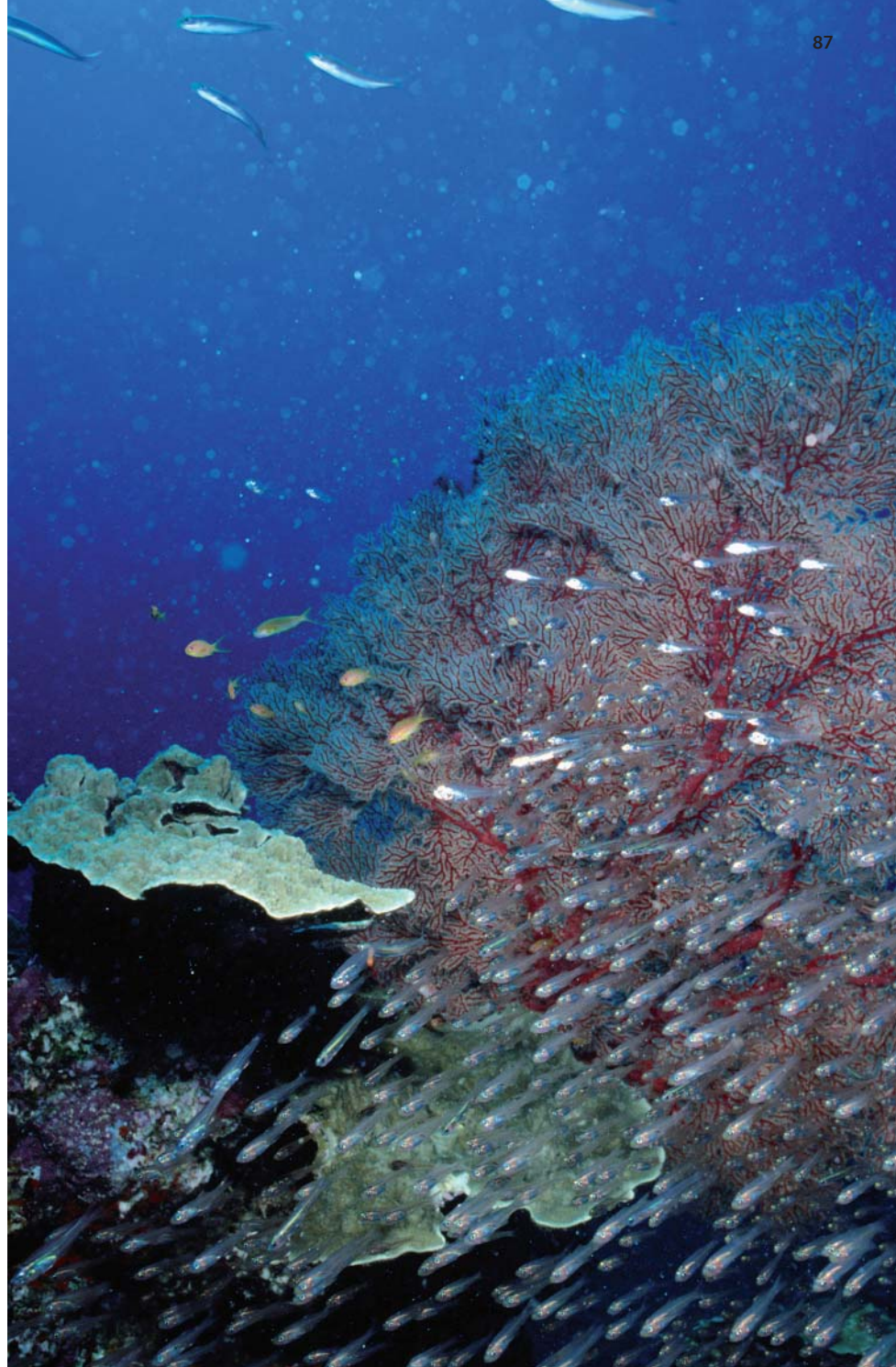
The southernmost stretch of Thailand is the upper portion of the Malay Peninsula, bordered on the east by the Gulf of Thailand and on the west by the Andaman Sea, a watery subdistrict of the vast Indian Ocean. Limestone-

Opposite page: The underwater world of the Similan Islands Marine National Park (p655)

MICHAEL AW

The golden sands of Hat Khao Lak border the stunning Khao Lak/Lamru National Park (p653)

