

Thailand

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Southern islands** – diving into underwater worlds on Ko Tao (p771), contemplating life on the beaches of Ko Samui (p772), and letting it all hang out in Ko Pha-Ngan (p777)
- **Krabi Province** – kayaking to the islands near Ao Nang (p799) and rising to new heights while rock climbing at Hat Rai Leh (p800)
- **Chiang Mai** – soaking up the intellectual atmosphere of Thailand's northern capital of culture (p727), a sophisticated base to study Thai cooking, massage or meditation
- **Ko Chang** – tuning out in a postcard-perfect beach bungalow, exploring a fishing village and losing yourself in the dense rainforest (p765)
- **Khao Yai National Park** – bird-watching, waterfall hunting and endless trekking through the evergreen forests and grasslands of this Unesco World Heritage site (p751)
- **Off the beaten track** – braving the bumpy, six-hour săwngthăew trip from Mae Sot to Mae Sariang along the Myanmar border (p725)

FAST FACTS

- **Budget** US\$11 to US\$15 (500B to 650B) a day
- **Capital** Bangkok
- **Costs** guesthouse in Bangkok US\$5 to US\$10, four-hour bus ride US\$2.50 to US\$5, rice and curry US\$0.75
- **Country code** ☎ 66
- **Language** Thai
- **Money** US\$1 = 41B (baht)
- **Phrases** *sà wàt dii* (hello), *kà rú naa* (please), *khàwp khun* (thank you)
- **Population** 62 million
- **Time** GMT + seven hours
- **Visas** 30-day visa-free entry for most nationalities



TRAVEL HINT

Throughout most of Thailand, internet connections are frustratingly slow. The solution? Skip the cafés filled with web-surfing foreign travellers, and instead look for the online video game outposts that seem to be packed at all hours with locals kids and teens; their broadband speeds are usually lightning fast. Keep your eyes peeled for the huge window posters advertising Asian video games.

OVERLAND ROUTES

Thailand shares land borders with Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia and Myanmar. Buses are best for Cambodia, crossing the Mekong by boat or bridge is more common for Laos, while comfortable trains and sleeper buses run to Malaysia. There are two day-trip points on the Myanmar–Thailand border, as well as two ‘regular’ crossings.

Thailand. Close your eyes, let the word roll over your tongue, and almost instantly the pictures begin to form in your mind. Maybe you're seeing a stark white beach, with piles of softly pillowing sand stretching out forever. There isn't another person in sight, and a mammoth coconut tree with a curved trunk stretches out over the startlingly blue ocean. Or maybe Thailand to you is the chaos and confusion of big-city Bangkok, with bodies moving in every direction at once, and stinging neon lights beckoning you to drink liquor with bikini-clad bargirls.

Perhaps your Thailand is an open field and an ancient stone Buddha so large its feet are longer than your body. Tourists have captured his image on film thousands of times, but he continues to sit still, eyes closed and peaceful, seemingly keeping a secret.

And that's the thing about Thailand: it is fast and stressful and frightening, and it's quiet and meditative and kind. And yes, it holds secrets, but very few of them will come to you easily.

There's a perfectly good reason why this country is one of the most popular destinations in all of Asia. When you see something here you've never seen before – the wrinkled face of a hill tribe villager, or the come-hither glance of a ladyboy – you start to think hard about what else you don't know, and where else you've not been. Thailand is like that. If you're lucky, it will seep into your pores, and settle heavily on your soul.

Many of you starting your journeys in Thailand have weeks, or months, or even years of Asian exploration ahead, and the good news is that you couldn't possibly have picked a more appropriate place to begin your education. But here's a fair warning: surrender yourself deeply enough to this Land of Smiles, and to its people, and you may find that the person you once were has changed forever. Is that a good thing? The decision, of course, is all yours. Why not just close your eyes and let the pictures begin to form in your mind?

CURRENT EVENTS

The year 2006 did not turn out to be a happy one for former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, a populist billionaire who was elected by a landslide in 2001, and during the following four years had managed to greatly raise the public profile of his Thai Rak Thai (Thais Love Thais) party among even the country's poorest citizens.

It all started on the evening of 19 September. Led by General Sonthi Boonyaratglin, the Royal Thai Army overthrew the elected government in what would become a soft coup; the event was bloodless, and there were no resulting casualties.

The coup had hardly taken the country by surprise, however. Rumours about a possible overthrow had been growing in the media and among the public for months. And while Sonthi offered a number of major issues as an explanation for the revolt – government corruption, human rights abuses, worsening social divisions – the military-installed government hasn't exactly had an easy time turning things around.

Thaksin, for instance, has yet to be tried for corruption. And after nearly a year in power, the junta had still done nothing to prove its claim that Thaksin had disrespected the king – a very serious allegation in Thailand.

Random bomb attacks in Bangkok have also created confusion. Prior to the coup,

anonymous bombings were nearly always assumed to be the work of Muslim insurgent groups from the south. But many are now guessing that pro-Thaksin supporters, still furious about the ousting of their leader, have become the country's most recent terrorist threat. Still talked about in hushed tones are the multiple bombings that took place on 31 December 2006. Three people were killed and dozens injured when two waves of explosions hit six different targets in the city. The city's New Year's Eve celebrations were promptly cancelled. Soon after, the interim government made the subtle suggestion that Thaksin's people were behind it all.

Regardless of the Thaksin situation, the separatist war in the south continues to rage on. Some elements of the minority Muslim community want more autonomy, and even a separate state. Once nothing more than a simmering cauldron of tension, the southern provinces of Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat have deteriorated into literal war zones, where Buddhist men, monks and even schoolchildren are killed daily. The papers in Bangkok are filled with stories of beheadings, bodies charred beyond recognition and execution-style murders. This is particularly bad news for the new government, now led by the former Army Chief Surayud Chulanont, who many assumed would succeed in quelling the southern violence.

Disease has been a big topic of discussion over the past few years. First came SARS and an attempted cover-up, which damaged the country's image. More recently, avian influenza (bird flu) has been breaking out at regular intervals and has claimed some lives.

HISTORY Rise of Thai Kingdoms

It is believed that the first Thais migrated southwest from modern-day Yunnan and Guangxi, China, to what is today known as Thailand. They settled along river valleys and formed small farming communities that eventually fell under the dominion of the expansionist Khmer Empire of present-day Cambodia. What is now southern Thailand, along the Malay peninsula, was under the sway of the Srivijaya empire in Sumatra.

By the 13th and 14th centuries, what is considered to be the first Thai kingdom – Sukhothai (meaning 'Rising Happiness') – emerged and began to chip away at the crumbling empire of Angkor. The third Sukhothai king, Ramkhamhaeng, is credited for developing a Thai writing system as well as building Angkor-inspired temples that defined early Thai art. The kingdom sprawled from Nakhon Si Thammarat in the south to the upper Mekong River and even into Myanmar (Burma), and is regarded as the cultural and artistic kernel of the modern state.

Sukhothai's intense flame was soon snuffed out by another emerging Thai power, Ayuthaya, established by Prince U Thong in 1350. This new centre developed into a cosmopolitan port on the Asian trade route, courted by various European nations attracted to the region by plenty of commodities and potential colonies. The small nation managed to thwart foreign takeovers, including one orchestrated by a Thai court official, a Greek man named Constantine Phaulkon, to advance French interests. For 400 years and 34 successive reigns, Ayuthaya dominated Thailand until the Burmese led a successful invasion in 1765, ousting the monarch and destroying the capital.

The Thais eventually rebuilt their capital in present-day Bangkok, established by the Chakri dynasty, which continues to occupy the throne today. As Western imperialism marched across the globe, King Mongkut (Rama IV, r 1851–68) and his son and successor King Chulalongkorn (Rama V, r 1868–1910) successfully steered the country