JOE CUMMINGS





Khao Yai National Park (p464) protects one of mainland Asia's largest tracts of monsoon forest
CASEY MAHANEY

encrusted islands dot the Andaman coast, adding drama to the jewel colours of the tropical sea. On the mainland, the Malay Peninsula is dominated by remaining stands of rainforests and cultivated tracts of rubber and palm-oil plantations. Thailand's Andaman Sea and Gulf of Thailand coastlines form 2710km of beaches, hard shores and wetlands. Hundreds of oceanic and continental islands lie offshore on both sides. Thailand's coral-reef system, including the Andaman coast from Ranong to northern Phuket and the Surin and Similan Islands, is one of the world's most diverse.

WILDLIFE

Unique in the region because its north-south axis extends some 1800km from mainland to peninsular Southeast Asia, Thailand's remaining stands of undeveloped land provide habitats for an astounding variety of flora and fauna.

Animals

In the northern half of Thailand, most of the indigenous species are classified zoologically as Indochinese, referring to fauna originating from mainland Southeast Asia, while that of the south is generally Sundaic, typical of peninsular Malaysia, Sumatra, Borneo and Java. A large overlap between the two zoogeographical and vegetative zones starts around Prachuap Khiri Khan on the southern peninsula, and extends north to Uthai Thani, providing habitat for plants and animals from both zones.

Thailand is particularly rich in birdlife, with more than 1000 recorded resident and migrating species – approximately 10% of the world's bird species. The cool mountains of northern Thailand are populated by montane species and migrants, especially flycatchers and thrushes. The forests of Khao Yai National Park in northeastern Thailand are a favourite for hornbills. Marshland birds prefer the wetlands of the central region, while Sundaic species such as Gurney's Pitta flock to the wetter climate of southern Thailand.

Guide to the Birds of Thailand (1991), by Boonsong Lekagul et al, remains the classic field guide for birders in Thailand.

Thai Birding (www.thaibirding.com) is a great online resource for bird sightings and trip reports.

SWEATY HIKES & GREAT VIEWS: THAILAND'S BEST NATIONAL PARKS

- Doi Inthanon (p337): tall granite mountains, views of misty valleys and lots of birdlife; it is best visited from November to May
- Doi Phu Kha (p391): a steep mountain summit overlooking misty valleys, karst caves and silvery waterfalls; it is best visited from November to May
- Um Phang Wildlife Sanctuary (p425): Thailand's biggest, most beautiful waterfall
- Thung Salaeng Luang (p401): massive grasslands are home to carpets of flowers (after the rainy season) and varied wild animals and birdlife
- Khao Yai (p464): a dense monsoon forest famed for its waterfalls and bird and monkey populations; it is best visited from November to April
- Phu Kradung (p504): a popular mountain hike rewards trekkers with sunset views and lots of camping camaraderie; it is best visited from January to May
- Kaeng Krachan (p553): an energy-sapping 6km hike delivers you to the summit of Phanoen Tung for breathtaking views of misty morning valleys
- Khao Sok (p582): a pristine southern rainforest, well-suited for jungle safaris and kayak trips; monkeys and hornbills are commonly spotted and if you time your trip just right you might also see the *Rafflesia*; it is best visited from February to May

Insect species in the kingdom number some 6000 and the country's marine environment counts tens of thousands of species.

More so than any other famous mammal, it is the monkey that visitors are more likely to spot in the country's national parks. Thailand is home to five species of macaque, four species of the smaller leaf-monkey and three species of gibbon. Although they face the same habitat loss as other native species, monkeys in Thailand live in varying states of domestication with humans. But Thais' relationship with monkeys seesaws between generosity and cruelty: food is often given to resident monkey troops as an act of Buddhist merit-making, but it isn't unusual to see a monkey kept in a small cage as an ignored pet.

Other species found in the kingdom's parks and sanctuaries include gaur (Indian bison), banteng (wild cattle), serow (an Asiatic goat-antelope), sambar deer, barking deer, mouse deer and tapir – to name a few.



Left: The renowned foraging skills of macaques are sometimes used in harvesting coconuts on plantations
JAMES MARSHALL

Right: Dusky langurs are some of the resident creatures you might spot in Thailand's national parks
TOM COCKREM

Thailand has several venomous varieties of snake, including the cobra

CAROL WILEY



They are not as numerous as decades past, but lizards and snakes also claim a Thai address. Thailand has six of the venomous variety: the common cobra, king cobra, banded krait, green viper, Malayan viper and Russell's pit viper. Although the relatively rare king cobra can reach up to 6m in length, the nation's largest snake is the reticulated python, which can reach a whopping 10m. The country's many lizard species include two commonly seen in homes – *túk-kae*, a reclusive and somewhat homely gecko that is heard in the early evening coughing its name; and *jing-jòk*, a spirited house lizard that is usually spotted chasing after bugs on ceilings and walls. The black jungle monitor, which looks like a miniature dinosaur, lives in some of the southern forests.

Opposite page: Once the backbone of the logging industry, many of Thailand's domesticated elephants now carry tourists, not timber

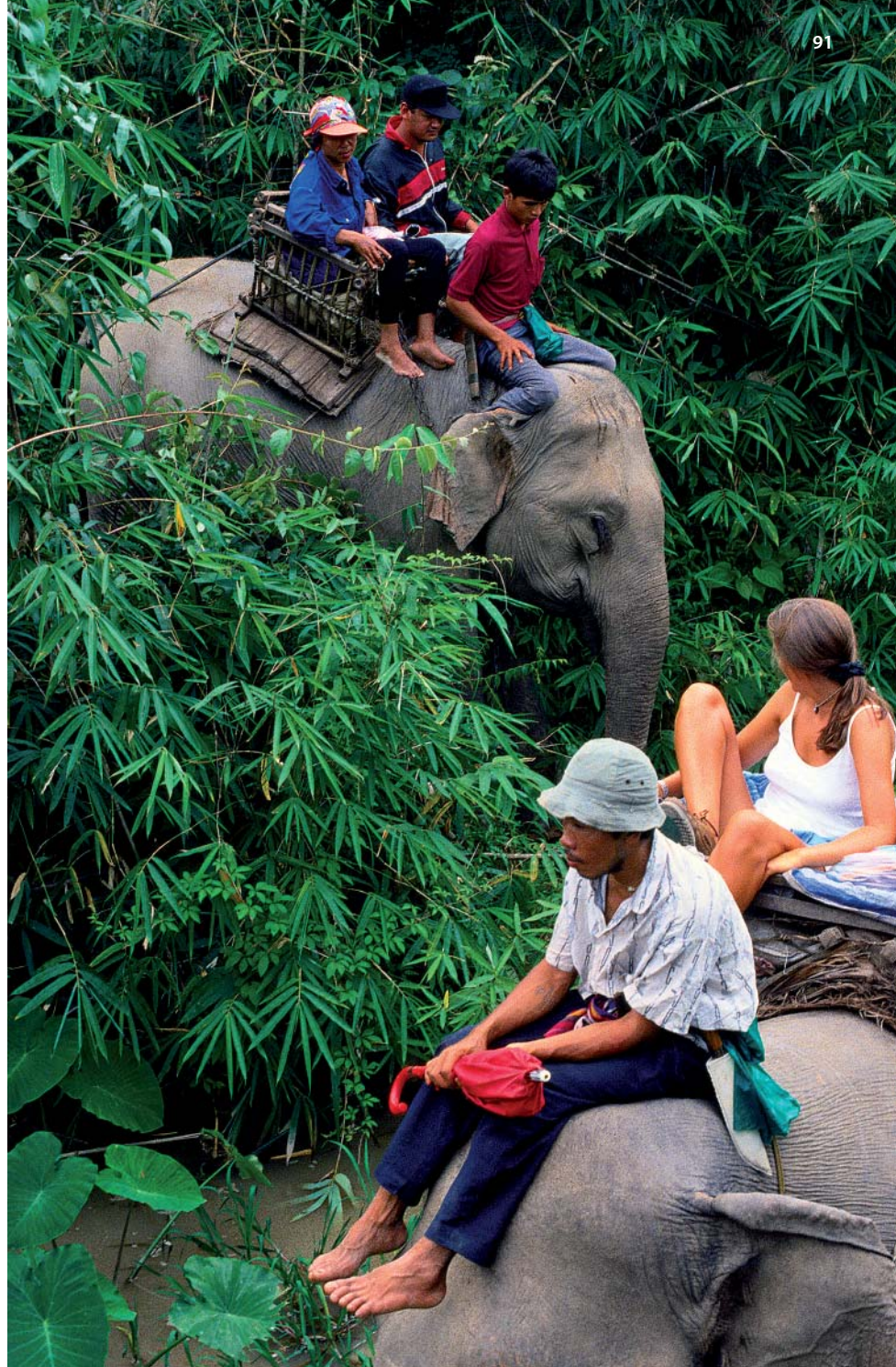
MICK ELMORE

The oceans on either side of the Malay Peninsula are home to hundreds of species of coral, and the reefs created by these tiny creatures provide the perfect living conditions for hundreds of species of fish, crustaceans and tiny invertebrates. The oceans are alive with prehistoric beasts and aquarium-style quick sprinters. You can find the world's smallest fish (a 10mm-long goby) and the largest (the 18m-long whale shark), plus reef denizens such as clownfish, parrotfish, wrasse, angelfish, triggerfish and lionfish. Deeper waters are home to larger species such as grouper, barracuda, sharks, manta rays, marlin and tuna. You might also encounter turtles, whales and dolphins.

Thailand's most famous animals are also its most endangered. The Asian elephant, a smaller cousin to the African elephant, once roamed the

The oceans on both sides of the Malay peninsula are home to abundant fish life and coral

MICHAEL AW





There's an estimated population of around 2000 wild elephants in Thailand, such as this pair in Khao Yai National Park (p464)

ANDERS BLOMQUIST

unclaimed forests of Indochina in great herds. The elephant's massive size and intelligence made it a reliable beast of burden, often corralled during important cultural festivals for the purposes of domestication. The elephant is still a national symbol and has served many roles in Thailand's history: war machine, timber logger, royal transport and godlike character in the Hindu-inherited myths. But both the wild and domesticated elephants face extinction and displacement as Thailand's human population increases and modernises. The population of wild elephants in Thailand is estimated at about 2000. The few remaining stands of elephant habitat often border agricultural villages; this results in ongoing battles between farmers and wild elephants who are prone to raiding crops instead of foraging in the forest. Despite the animals' protected status, retaliation or poaching is often seen by struggling farmers as the only solution to this threat to their livelihood.