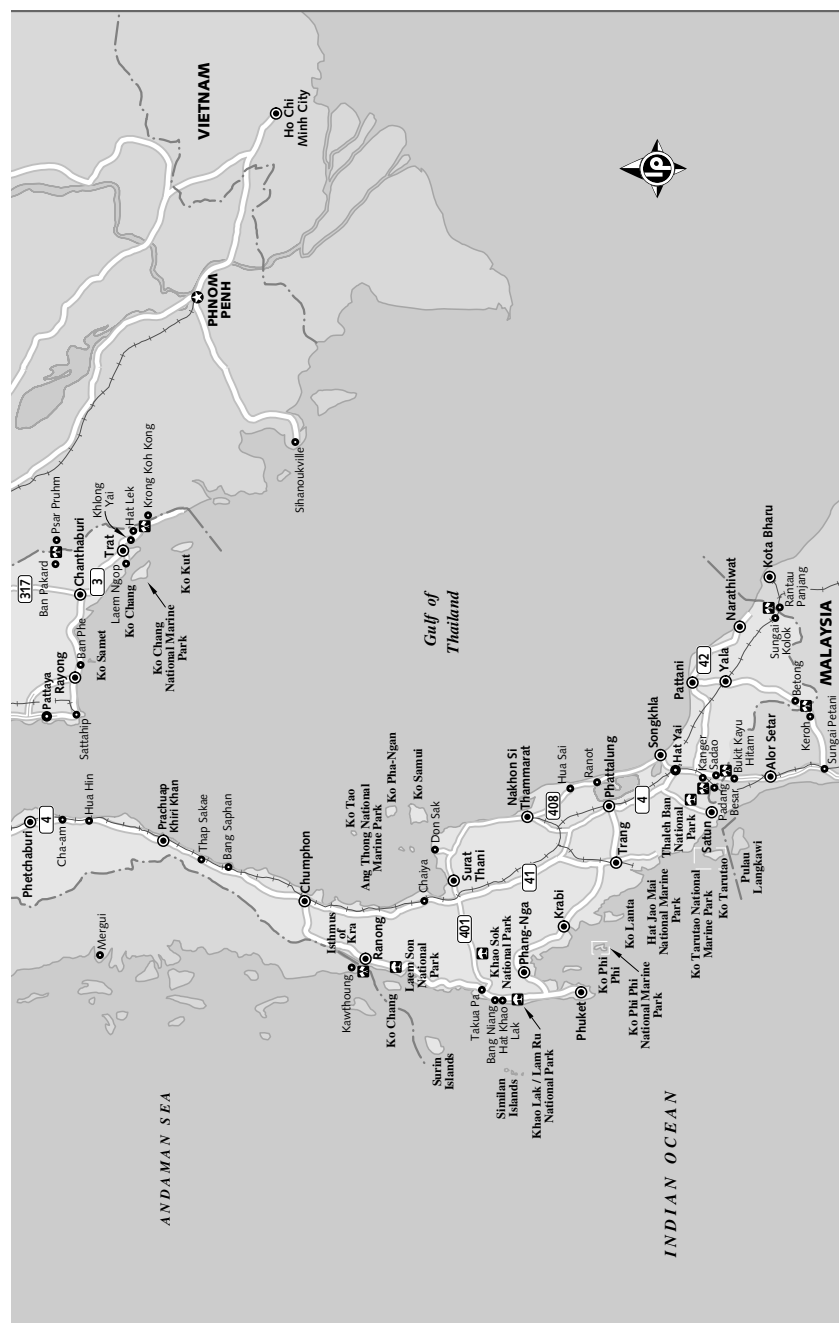
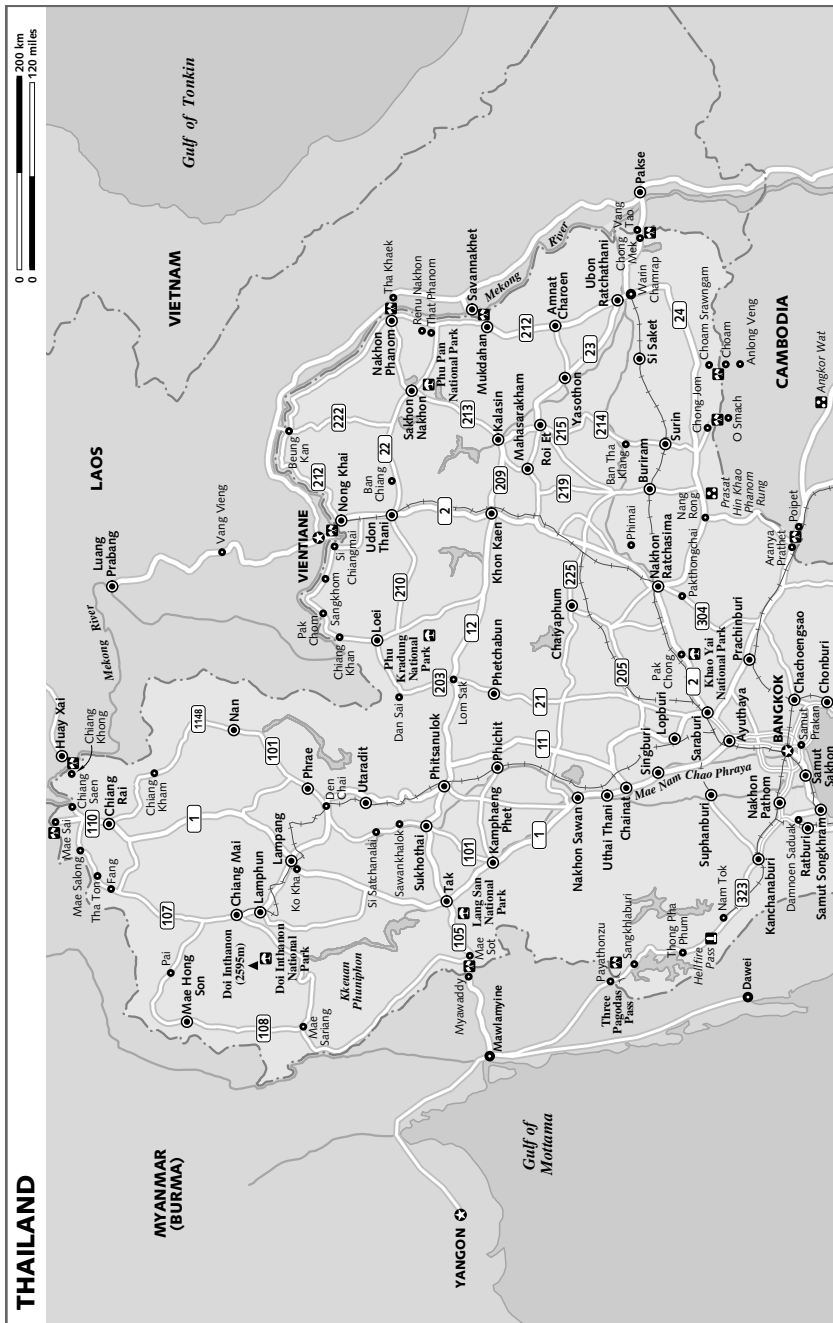
into the modern age without becoming a colonial vassal. Their progressive measures included adopting Western-style education systems, forging trade agreements and introducing Western-style dress. In return for the country's continued independence, King Chulalongkorn returned huge tracts of Laos and Cambodia to French-controlled Indochina – an unprecedented territorial loss in Thai history.

A Struggling Democracy

In 1932 a peaceful coup converted the country into a constitutional monarchy, loosely based on the British model. Nearly half a century of chaos followed in its wake. During the mid-20th century, a series of anticommunist military dictators wrestled each other for power, managing little more than the suppression of democratic representation and civil rights. In 1973, student activists staged demonstrations calling for a real constitution and the release of political dissidents. A brief respite came, with reinstated voting rights and relaxed censorship. But in October 1976, a demonstration on the campus of Thammasat University in Bangkok was brutally quashed by the military, resulting in hundreds of casualties and the reinstatement of authoritarian rule. Many activists went underground to join armed communist insurgency groups hiding in the northeast.

In the 1980s, as the regional threat of communism subsided, the military-backed Prime Minister Prem Tinsulanonda stabilised the country and moved towards a representative democracy. Not content to step out of the political theatre, the military overthrew the democratically elected government in February 1991. This was Thailand's 19th coup attempt and the 10th successful one since 1932. In May 1992, huge demonstrations led by Bangkok's charismatic governor Chamlong Srimuang erupted throughout the city and the larger provincial capitals. The bloodiest confrontation occurred at Bangkok's Democracy Monument, resulting in nearly 50 deaths, but it eventually led to the reinstatement of a civilian government.

Thailand's 16th constitution was enacted in October 1997 by parliamentary vote. Because it was the first charter in the nation's history not written under military order, it is commonly called the 'people's constitution'. Among other changes, the new charter



makes voting in elections compulsory, allows public access to information from all state agencies, mandates free public education for 12 years and establishes commissions devoted to anticorruption and human rights.

During these tumultuous times, King Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama IX, r 1946–), who succeeded his brother after a suspected assassination, defined a new political role for the monarchy. Although powerless to legislate change, the king came to be viewed as a paternal figure who restrained excesses in the interests of all Thais and acted with wisdom in times of crisis.

Economic Roller Coaster

During the 1990s, Thailand was one of the so-called tiger economies, roaring ahead with one of the world's highest growth rates – 9% at its peak. It was poised to join the ranks of Hong Kong, Singapore and other more industrialised nations of the Pacific Rim. But unabated growth soon imploded, sending Thailand and its neighbours into a regional currency crisis in 1997. The Thai baht dived to an all-time low – roughly 40% against the US dollar. The freewheeling boom days were over and the country entered a nearly three-year recession. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) provided a US\$17.2 billion rescue package in the form of short-term loans, with the stipulation that the Thai government follow the IMF's prescriptions for recapitalisation and restructuring.

Thailand's convalescence progressed remarkably well in the following years, with more sustainable economic growth (a healthy 6.3% in 2004, so say the economists) enabling an 'early exit' from the IMF's loan package back in mid-2003.

However, that exit appears to have been something of an ill-timed move as the tourism-dependent side of the economy took several sucker punches soon after, including the outbreak of SARS in 2003, bird flu in 2004 and the devastating waves of the tsunami that pounded the Andaman coast on 26 December 2004.

The ousting of Thailand's democratically elected Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra in September 2006 had inevitable economic consequences, which were slowly reflected in the country's stock exchange. The most extreme one-day plunge in the exchange's history took place on 19 December. The story was signifi-

cantly different for the country's exports in 2006, which rose by 17% that year.