The domesticated elephant has suffered more indignity than its wild counterpart as it is now obsolete in modern society. No longer employable in the timber industry or honoured in ceremonial processions, the domesticated elephant and its mahout often wander the streets of the kingdom's major cities reduced to beggars and sideshows. See p43 for information about elephant-sanctuary programmes.

Reclusive wild tigers stalk the hinterland between Thailand and Myanmar but in ever decreasing numbers. It is difficult to obtain an accurate count of surviving tigers, but most experts theorise that around 200 to 300 wild tigers remain in Thailand. Although tiger hunting and trapping is illegal, poachers continue to kill the cats for the lucrative overseas wildlife trade.

Roughly 250 animal and plant species in Thailand are on the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) list of endangered or vulnerable species, with fish, bird and plants species being the most affected.

The Elephant Keeper (1987; directed by Prince Chatrichalerm Yukol) tells the story of an honest forestry chief who tries to protect the wilderness from illegal logging interests; he is assisted by a courageous mahout and his faithful elephant.

Plants

The days of Thailand as a vast jungle country are long gone. The cultivating hand of the farmer and more recently the industrialist has moulded the canopy into field and city. In the remaining protected areas, there are two types of primary forest: monsoon (with a distinct dry season of three months or more) and rainforest (where rain falls more than nine months per year). The most heavily forested provinces are Chiang Mai and Kancharaburi.

Most of the northern and central forests are made up of the deciduous trees of a monsoon forest, which become green and lush during the rainy season, and dusty and naked during the dry season in order to conserve water. Teak is one of the most famous monsoon timbers and still survives in limited quantities in Thailand's forests.

In southern Thailand, where the rainfall is more plentiful, the forests are classified as rainforests with a few zones of mixed monsoon and rainforest vegetation. One remarkable species found in some southern forests is *Rafflesia kerrii*, Thailand's largest flower (which reaches 80cm across); you can see it at Khao Sok National Park (p578) near Surat Thani.

Along the coastal areas are the wetland mangroves that proved to be a helpful buffer during the 2004 tsunami. These mangrove forests were once considered wastelands and have been heavily depleted by urban development and commercial farming, despite the forests' role as a protective incubator for many coastal fish and animal species.

Flourishing in every backyard large enough to claim sunshine is an incredible array of fruit trees (mango, banana, papaya, jackfruit and occasionally durian). Common in the forests are bamboo (more species than any other country outside China), tropical hardwoods and more than 27,000 flowering species, including Thailand's national floral symbol, the orchid. Commercial plantings in the south include coconut, palm oil, cashew and rubber. In the denuded northeast, eucalyptus is often planted to prevent erosion and as a cheap and quick timber source.



Left: The orchid is Thailand's national floral symbol

MARGARET JUNG

Right: Bananas are one of Thailand's staple tropical fruits

FRANK CARTER



Ko Kham (p265), one of the dazzling islands of the Mu Ko Chang National Marine Park

WOODS WHEATCROFT

NATIONAL PARKS & PROTECTED AREAS

With 15% of the kingdom's land and sea designated as park or sanctuary, Thailand has one of the highest percentages of protected areas of any nation in Asia. There are more than 100 national parks, plus more than 1000 'nonhunting areas', wildlife sanctuaries, forest reserves, botanic gardens and arboretums. Twenty-six of the national parks are marine parks that protect coastal, insular and open-sea areas. Thailand began its conservation efforts in 1960 with the creation of a national system of wildlife sanctuaries under the Wild Animals Reservation and Protection Act, followed by the National Parks Act of 1961. Khao Yai National Park was