THE CULTURE

Thais are master chatters and for a Westerner they have a shopping list of questions: where are you from, how old are you, are you married, do you have children? Occasionally they get more curious and want to know how much you weigh or how much money you make; these questions to a Thai are matters of public record and aren't considered impolite. They also love to dole out compliments. Foreigners who can speak even the most basic Thai are lauded for being linguistic geniuses. And the most reluctant smile garners heaps of flattery about your ravishing looks. Why do some foreigners come to Thailand and never leave? Because Thais know how to make visitors feel like superstars.

The National Psyche

Thais are laid-back, good-natured people whose legendary hospitality has earned their country a permanent place on the global travel map. Paramount to the Thai philosophy of life is *sànuik* (fun) – each day is celebrated with food and conversation, foreign festivals are readily adopted as an excuse for a party and every task is measured on the *sànuik* meter.

The Thai-on-Thai culture is a lot more mysterious to unravel. Whole books are dedicated to the subject and expats spend hours in speculation. A few guiding principles are *nàa* (face) and elder-junior hierarchy. Like many Asian cultures, Thais believe strongly in the concept of 'saving face' – that is, avoiding confrontation and endeavouring not to embarrass themselves or other people. All relationships in Thai society are governed by connections between the elder and the junior, following simple lines of social rank defined by age, wealth, status and personal and political power. The elder of the table always picks up the tab. The junior in the workplace must do all the elder's menial chores and is not encouraged to participate in meetings or decision-making. The Western mindset is so different in this regard that it becomes something of a handicap in Thai society.

Delving deeper into the serious side of Thailand, the culture's fundamental building blocks are family and religion. Take all the pressures your parents put on you about a career, education, a future spouse and mul-

DID YOU KNOW?

- His Majesty Bhumibol Adulyadej, on the throne for more than 60 years, is the longest-reigning king in Thai history, as well as the longest-reigning current monarch worldwide.
- It is illegal to step on money in Thailand, as the king's image is on all coins and notes.
- The minimum daily wage in Bangkok and surrounding provinces is 175B (US\$4.50).
- Traditional Thai tattoos are believed to have mystical powers, protecting those bearing them from illness, and bringing them good luck.
- Thailand is 543 years ahead of the West, at least according to the Thai calendar that measures from the beginning of the Buddhist Era (in 543 BC).

tiple that by 10 – now you are approaching the environment of your Thai peer. Young Thais from poor families are also expected to support the family financially. Many do so with side jobs; they sell sweets from their front porch, run small internet cafés or sell orange juice to tourists. For a culture that values having a good time, they work unimaginably long hours, usually wearing a beaming smile.

Religion and the monarchy, which is still regarded by many as divine, are the culture's sacred cows. You can turn your nose up at fish sauce or dress like a retro-hippy, but don't insult the king and always behave respectfully in the temples. One of Thailand's leading intellectuals, Sulak Sivarak, was once arrested for describing the king as 'the skipper' – a passing reference to his fondness for sailing. Pictures of the king, including Thai currency and stamps, are treated with deference as well.

Lifestyle

Thailand has a split personality – the highly Westernised urban Thais in major cities, and the rural farming communities more in tune with the ancient rhythms of life. But regardless of this divide, several persisting customs offer us a rough snapshot of daily life. Thais wake up early, thanks in part to the roosters

that start crowing sometime after sunset. The first events of the day are to make rice and to sweep the floor and common spaces – very distinct smells and sounds. In the grey stillness of early morning, barefoot monks carrying large round bowls travel through the town to collect their daily meals from the faithful. Several hours later, business is in full swing: the vendors have arrived at their favourite corner to sell everything imaginable, and some things that are not, and the civil servants and students clad in their respective uniforms swoop in and out of the stalls like birds of prey.

A neat and clean appearance complements Thais' persistent regard for beauty. Despite the hot and humid weather, Thais rarely seem to sweat and never stink. Soap-shy backpackers take note: if you don't honour the weather with regular bathing you will be the sole source of stench on the bus. Thais bathe three or four times a day, more as a natural air-conditioner than as compulsive cleaning. They also use talcum powder throughout the day to absorb sweat, and as one Thai explained, 'for freshy'.

Superficially, eating makes up the rest of the day. Notice the shop girls, ticket vendors or even the office workers: they can be found in a tight circle swapping gossip and snacking (or *gin lèn*, literally 'eat for fun'). Then there is dinner and after-dinner and the whole seemingly chaotic, yet highly ordered affair starts over again.

Population

About 75% of citizens are ethnic Thais, further divided by geography (north, central, south and northeast). Each group speaks its own Thai dialect and to a certain extent practises customs unique to its region or influenced by

WHY WÂI?

Traditionally, Thais greet each other not with a handshake but with a prayerlike palms-together gesture, known as a *wâi*. If someone *wâis* you, you should *wâi* back (unless *wâi*-ed by a child or a serviceperson). The placement of the fingertips in relation to the facial features varies with the recipient's social rank and age. The safest, least offensive spot is to place the tips of your fingers to nose level and slightly bow your head.

neighbouring countries. Politically and economically the central Thais are the dominant group. People of Chinese ancestry make up roughly 14% of the population, many of whom have been in Thailand for generations. Ethnic Chinese probably enjoy better relations with the majority population here than in any other country in Southeast Asia. Other large minority groups include the Malays in the far south, the Khmers in the northeast and the Lao, spread throughout the north and east. Smaller non-Thai-speaking groups include the colourful hill tribes living in the northern mountains.

SPORT

Muay Thai (Thai Boxing)

The wild musical accompaniment, the ceremonial beginning of each match and the frenzied betting around the stadium – almost anything goes in this martial sport, both in the ring and in the stands.

Bouts are limited to five three-minute rounds separated by two-minute breaks. Contestants wear international-style gloves and trunks (always either red or blue) and their feet are taped. 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. A contestant may even grasp an opponent's head

between his hands and pull it down to meet an upward knee thrust. 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.

Matches are held every day of the year at the major stadiums in Bangkok (see p707) and the provinces. There are about 60,000 full-time boxers in Thailand.

Tàkrâw

The most popular variation of *tàkrâw*, sometimes called Siamese football, is best described as volleyball for the feet. Using a *lâuk tàkrâw* (rattan ball), players assemble on either side of the net, using similar rules to volleyball except that only the feet and head are permitted to touch the ball. Like gymnasts 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, but without a backboard!

The traditional way to play *tàkrâw* is for players to stand in a circle and simply try to keep the ball airborne by kicking it, like hacky sack. Points are scored for style, difficulty and variety of kicking manoeuvres.

RELIGION

Alongside the Thai national flag flies the yellow flag of Buddhism – Theravada Buddhism

(as opposed to the Mahayana schools found in East Asia and the Himalayas). Country, family and daily life are all married to religion. Every Thai male is expected to become a monk for a short period in his life, since a family earns great merit when a son 'takes robe and bowl'. Traditionally, the length of time spent in a wat is three months, during the Buddhist lent (*phansāa*), which begins around July and coincides with the wet season, or when an elder in the family dies.

More evident than the philosophical aspects of Buddhism is the everyday fusion with animist rituals. Monks are consulted to determine an auspicious date for a wedding or the likelihood of success for a business. Spirit houses (*phrá phuum*) are constructed outside buildings and homes to encourage the spirits to live independently from the family, but to remain comfortable so as to bring good fortune to the site. The spirit houses are typically ornate wat-like structures set on a pedestal in a prominent section of the yard. Food, drink and furniture are all offered to the spirits to smooth daily life. Even in commerce-crazy Bangkok, ornate spirit houses eat up valuable real estate and become revered shrines to local people.

Roughly 95% of the population practises Buddhism, but in southern Thailand there is a significant Muslim minority community.

ARTS

Music

TRADITIONAL

Classical central Thai music features an incredible array of textures and subtleties, hair-raising tempos and pastoral melodies. Among the more common instruments is the *pii*, a woodwind instrument with a reed mouthpiece; it is heard prominently at Thai boxing matches. A bowed instrument, similar to examples played in China and Japan, is aptly called the *saw*. The *ránàat èhk* is a bamboo-keyed percussion instrument resembling the Western xylophone, while the *khlii* is a wooden flute. This traditional orchestra was originally developed as an accompaniment to classical dance-drama and shadow theatre, but these days it can be heard at temple fairs and concerts.

In the north and northeast there are several popular wind instruments with multiple reed pipes, which function basically like a mouth organ. Chief among these is the *khaen*, which

MUST SEE

Based on a true Thai festival known as the Illuminated Boat Procession, the 2002 film *Mekong Full Moon Party* takes a close look at how the spiritual faith of Thailand is being challenged by the technological scepticism of today. International audiences praised the film for its wonderfully insightful characterisation of modern Thai culture.

originated in Laos; when played by an adept musician it sounds like a rhythmic, churning calliope organ. It is used chiefly in *māw lam* music. The *lâuk thung*, or 'country' (literally, 'children of the fields') style, which originated in the northeast, has become a favourite throughout Thailand.

MODERN

Popular Thai music has borrowed much from the West, particularly its instruments, but retains a distinct flavour. The best example of this is the famous rock group Carabao. Recording and performing for more than 20 years now, Carabao has crafted an exciting fusion of Thai classical and *lâuk thung* forms with heavy metal.

Another major influence on Thai pop was a 1970s group called Caravan. It created a modern Thai folk style known as *phleng phèua chii-wit* (songs for life), which features political and environmental topics rather than the usual moonstruck love themes.