Seahorses are just one of the underwater delights of Thailand's marine kingdom

ROBERT HALSTEAD

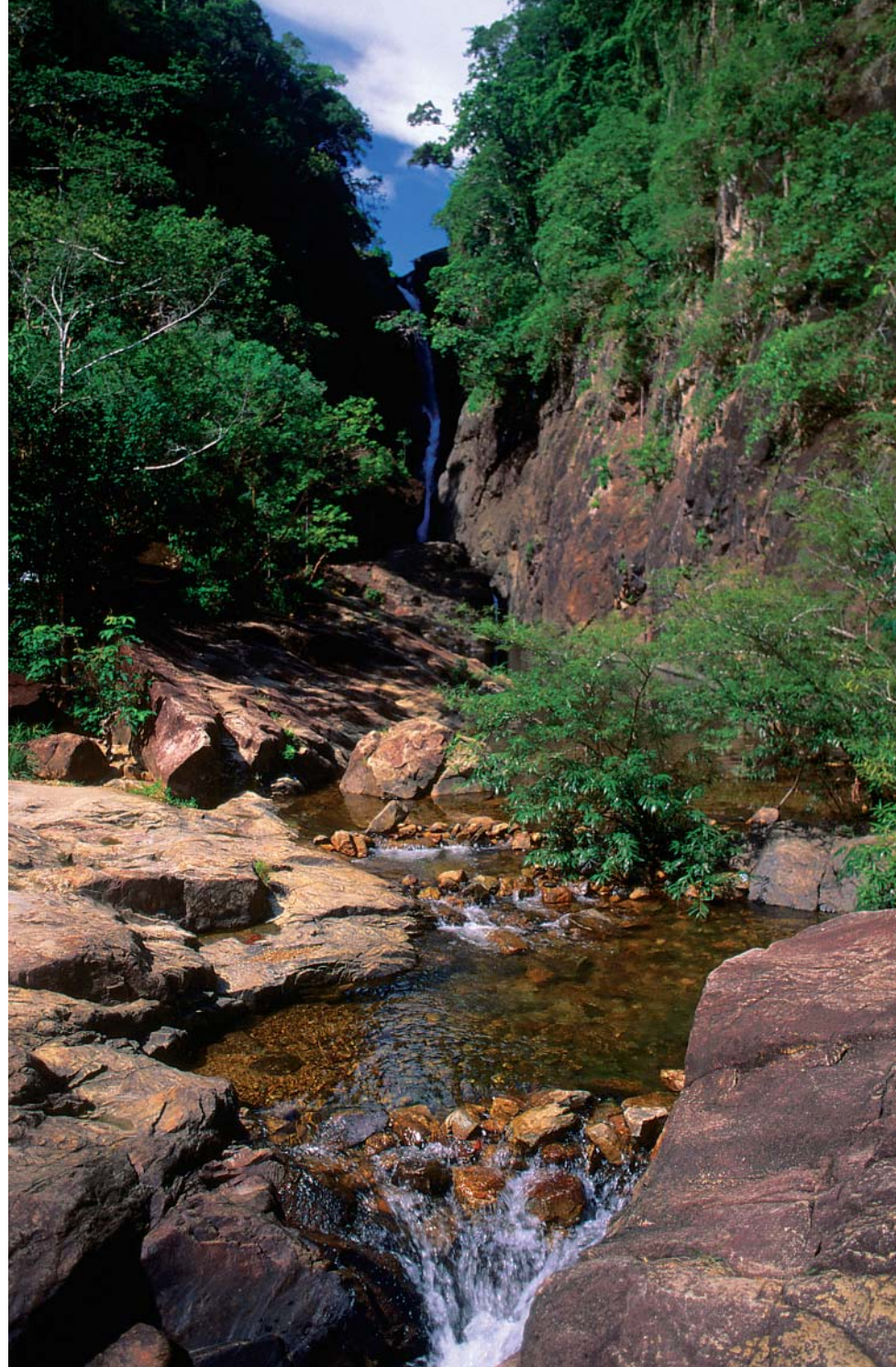


Opposite page: The protected mountainous interior of Ko Chang (p257) is home to dense jungle and tumbling waterfalls

ANDREW LEANNE WALKER

the first wild area to receive this new status. In 2005, Khao Yai along with four other neighbouring parks and sanctuaries was designated a Unesco World Heritage site because of the protected areas' 200km coverage of major rainforest habitat. The parks are administered by the **National Park, Wildlife & Plant Conservation Department** (DNP; www.dnp.go.th).

Marine national parks along the Andaman coast experienced varying amounts of damage from the 2004 tsunami. Roughly 5% to 13% of the coral in reef systems associated with these parks is estimated to have been heavily damaged by the waves or by debris brought by the waves. None of the damage was extensive enough to interfere with park activities in the long run, and all of the parks are open as usual.



ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

Deforestation, Flooding & Species Loss

Typical of countries with high population densities, Thailand has put enormous pressure on its ecosystems. The natural forest cover makes up about 28% of the kingdom's land area as compared to 70% some 50 years ago. The rapid depletion of the country's forests coincides with the modern era's industrialisation, urbanisation and commercial logging. Although these statistics are alarming, forest loss has slowed since 1990 and now equals about a 0.7% per year loss, according to statistics published by the World Bank.

In response to environmental degradation, the Thai government has created a large number of protected areas since the 1970s and has enacted legislation to protect specific plant and animal species. The government hopes to raise the total forest cover to 40% by the middle of this century, but satellite imaging shows that many areas designated as forest cover have been denuded or are so significantly fragmented that they cannot support wildlife populations. In 1989 all logging was banned in Thailand following a disaster the year before in which hundreds of tonnes of cut timber washed down deforested slopes in Surat Thani Province, burying a number of villages and killing more than 100 people. It is now illegal to sell timber felled in Thailand, and all imported timber is theoretically accounted for before going on the market.

Seasonal flooding is a common natural disaster in Thailand, but 2006 was an exceptionally destructive year, especially in Nan Province, which experienced its worst occurrence in 40 years after days of incessant rains. Monsoonal rains during this period caused flooding in 46 provinces in northern and central Thailand. Many environmental experts suspect human alteration of natural flood barriers and watercourses is responsible for increased occurrences of severe flooding. Increased incidents of flooding along the Mekong River are often linked to upstream infrastructure projects, such as dams and removal of rapids for easier navigation, and increased riverside populations. Deforestation and destruction of wetlands and river margins are some of the many compounding factors. Increased seasonal

Ecology Asia (www.ecologyasia.com) has an e-news section that follows green headlines in Thailand.

Doi Inthanon (2565m) is Thailand's tallest mountain.

Deforestation places enormous pressure on Thailand's fragile ecosystems

DENNIS JOHNSON



YOU CALL THIS A PARK?

Why do some Thai national parks look more like tourist resorts? To be perfectly honest, the government's commitment to enforcement of environmental protection is firmer on paper than in practice. Back when forests were natural resources not natural treasures, the Royal Forest Division (RFD) managed the profitable teak concessions. How does a government replace a money-making venture like logging with a money-losing venture like conservation? A sizeable enforcement budget would have been a good start, but rarely did the necessary funds materialise to bar moneyed interests from operating surreptitiously in public lands. The conflict between paper legislation and economic realities became most acute in the late 1990s after the Asian currency crisis crippled the RFD's enforcement budget.

Another loophole arises around land ownership and land use: many of Thailand's parks contain local communities, in some cases marginalised ethnic minorities, subsistence farmers or fisherfolk, whose presence predates the area's park status. Villagers are often disrespectful of forest-protection rules that conflict with traditional practices like slash-and-burn agriculture or firewood collection; some even augment incomes through illegal poaching. More obvious, though, are the southern marine parks where coastal villagers have turned their fishing shacks into bungalows for the emerging tourism industry. In the case of Ko Chang, for example, commercial development of the park was orchestrated by business interests connected to the Thaksin government. The island was once a rural community with a few basic guesthouses and intermittent electricity, but during the Thaksin era the island was given a special economic status and touted as an ecotourism model. The end result was a sizeable profit for politically connected land buyers and a mini-Samui.

It is easy to judge Thailand for mismanaging its natural endowments when the West has, in many cases, squandered and auctioned off its own, but the Thai government is undoubtedly conflicted in its commitment to environmental protection. This is a habit that can be traced back to the creation of the park system and one that is further encouraged with a new revenue source: tourism.

rains, possibly an indication of broader climate changes, overload an otherwise healthy ecosystem.

Thailand is a signatory to the UN Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES). Although Thailand has a better record than most of its neighbours, corruption hinders government attempts to shelter 'exotic' species from the illicit global wildlife trade, which is the third-largest black-market activity after drugs and arms dealing. Between the border of Thailand and Myanmar it is quite easy for poachers and illegal loggers to move contraband from the unregulated forests of Myanmar into the markets of Thailand and beyond. Southeast Asia is a poaching hotspot due to the region's biodiversity and because of inconsistent enforcement of wildlife protection laws.

In any case, wildlife experts agree that the greatest danger faced by Thai fauna is neither hunting nor the illegal wildlife trade but rather habitat loss – as is true worldwide. Species that have become notably extinct in Thailand include the kouprey (a type of wild cattle), Schomburgk's deer and the Javan rhino.

Coastal Development & Overfishing

Coastal development has put serious pressures on Thailand's diverse coral reef system and marine environment. It is estimated that about 25% of Thailand's coral reefs have died and that the annual loss of healthy reefs will continue at a rate of 20% a year. Coral's biggest threat is sedimentation from coastal development, such as new condominiums, hotels, roads and houses. Other common problems include pollution from anchored tour

EnviroSEA (www.envirosea.com) is an online news outlet covering environmental issues of coastal Thailand.

Large-scale fishing places pressure on the region's marine environment

PAUL BEINSEN



boats, rubbish and sewage dumped directly into the sea and agricultural and industrial runoff. Coastal development and the attendant light pollution also threaten the breeding cycles of the marine turtles who rely on a dark night sky lit by the moon.

The overall health of the ocean is deteriorating because of Thailand and its neighbours' large-scale fishing industries. Fish catches have declined by up to 33% since the 1980s in the Asia-Pacific region and the upper portion of the Gulf of Thailand is no longer as fertile as it once was. Most of the commercial catches are sent to overseas markets and rarely see a Thai dinner table. The seafood sold in Thailand is typically from fish farms, another large coastal industry for the country.

Air & Water Pollution

Step off the plane in Bangkok and take a deep breath to experience one of Thailand's most pressing environmental problems: poor urban air quality. Bangkok is one of the world's most polluted cities and at least a million Bangkok residents suffer from respiratory problems or allergies triggered by the levels of air pollution. The WHO estimates that particulate matter

in Bangkok is 2.5 times higher than acceptable standards. The primary culprits are emissions from vehicles, mainly diesel vehicles, which comprise less than 10% of the cars in the metropolitan area but contribute approximately 89% of emissions of particulate matter. Even the cleaner cars play a role as the sheer numbers of vehicles on the road in the city each day creates a critical mass of emissions.

However, in the past 10 years, Bangkok has reduced lead, dust and carbon monoxide levels, due to the government's emphasis on phasing out leaded petrol and improving diesel quality. But there are still fleets of old trucks and buses



There are 2.6 million registered cars in Bangkok

JOHN ELK III

TRAVEL WIDELY, TREAD LIGHTLY, GIVE SUSTAINABLY – THE LONELY PLANET FOUNDATION

The Lonely Planet Foundation proudly supports nimble nonprofit institutions working for change in the world. Each year the foundation donates 5% of Lonely Planet company profits to projects selected by staff and authors. Our partners range from Kabissa, which provides small nonprofits across Africa with access to technology, to the Foundation for Developing Cambodian Orphans, which supports girls at risk of falling victim to sex traffickers.