Sculpture & Architecture

On an international scale, Thailand has probably distinguished itself more in traditional religious sculpture than in any other art form. Thailand's most famous sculptural output has been its bronze Buddha images, coveted the world over for their originality and grace.

Architecture, however, is considered the highest art form in traditional Thai society. Ancient Thai homes consist of a single-room teak structure raised on stilts, since most Thais once lived along river banks or canals. The space underneath also serves as the living room, kitchen, garage and barn. Rooflines in Thailand are steeply pitched and often decorated at the corners or along the gables with motifs related to the *naga* (mythical sea serpent), long believed to be a spiritual protector.

ARE YOU A DEEP-FRIED FARÀNG?

Faràng is the word that Thais use for foreigners. It is derived from the word for French (*faràngsèht*) and can be merely descriptive, mildly derogatory or openly insulting, depending on the situation. When kids yell it as they pass by on bikes, it is usually the first, as if they were pointing out a big truck. You can graduate to the last category by being clueless or disrespectful towards the culture. Here are some tips on how to avoid the label:

- Before every movie and in bus and train stations, when the national anthem is played you are expected to stand with your arms by your side.
- Don't lick stamps, which usually bear an image of the king, or your fingers – to the Thais only animals lick things.
- Don't get angry, yell or get physically violent; keep your cool and things will usually work out in your favour.
- Feet are the lowest and 'dirtiest' part of the body in Thailand. Keep your feet on the floor, not on a chair; never touch anyone or point with your foot; never step over someone (or something) sitting on the ground. Take your shoes off when you enter a home or temple.
- Dress modestly and don't sunbathe topless.
- Women aren't allowed to touch or sit next to a monk or his belongings. The very back seat of the bus and the last row on public boats are reserved for monks.

Temple architecture symbolises elements of the religion. A steeply pitched roof system tiled in green, gold and red, and often constructed in tiered series of three levels, represents the Buddha (the Teacher), the Dhamma (Dharma in Sanskrit; the Teaching) and the Sangha (the fellowship of followers of the Teaching).

Theatre & Dance

Traditional Thai theatre consists of six dramatic forms: *khōhn*, formal masked dance-drama depicting scenes from the Ramakian (the Thai version of India's Ramayana) and originally performed only for the royal court; *lakhon*, a general term covering several types of dance-dramas (usually for nonroyal occasions), as well as Western theatre; *li-keh*, a partly improvised, often bawdy folk play featuring dancing, comedy, melodrama and music; *mānohraa*, the southern-Thai equivalent of *li-keh*, but based on a 2000-year-old Indian story; *nāng*, or shadow plays, limited to southern Thailand; and *hūn lūang* or *lakhon lēk* puppet theatre.

ENVIRONMENT

Thailand's shape on the map has been likened to the head of an elephant, with its trunk extending down the Malay peninsula. The country covers 517,000 sq km, which is slightly smaller than the US state of Texas. The centre of the country, Bangkok, sits at about 14° north latitude – level with Madras, Manila, Guatemala and Khartoum. Because the north–south reach spans roughly 16 latitudinal degrees, Thailand has perhaps the most diverse climate in Southeast Asia.

The Land

The country stretches from dense mountain jungles in the north to the flat central plains to

the southern tropical rainforests. Covering the majority of the country, monsoon forests are filled with a sparse canopy of deciduous trees that shed their leaves during the dry season to conserve water. The landscape becomes dusty and brown until the rains (from July to November) transform everything into a fecund green. Typically, monsoon rains are brief afternoon thunderstorms that wet the parched earth and add more steam to a humid day. As the rains cease, Thailand enters its 'winter', a period of cooler temperatures, virtually unnoticeable by a recent arrival except in the north where night-time temperatures can drop to 13°C. By March, the hot season begins with little fanfare and the mercury climbs to 40°C or more at its highest, plus humidity.

In the south, the wet season lasts until January, with months of unrelenting showers and floods. Thanks to the rains, the south supports the dense rainforests more indicative of a 'tropical' region. Along the coastline, mangrove forests anchor themselves wherever water dominates.

Thailand's national flower, the orchid, is one of the world's most beloved parasites, producing such exotic flowers that even its host is charmed.

Wildlife

Thailand is particularly rich in bird life: more than 1000 resident and migrating species have been recorded and approximately 10% of all world bird species dwell here. Thailand's most revered indigenous mammal, the elephant, once ran wild in the country's dense virgin forests. Since ancient times, annual parties led by the king would round up young elephants from the wild to train them as workers and fighters. Integral to Thai culture, the elephant symbolises wisdom, strength and good fortune. White elephants are even more auspicious and by tradition are donated to the king. Sadly, elephants are now endangered, having lost their traditional role in society and much of their habitat.

National Parks

Despite Thailand's rich natural diversity, it's only in recent decades that most of the 96 national parks and 100 wildlife sanctuaries have been established. Together these cover 13% of the country's land and sea area, one of the highest ratios of protected to unprotected areas of any nation in the world.

The majority of the preserved areas remain untouched thanks to the **Royal Forest Department** (www.forest.go.th/default_e.asp), but a few – notably Ko Phi Phi, Ko Samet and Ko Chang – have allowed rampant tourism to threaten the natural environment. Ironically, the devastating tsunami had one positive effect in Ko Phi Phi, washing away the worst of the developments and allowing the island to be reborn. Poaching, illegal logging and shifting cultivation have also taken their toll on protected lands.

Environmental Issues

Like all countries with a high population density, there is enormous pressure on Thailand's ecosystems: 50 years ago about 70% of the countryside was forest; by 2000 an estimated 20% of the natural forest cover remained. In response to environmental degradation, the Thai government has created a large number of protected areas since the 1970s. It is now illegal to sell timber felled in Thailand, and the government hopes to raise total forest cover to 40% by the middle of this century.

Air and water pollution are problems in urban areas. The passing of the 1992 Environmental Act was an encouraging move by the government, but standards still lag centuries behind Western nations.

Thailand is a signatory to the UN Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES). Forty of Thailand's 300 mammal species are on the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) list of endangered species. As elsewhere in the region, the tiger is one of the most endangered of large mammals. Tiger hunting or trapping is illegal, but poachers continue to kill the cats for the lucrative overseas Chinese pharmaceutical market. Around 200 wild tigers are thought to be hanging on in the national parks of Khao Yai, Kaeng Krachan, Thap Lan, Mae Wong and Khao Sok.

Corruption continues to impede the government's attempts to shelter species coveted by the illicit global wildlife trade. The Royal Forest Department is currently under pressure to take immediate action in those areas where preservation laws have not been enforced, including coastal zones where illegal tourist accommodation has flourished.

TRANSPORT

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Thailand has six international airports: Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Phuket, Ko Samui, Sukhothai and Hat Yai. Most international flights arrive at Bangkok.

Airlines operating out of Thailand:

Air Asia (code AK; ☎ 0 2515 9999; www.airasia.com)

Bangkok Airways (code PG; ☎ 0 2265 5678; www.bangkokair.com)

Cathay Pacific Airways (code CX; ☎ 0 2263 0606; www.cathaypacific.com)

Garuda Indonesia (code GA; ☎ 0 2679 7371; www.garuda-indonesia.com)

Lao Airlines (code QV; ☎ 0 2236 9822; www.lao-airlines.com)

Malaysia Airlines (code MH; ☎ 0 2263 0520; www.malaysiaairlines.com)

Myanmar Airways International (code 8M; ☎ 0 2261 5060; www.maiir.com)

Singapore Airlines (code SQ; ☎ 0 2236 0440; www.singaporeair.com)

Thai Airways International (THAI, code TG; ☎ 0 2280 0060; www.thaiair.com)

Vietnam Airlines (code VN; ☎ 0 2280 0060; www.vietnamair.com)

It is possible to fly return from Bangkok to the US, Europe and Australia for less than US\$1000. Cheaper indirect options are available, particularly via Hong Kong, Taiwan and Japan to the US, or via the Middle East to Europe.

Land

Thailand enjoys open and relatively safe border relations with Cambodia, Laos and Malaysia. Myanmar's internal conflicts require a restricted border that is subject to frequent closings and shifting regulations.

DEPARTURE TAX

After staying steady for ages at 500B, the departure tax on international flights was recently raised to 700B, which is paid before passing through immigration. Rumours have been spreading, however, that the departure tax will soon be folded into the price of the plane ticket. This is standard practice at most international airports.

MUST READ

Like a ripe mangosteen, you won't put down Alex Garland's 1997 novel *The Beach* until you've devoured it. A tale of island-hopping backpackers trying to carve out their own private paradise, this is essential reading for any Thailand trip beginning in a Th Khao San fleapit. A glossy Hollywood film based on the novel and starring Leonardo DiCaprio was released in 2000.

CAMBODIA

Along the Thailand–Cambodia border, there are small border crossings that have opened up recently, but they see little traffic due to roller-coaster roads on the Cambodian side. The Chong Jom–O Smach border (p753) connects Surin Province with Siem Reap, but it is very remote on the Cambodian side. There is also another remote crossing that links Choam Srawngam in Si Saket Province with Choam, in the former Khmer Rouge stronghold of Anlong Veng, but access is tough on both sides of the border (see p753). More popular border crossings include Aranya Prathet–Poipet (p709), Hat Lek–Krong Koh Kong (p765) and Ban Pakard–Psar Pruhm (p765).

LAOS

Nong Khai (p758) is the most popular land border crossing between Thailand and Laos. Other crossings include Chiang Khong–Huay Xai (p744), Chong Mek–Vang Tao (p755), Mukdahan–Savannakhet (p756) and Nakhon Phanom–Tha Khaek (p757).

MALAYSIA

The main border crossing into Malaysia is Kanger–Padang Besar (p784), although you can also cross at nearby Sadao (p784). There is also a crossing at Satun–Pulau Langkawi (p803), and you can access Malaysia's east coast at the Sungai Kolok–Rantau Panjang crossing (p786). There has been unrest, however, in the Muslim-majority southern provinces of Thailand, and until the safety situation improves we advise avoiding the journey between Sungai Kolok and this area. There is also a border crossing to Malaysia between Betong and Keroh, but at the time of writing using the border was extremely inadvisable due to violence in the area.

Anyone planning on crossing from Thailand to Malaysia, and then returning to Thailand should ensure they get stamped out as not doing so has caused difficulties for some travellers.

MYANMAR

In peaceful times, foreigners may cross from Mae Sai into Tachilek, Myanmar (p746); there is another crossing at Ranong–Kawthoung (p787). You can also sometimes make day trips into Myanmar at Three Pagodas Pass (p716) and Mae Sot (p726).

GETTING AROUND

Air

Thailand's major domestic carrier is Thai Airways International (THAI), with Bangkok Airways running a close second, but there has been an explosion of no-frills budget airlines serving popular routes in recent years, making for some dirt-cheap deals for the vigilant traveller. The most useful routes for shoestringers are Mae Hong Son–Chiang Mai, Ko Samui–Bangkok and Phuket–Bangkok – in each case a bus ride of eight to 15 hours is condensed to a one-hour hop. But there are also some amazing deals available on the Bangkok–Chiang Mai route, because competition is fierce. Book your tickets several days in advance for all domestic air travel.

Leading airlines for domestic routes:

Air Andaman (code ADW; ☎ 0 2229 9555)

Air Asia (code AK; ☎ 0 2515 9999; www.airasia.com)

Bangkok Airways (code PG; ☎ 0 2265 5678; www.bangkokair.com)

Nok Air (code DD; ☎ 1318; www.nokair.com)

Orient Thai (code OX; ☎ 0 2267 3210; www.orient-thai.com)

Thai Airways International (code TG; ☎ 0 2280 0060; www.thaiair.com)

Thai Airways is currently offering a countrywide air pass to travellers living outside Thailand. The first three coupons in economy class are US\$169; each additional coupon is US\$59. The pass must be purchased outside Thailand.

Bicycle

Bicycles are available for rent in many areas; guesthouses often have a few for rent at only 30B to 50B per day. Just about anywhere outside Bangkok, bikes are the ideal form of local transport because they're cheap, nonpolluting and keep you moving slowly enough to see everything. Carefully note the condition of the bike before hiring; if it breaks down, you are responsible and parts can be expensive.

See p804 for information on bicycle touring in Thailand.

Boat

Being a riverine people, Thais have colourful boats of traditional design. With a long graceful breast that barely skims the water and a tail-like propeller, longtail boats are used as island-hoppers, canal coasters and river ferries.

Small wooden fishing boats, brilliantly painted, sometimes shuttle tourists out to nearby islands. Longer trips to the islands of Ko Pha-Ngan and Ko Tao are undertaken by slow yet determined cargo boats through the dark of night. Boat schedules are subject to change depending on weather conditions and demand.

Bus

The Thai bus service is widespread, convenient and phenomenally fast – nail-bitingly so. While private companies usually bag unsuspecting travellers, you're better off with companies operating out of the government bus station. These buses cater to the Thai community, making them more culturally engaging and safer for your belongings. Starting at the top, VIP buses are the closest you will come to being pampered like a rock star. The seats recline, the air-con is frosty and your very own 'air hostess' dispenses refreshments and snacks. Various diminishing classes of air-con buses begin to strip away the extras until you're left with a fairly beat-up bus with an asthmatic cooling system.

Incredibly punishing but undeniably entertaining are the 'ordinary' buses. These rattletaps have fans that don't work when the bus has come to a stop, school-bus sized seats and a tinny sound system that blares the driver's favourite music. The trip is sweaty, loud and usually involves as many animals and babies as adult passengers. At stops along the way, vendors walk the aisles selling food, everyone throws their rubbish out the window and the driver honks at every passer-by hoping to pick up another fare. It's a real trip!

For long-distance trips, check out schedules and/or purchase tickets the day before. Visit www.transport.co.th for bus routes and timetables in English.

Car & Motorcycle

Cars, 4WDs or vans can be rented in Bangkok and large provincial capitals. Check with travel agencies or hotels for rental locations. Always verify that the vehicle is insured for liability before signing a rental contract, and ask to see the dated insurance documents. If you have an accident while driving an uninsured vehicle, you're in for some major hassles.

Thais drive on the left-hand side of the road – most of the time. Like many places in Asia, every two-lane road has an invisible

ALWAYS LOOK ON THE BRIGHT SIDE...

...unless you happen to be on a Thai bus. If you get on board and everyone has clustered to one side, don't celebrate that you've scored a whole row. Thais instinctively know where the sun will be at all times of the day. The deserted side of the bus will be the side that gets bleached by the sun for the entire trip. Banish the urge to populate virgin territory and join the dark side for the day.

third lane in the middle that all drivers feel free to use at any time. Passing on hills and curves is common – as long as you've got the proper Buddhist altar on the dashboard, what could happen? The main rule to be aware of is that 'might makes right' and smaller vehicles always yield to bigger ones.

Motorcycle travel is a popular way to get around Thailand. Dozens of places along the guesthouse circuit rent motorbikes for 150B to 300B a day. It is also possible to buy a new or used motorbike and sell it before you leave the country – a good used 125cc bike costs around 40,000B. If you've never ridden a motorcycle before, stick to the smaller 100cc step-through bikes with automatic clutches. Motorcycle rental usually requires that you leave your passport.

Hitching

It is uncommon to see people hitching alongside the highway, since bus travel between towns is fairly inexpensive and reliable. Hitching becomes a better option in the country where public transport isn't available. If you get dropped off by a bus outside a national park or historical site, you can catch a ride along the remainder of the road with an incoming vehicle. Just remember to use the Asian style of beckoning: hold your arm out towards the road, palm-side down and wave towards the ground.

That said, hitching is never entirely safe, and travellers who do so should understand that they are taking a small but potentially serious risk.

Local Transport

Rarely does anyone get stuck anywhere in Thailand, but it is also impossible to escape

the hungry drivers who have mastered the most irritating phrase in the English language, 'Hey you, where you go?' A literal translation from the typical Thai inquiry, this phrase will drive you to the edge of insanity, but keep in mind that most don't intend offence, they only want to make a living.

SĀAMLĀW & TŪK-TŪK

Sāamlāw (also written samlor), meaning 'three wheels', are pedal rickshaws, and you'll see them in a few towns in the northeast and in Chiang Mai. These are good for relatively short distances, but expect to pay a little more if you take one further afield, as it is all human powered. Then there are the motorised sāamlāw, called tŭk-tŭk because of the throaty cough their two-stroke engines make. In Bangkok especially, tŭk-tŭk drivers give all local transporters a bad name. The worst are unscrupulously greedy – exorbitantly inflating the fares or diverting passengers to places that pay commissions.

You must bargain and agree on a fare before accepting a ride, but in many towns there is a more-or-less fixed fare anywhere in town.

SĀWNGTHĀEW

Sāwngthāew (literally, 'two benches') are small pick-ups with a row of seats down each side. In some towns, sāwngthāew serve as public buses running regular routes for fixed fares. But in tourist towns, you'll also find sāwngthāew performing the same function as tŭk-tŭk, transporting people to and from the bus station or to popular attractions for a bargained fare.

Train

All rail travel originates in Bangkok and radiates out, forming the following four spurs: Ayuthaya–Phitsanulok–Chiang Mai; Nakhon Ratchasima (Khorat)–Surin–Ubon Ratchathani; Nakhon Ratchasima–Khon Kaen–Nong Khai; and Hua Hin–Surat Thani–Hat Yai. The government-operated trains (www.railway.co.th) in Thailand are comfortable and moderately priced, but rather slow. On comparable routes, the buses can often be twice as fast, but the relatively low speed of the train means you can often leave at a convenient hour in the evening and arrive at your destination at a pleasant hour in the morning. Very useful condensed railway timetables are available in English at the Hualamphong train

station in Bangkok. These contain schedules and fares for all rapid and express trains, as well as a few ordinary trains.

First-, 2nd- and 3rd-class cabins are available on most trains, but each class may vary considerably depending on the type of train (rapid, express or ordinary). First class is typically a private cabin. Second class has individually reclining seats or padded bench seating; depending on the train some cabins have air-con. Non-air-conditioned, 3rd class is spartan and cheap with shared wooden-bench seating.

Ordinary trains only have the most basic version of 3rd class and stop at every itty bity station. Express and rapid are, well, faster and make fewer stops, but there is a 60B surcharge for express trains and 40B for rapid trains. Some 2nd- and 3rd-class services are air-con, in which case there is a 70B surcharge. For the special-express trains that run between Bangkok and Padang Besar (Malaysia) and between Bangkok and Chiang Mai, there is an 80B to 100B surcharge (or 120B if a meal is included).