Our nonprofit partners are linked by a grass-roots approach to the areas of health, education or sustainable tourism. Many – such as Louis Sarno who works with BaAka (Pygmy) children in the forested areas of Central African Republic – choose to focus on women and children as one of the most effective ways to support the whole community. Louis is determined to give options to children who are discriminated against by the majority Bantu population.

Sometimes foundation assistance is as simple as restoring a local ruin like the Minaret of Jam in Afghanistan; this incredible monument now draws intrepid tourists to the area and its restoration has greatly improved options for local people.

Just as travel is often about learning to see with new eyes, so many of the groups we work with aim to change the way people see themselves and the future for their children and communities.

on the road, including the city's bus transit system, which cough up clouds of asphyxiating black smoke and also shower the city with fine dust particles.

Chiang Mai, Thailand's second-largest city, also suffers from air pollution due to traffic pressures, and the problem is further augmented by agricultural burning and household rubbish fires. Industrial and chemical pollution from factory activities also adversely affect air quality. Petrochemical pollutants are particularly high in Rayong Province, which is home to Map Ta Phut Industrial Estate, the country's biggest industrial port.

Water pollution varies according to region but is, as would be expected, most acute in the Bangkok metropolitan area because of the relatively high concentration of factories, particularly east of the city. Chemical runoff from agribusiness, coastal shrimp farming and untreated sewage also pollute groundwater and coastal areas. Offshore oil and gas exploration in the Gulf of Thailand has also increased marine pollution.

ENVIRONMENTAL ORGANISATIONS

Chiang Mai has a large concentration of NGOs working on rural- and forest-related issues, especially environmental justice regarding minority hill tribes. International funding, research and policy organisations typically base their headquarters in the capital, Bangkok. Along the Gulf and Andaman coasts are informal village associations that regard the ocean as their backyard and periodically orchestrate beach cleanups or animal rescues. The following activist or research organisations work on environmental and conservation issues in Thailand. For information



Feel like hanging with a gibbon? Then lend a hand at the Phuket Gibbon Rehabilitation Centre (p671).

ANDERS BLOMQUIST

Wat Luang Ta Bua Yanna Sampanno (Tiger Temple; p218) in Kanchanaburi is a monastery-refuge that cares for orphaned tigers

JULIET COOMBE



on environmental volunteering opportunities, see the Thailand & You chapter (p48).

Bird Conservation Society of Thailand (☎ 0 2691 4816; www.bcst.or.th; 43 Soi 29/Chok Chai Ruam Mit, Th Vipahvadee-Rangsit, Dindaeng, Bangkok 10320) Works to preserve birding sites through public and government outreach.

Friends of Asian Elephant (☎ 0 2945 7124; www.elephant.or.th; 350 Mu 8, Soi 61, Th Ramindra, Bangkhen, Bangkok 10230) This Thai NGO operates an animal hospital in Mae Yao National Park in Lampung Province, and specialises in treating abused and injured elephants.

Southeast Asia Rivers Network (Searin; ☎ 0 5327 8334; www.searin.org/indexE.htm; 78 Mu 10, Th Suthep, Chiang Mai 50200) An activist group working to maintain local communities' access to rivers and waterways and to oppose the development of large-scale damming projects. Its projects focus on the Mekong, Mun and Salween rivers.

Thailand Environment Institute (TEI; ☎ 0 2503 3333; www.tei.or.th; 16/151 Muang Thong Thani, Th Bond, Bangpood, Pakkred, Nonthaburi 11120) A nonprofit research institute devoted to sustainable human development and promoting green business models.

Wild Animal Rescue Foundation of Thailand (WAR; ☎ 0 2712 9515; www.warthai.org; 65/1 Soi 55, Th Sukhumvit 55, Bangkok 10110) One of Thailand's leading conservation NGOs working to protect native species through rehabilitation programmes and conservation projects.

World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF; ☎ 0 2524 6128; www.panda.org; 104 Outreach Bldg, Asian Institute of Technology, PO Box 4, Klong Luang, Pathum Thani 12120) WWF has a Thailand-based office working on reducing human-wild elephant conflicts and protecting the ecosystem of the Mekong River and marine environment.

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