Overnight trains have sleeping berths in 1st and 2nd class. The charge for 2nd-class sleeping berths is 100B for an upper berth and 150B for a lower berth (or 130B and 200B, respectively, on a special express). For 2nd-class sleepers with air-con add 250/320B for upper/lower. No sleepers are available in 3rd class.

All 1st-class cabins come with individually controlled air-con. For a two-bed cabin the surcharge is 520B per person.

Trains are often heavily booked, so it's wise to reserve your place well ahead, especially for long-distance trips. At **Hualamphong Station** (☎ 0 2220 4334) in Bangkok, you can book trains on any route in Thailand. The advance booking office is open from 8.30am to 4pm daily. Seats, berths or cabins may be booked up to 60 days in advance. Visit www.railway.co.th for train timetables in English.

BANGKOK

pop 6 million

Ladies and gentlemen, fasten your seatbelts. You are now entering Bangkok, a city that is always on the move. Ancient temples in the shadow of space-age shopping malls, soaring skyscrapers towering over tumbledown hov-

DON'T MISS...

- catching cool breezes on the Chao Phraya River Express
- shopping for items you never knew existed at the weekend Chatuchak Market
- gawking at sex-tourists along Soi Cowboy and inside Nana Plaza
- taking a ride on the Skytrain

els, ubercool cafés and restaurants surrounded by simple street stalls: Bangkok is an interchange of the past, present and future, and a superb subject for any urban connoisseur. It's your decompression chamber, softening the landing in another world, familiar enough to feel like a hot version of home, exotic enough to point the way to adventures ahead. Delve beneath the elevated highways and skyways and you'll find a small village napping in the narrow *soi* (lanes) with an unmistakable *khwaam pen thai* (Thai-ness).

The capital of Thailand was established at Bangkok in 1782. But the name Bangkok, baptised by foreigners, actually refers to a small village within the larger beast. The Thais call their capital Krung Thep, or City of Angels, a much shortened version of the very official and very long tongue-twister of *Krungthep mahanakhon amonratanakosin mahintara ayuthaya mahadilok popnopparat ratchathani burirrom udomratchaniwet mahasathan amonpiman avatansathit sakkathatiya witsanukamprasit*.

ORIENTATION

The Mae Nam Chao Phraya divides Bangkok from the older city of Thonburi, where the Southern Bus Terminal and the Thonburi (Bangkok Noi) train station are located.

Bangkok can be further divided into east and west by the main railway line, which feeds in and out of Hualamphong station. Sandwiched between the western side of the tracks and the river is the older part of the city, crowded with historical temples, bustling Chinatown and the popular travellers' centre of Banglamphu. This section of town is less urban, relatively speaking, with low-slung residential homes and shops built along the *khlong* (canals).

East of the railway line is the new city, devoted to commerce and its attendant temples

of skyscrapers and shopping centres. Th Phra Ram I feeds into Siam Sq, a popular shopping district, and eventually turns into Th Sukhumvit, a busy commercial centre. Between Siam Sq and Sukhumvit, Th Withayu shelters many of the cities foreign embassies. South of these districts, Th Silom is another concentration of high-rise hotels and multinational offices.

This simple sketch of Bangkok's layout does a real injustice to the chaos that the city has effortlessly acquired through years of unplanned and rapacious development. Street names are unpronounceable, compounded by the inconsistency of romanised Thai spellings. Street addresses are virtually irrelevant as the jumble of numbers divided by slashes and dashes are a record of lot distribution rather than sequential order along a block. *Soi* can't be trusted as they change course more frequently than unfettered rivers.

In short, you will need a good map and a lot of patience. If you plan to use Bangkok's very economical bus system, you should buy the *Tour 'n' Guide Map to Bangkok Thailand*. *Nancy Chandler's Map of Bangkok* is a colourful schematic map of the usual attractions, popular restaurants and other tips from Nancy Chandler, a longtime Bangkok resident. Another contender on the market, *Groovy Map's Bangkok by Day Map 'n' Guide*, combines an up-to-date bus map, sightseeing features and a short selection of restaurant and bar reviews.

INFORMATION Bookshops

The bookshops in Bangkok are among the best in Southeast Asia. Options include the following places:

Aporia Books (Map p698; 131 Th Tanao, Banglamphu) Used books.

Asia Books Th Sukhumvit (Map pp694-5; Soi 15); Th Ploenchit (Map pp694-5; 3rd fl, Central World Plaza); Th Silom (Map pp694-5; 3rd fl, Thaniya Plaza); Th Ratchadamri (Map pp694-5; Peninsula Plaza); Th Phra Ram I (Map pp694-5; Siam Discovery Center) Books on anything and everything.

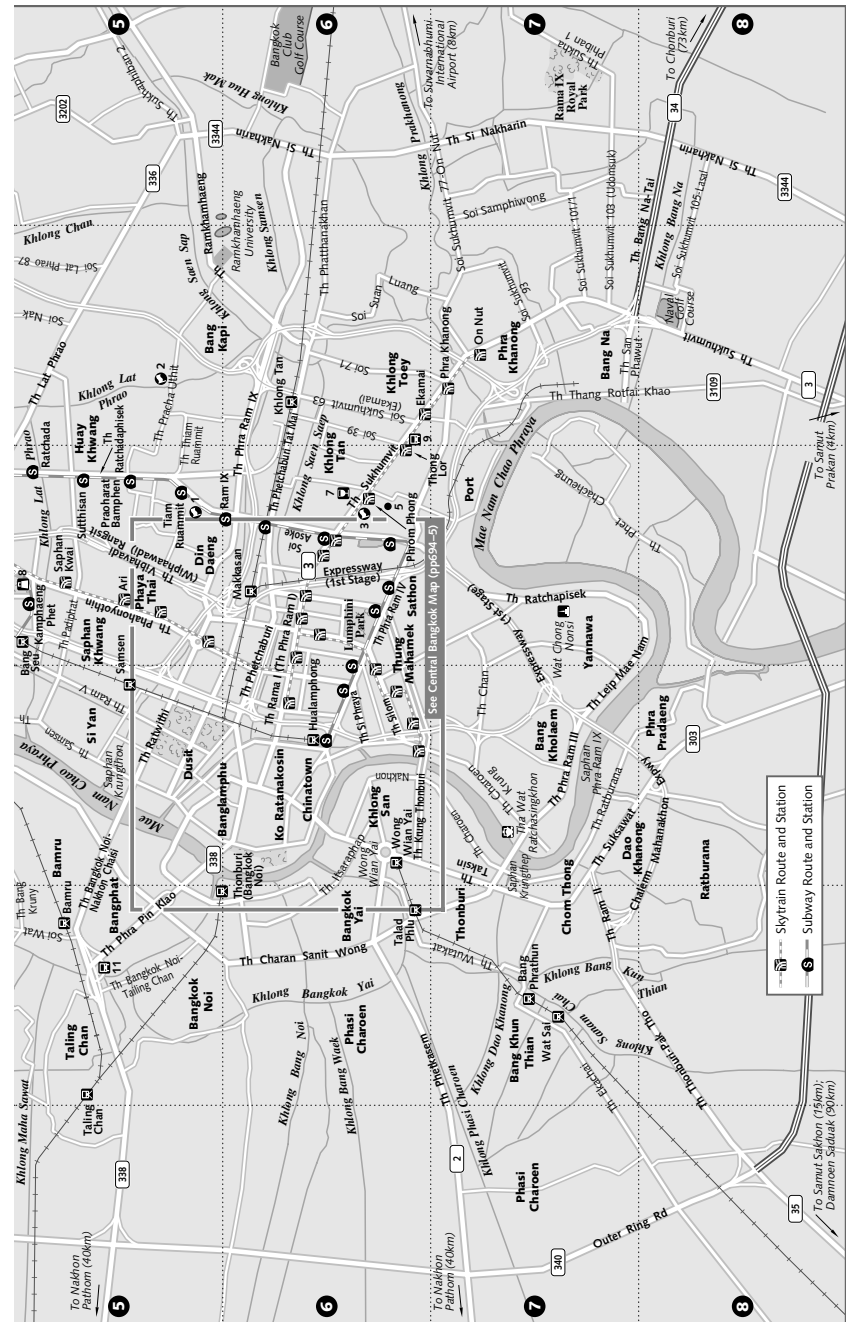
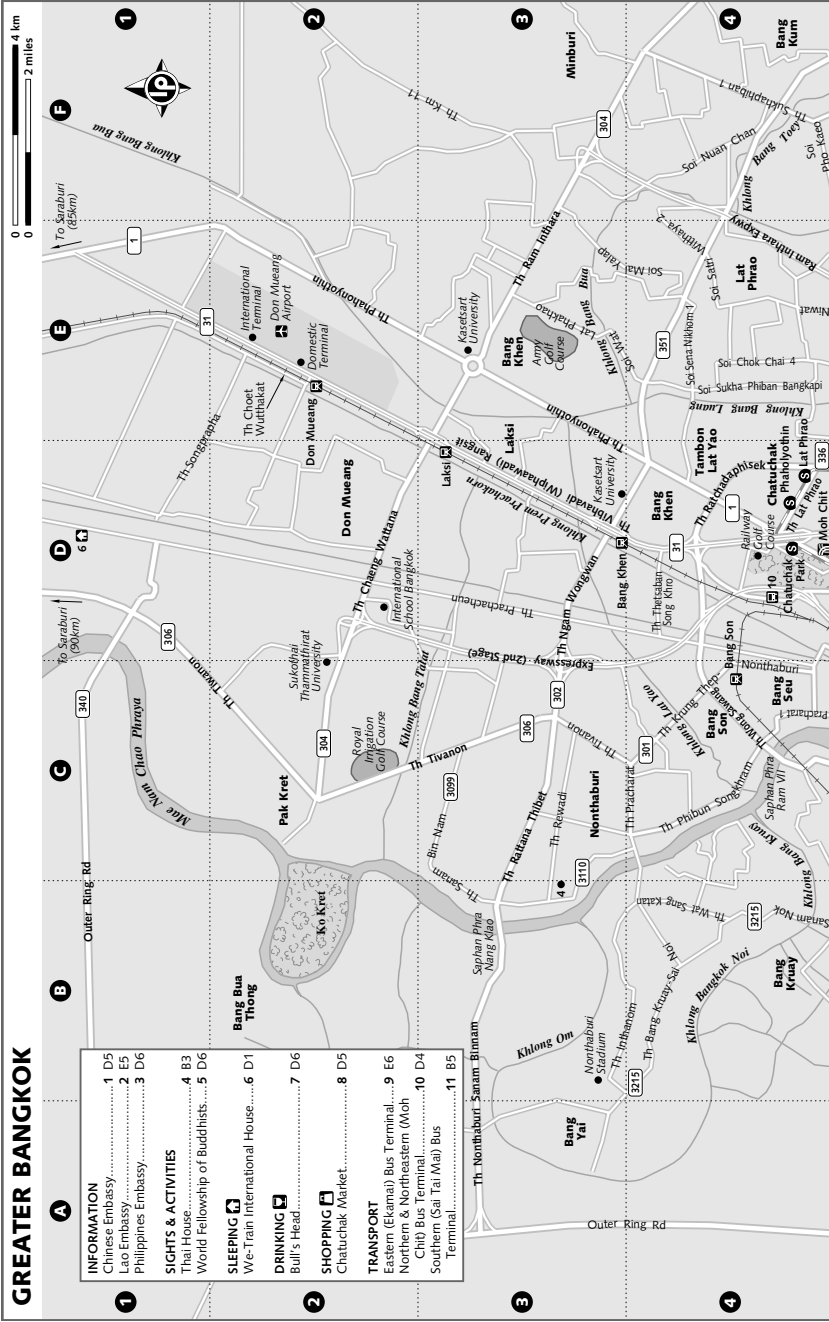
Shaman Books (Map p698; 71 Th Khao San, Banglamphu) Huge selection of used books.

Emergency

Bangkok does not have an emergency phone system staffed by English-speaking operators.

Tourist Assistance Centre (☎ 0 2281 1348; ☎ 8am-midnight) A division of the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) dealing with tourist safety.

GREATER BANGKOK



Tourist police (☎ 1155; 🕒 24hr) English-speaking police to assist tourists in trouble.

Internet Access

Internet cafés are ubiquitous. Rates vary depending on the concentration and affluence of cyber junkies. The cheapest access is found in the back streets around Th Khao San, where it starts at around 30B an hour. Siam Sq is the next best bet, but places around the Th Sukhumvit and Silom areas are more expensive.

Internet Resources

Bangkok Recorder (www.bangkokrecorder.com) Online magazine on music trends (the indie revolution), nightlife (curfew crackdowns) and other vexing capital questions.

Bangkok Thailand Today (www.bangkok.thailandtoday.com) Solid tips on shopping, nightlife, dining and sight-seeing, with an emphasis on the river and Ko Ratanakosin.

Khao San Road (www.khaosanroad.com) News, reviews and profiles of Bangkok's famous tourist ghetto.

Libraries

Besides offering an abundance of reading material in English, Bangkok's libraries make a peaceful escape from the heat and noise.

National Library (Map pp694-5; ☎ 0 2281 5212; cnr Th Samsen & Th Si Ayuthaya) Foreign-language books and magazines; membership free.

Neilson Hays Library (Map pp694-5; ☎ 0 2233 1731; 195 Th Surawong; 🕒 9.30am-4pm Tue-Sat, to 2pm Sun) The oldest English-language library in Thailand. Next to the British Club.

Media

There are a ton of free rags available in Bangkok; many are packed full with useful sightseeing advice for the baht-watching backpacker. Pick up a copy of *Bangkok Metro* or *BK Magazine* for listings, reviews and what's on. Look for the digest-sized magazine *Bangkok 101* at bookstores and newsstands. Essentially a mini-Bangkok guidebook, it also carries up-to-date arts and culture listings.

Medical Services

There are several outstanding hospitals in Bangkok with English-speaking staff.

Bangkok Adventist (Mission) Hospital (Map pp694-5; ☎ 0 2281 1100; 430 Th Phitsanulok)

Bangkok Christian Hospital (Map pp694-5; ☎ 0 2634 0560; 124 Th Silom)

GETTING INTO TOWN

Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi International Airport (Map pp690-1) is most likely where you'll find yourself if you've journeyed to Thailand on an international flight. There are four designated bus routes into town; they run from 5am to midnight. AE1 heads to Silom, AE2 to Banglamphu (near Th Khao San), AE3 to Th Sukhumvit and AE4 to Hualamphong railway station. All bus fares are 150B.

Touts try to steer all arriving passengers towards one of their expensive 650B limousine services or to the flat-rate taxis; ignore them and buy a ticket from the public taxi booth located near the kerb right outside the arrival hall. Fares differ according to destination; most destinations in central Bangkok cost from 200B to 400B.

The cheapest way to get into town from Don Mueang, currently acting as the city's domestic airport, is by train, as there is a station across the street from the airport. Trains run frequently between 4.40am and 9.45pm, take about 45 minutes to one hour and terminate in central Hualamphong station. Tickets cost 10B for ordinary trains. But then you still need to arrange transport from the station!

Once you know where you are going, you are in a position to exploit the public bus system. Located just a few steps outside the airport there is a highway that leads straight into the city. Air-con bus 29 (16B, runs 24 hours) goes to the Siam Sq and Hualamphong areas. Air-con bus 4 (16B, runs from 5.45am to 8pm) works its way to Th Silom and across the river to Thonburi. Air-con bus 513 (16B, 4.30am to 9pm) is a good option for Th Sukhumvit-bound travellers. Air-con bus 510 (16B, 4am to 9.30pm) goes from the airport all the way to the Southern Bus Terminal located in Thonburi.

Confusingly enough, there have been a number of speed bumps and roadblocks associated with the recent reopening of Don Mueang, and in Thailand you may hear rumours about the domestic airport's imminent reclosing. For the time being, your safest bet is to reconfirm all flights before leaving for either airport.

Bumrungrad Hospital (Map pp694-5; ☎ 0 2253 0250; 33 Soi 3, Th Sukhumvit)

Money

Thai banks have currency exchange kiosks in many parts of Bangkok, although a large number of exchange kiosks are concentrated in the Th Sukhumvit, Th Khao San, Siam Sq and Th Silom areas. Hours sometimes vary, but most kiosks are open from 8am to 8pm daily. Regular bank hours in Bangkok are 10am to 4pm. ATMs are located everywhere.

Post

Main post office (Map pp694-5; Th Charoen Krung; 🕒 8am-8pm Mon-Fri, to 1pm Sat & Sun) Poste restante and a packing service for sending parcels home. Branch post offices also offer poste restante and parcel services.

Telephone

Communications Authority of Thailand (CAT; Map pp694-5; Th Charoen Krung; 🕒 24hr) Next to the main post office.

Telephone Organisation of Thailand (TOT; Map pp694-5; Th Phoenchit) International faxes and calls.

Tourist Information

Bangkok Tourist Division (Map p698; ☎ 0 2225 7612; www.bangkoktourist.com; 17/1 Th Phra Athit; 🕒 9am-7pm)

Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT; www.tourismthailand.org) main office (Map pp694-5; ☎ 0 2250 5500; 4th fl, 1606 Th Phetburi Tat Mai; 🕒 8.30am-4.30pm); airport information desk (☎ 0 2504 2701; Arrival Hall, Terminal 1, Bangkok International Airport; 🕒 8am-midnight) To get to the main office, take air-con bus 512, microbus 10 and ordinary buses 11, 38, 58, 60, 72, 99 and 113 or walk from Asoke Skytrain station.

Travel Agencies

There is no shortage of travel agents in Bangkok, but not all of them are legitimate or trustworthy, especially when it comes to cheap airline tickets. Whenever possible, try to see the tickets before you hand over the money. Try the following established agencies:

IBS Travel (Map p698; ☎ 0 2810 1219; 108/11 Th Khao San) One of the most reliable options in backpackersville, just off Th Khao San near Susie Pub.

STA Travel (Map pp694-5; ☎ 0 2236 0262; www.statravel.com; 14th fl, Wall St Tower, 33/70 Th Surawong) Bangkok branch of an international institution.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Bangkok's most heavily toured areas – Wat Phra Kaew, Th Khao San, Jim Thomp-

son's House – are favourite hunting grounds for professional con artists. Smartly dressed and slick talking, not all are Thai, but all will speak your native language fluently. Their usual spiel is that the attraction you want to visit is closed for the day and they can arrange a bargain tour for you elsewhere. This is the bait for the infamous gem scam (see p806).

More obvious are the tók-tók drivers who are out to make a commission by dragging you to a local silk or jewellery shop, even though you've requested an entirely different destination. In either case, if you accept an invitation for 'free' sightseeing or shopping, you're quite likely to end up wasting an afternoon or – as happens all too often – losing a lot of money.

SIGHTS

The cultural gems of Bangkok are found in Ko Ratanakosin, the oldest and holiest part of town. For good old-fashioned wandering, sample the commercial chaos of Chinatown; to escape the heat and congestion, explore the Mae Nam Chao Phraya.

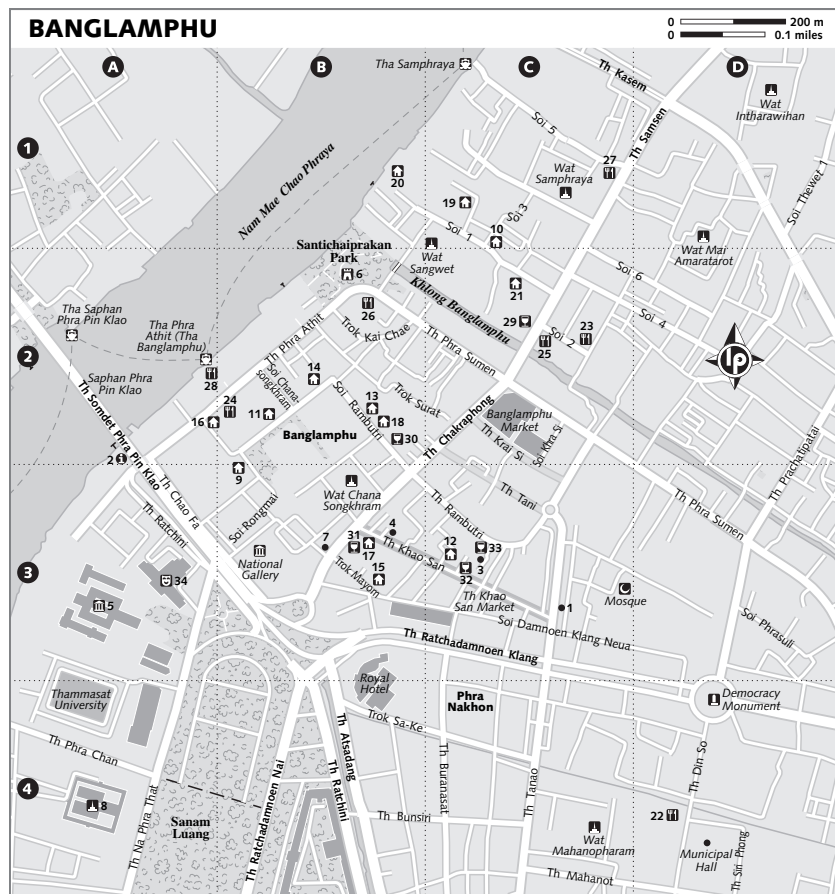
Ko Ratanakosin Area

Bordering the eastern bank of the Mae Nam Chao Phraya, this area is a veritable Vatican City of Thai Buddhism, filled with some of the country's most honoured and holy sites: Wat Phra Kaew, the Grand Palace and Wat Pho. These are also the most spectacular tourist attractions the city has to offer and a must for even the most unmotivated students of culture and history. Many Thais make religious pilgrimages here, so remember to dress modestly (clothes to elbows and knees) and behave respectfully (remove shoes when instructed). And for walking in the grounds, wear shoes with closed toes and heels, not sandals.

Wat Phra Kaew (Map pp694-5; ☎ 0 2623 5500; Th Na Phra Lan; admission 200B; 🕒 8.30am-3.30pm), also known as the Temple of the Emerald Buddha,

THÀNŌN & SOI

Throughout this book, *Thànŏn* (meaning 'street') is abbreviated as 'Th'. A *soi* is a small street or lane that runs off a larger street. The address of a site located on a *soi* will be written as 48/3-5 Soi 1, Th Sukhumvit, meaning off Th Sukhumvit on Soi 1.



Market (Nakhon Kasem; Map pp694–5), so named for the ‘hot’ items once sold here. The neighbourhood is fun to explore at night when it is lit up like a Christmas tree.

On the western side of Chinatown is a small Indian district, known as Phahurat. Th Chakraphet is popular for its Indian restaurants and shops selling Indian sweets.

Wat Traimit (Map pp694–5; ☎ 0 2623 1226; cnr Th Yaowarat & Th Charoen Krung; admission 20B; ☸ 9am–5pm) shelters a 3m-tall, 5.5-tonne, solid-gold Buddha image – an impressive sight, even in the land of a million Buddhas. This gleaming figure was once covered in stucco, but during efforts to move it in the 1960s, the figure fell, cracking the stucco and revealing the treasure inside. The covering was

probably intended to hide it during one of the many invasions by Burma. Located near Hualamphong station, this temple’s English name is, surprise surprise, Temple of the Golden Buddha.

Mae Nam Chao Phraya

Once upon a time, Bangkok was called the ‘Venice of the East’. Canals, not roads, transported goods and people, and the mighty Mae Nam Chao Phraya (Chao Phraya River) was the superhighway leading to the interior of the country. All life centred on these vast canal networks and Thais considered themselves *jào nàam* (water lords). Times have changed, but you can observe remnants of urban river life by observing a Chao Phraya River Express

INFORMATION			
Aporia Books.....	1 C3	Bella Bella House.....	11 B2
Bangkok Tourist Division.....	2 A2	Khao San Palace Inn.....	12 C3
IBS Travel.....	3 C3	Lamphu House.....	13 B2
Shaman Books.....	4 B3	My House.....	14 B2
		New Joe Guesthouse.....	15 B3
		New Merry V Guest House.....	16 A2
		Prakorb’s House.....	17 B3
		Rambuttri Village Inn.....	18 B2
		River Guest House.....	19 C1
		Riveline Guesthouse.....	20 B1
		Villa Guest House.....	21 C2
SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES		DRINKING ☑	
National Museum.....	5 A3	Ad Here the 13th.....	29 C2
Santichaiprakan Park.....	6 B2	Bangkok Bar.....	30 B2
Sor Vorapin Thai Boxing Gym.....	7 B3	Gullivers Traveller’s Tavern.....	31 B3
Wat Mahathat.....	8 A4	Sunset Street.....	32 C3
		Susie Pub.....	33 C3
SLEEPING ☑		ENTERTAINMENT ☑	
Baan Sabai.....	9 B3	Araway.....	22 D4
Bamboo Guest House.....	10 C1	Café Corner.....	23 C2
		National Theatre.....	34 A3

boat at any *thaa* (pier). This is also one of the more pleasant commuting options in Bangkok and is used by a healthy cross-section of the populace, from uniformed schoolchildren to saffron-robed monks.

Just across the river in the area known as Thonburi, **Khlong Bangkok Noi** train station provides a quick escape from Bangkok’s modern madness. The further into the *khlong* you venture, the better the rewards, with teak houses on stilts and plenty of greenery.

Foreigners also had a presence on the river during the bygone shipping era. Two Dutch sea captains built the majestic **Oriental Hotel** (Map pp694–5; ☎ 0 2659 9000; www.mandarinoriental.com; 48 Soi Oriental, Th Charoen Krung), an attraction in its own right. Somerset Maugham and Joseph Conrad were among the Oriental’s famous guests. You can toast those literary giants in the hotel’s Author Wing café or the riverside bar; dress smartly.

Other Attractions

Jim Thompson’s House (Map pp694–5; ☎ 0 2216 7368; Soi Kasem San 2, Th Phra Ram I; adult/child 100/50B; ☸ 9am–5pm) is the beautiful house of the American entrepreneur Jim Thompson, who successfully promoted Thai silk to Western markets. After a long career in Thailand, he mysteriously disappeared in 1967 in Malaysia’s Cameron Highlands; the reason remains unknown and many suspect foul play. Atmospherically sited on a small *khlong*, his house was built from salvaged components of traditional Thai houses. In addition to remarkable architecture, his collection of Thai art and furnishings is superb. Admission proceeds go to Bangkok’s School for the Blind.

Vimanmek Teak Mansion (Map pp694–5; ☎ 0 2628 6300; foreigner/Thai 100/50B, free with Grand Palace ticket; ☸ 9.30am–4pm), in the serene Dusit Palace grounds, is reputedly the world’s larg-

est golden teak building. In the early 20th century Rama V lived in this mansion of graceful staircases, octagonal rooms and lattice walls. The interior contains various personal effects of the king, and a treasure-trove of early Ratanakosin art objects and antiques.

Lumphini Park (Map pp694–5; cnr Th Phra Ram IV & Th Ratchadamri; ☸ 5am–8pm) offers a shady respite from the city’s noise and traffic; the afternoon drop-in aerobics class is great free entertainment whether or not you join the synchronised crowd.

Although religion and commerce may seem diametrically opposed, Thai Buddhism is a flexible faith, as witnessed by the numerous and popular shrines built in front of huge shopping centres and hotels throughout Bangkok. Outside the Grand Hyatt Erawan hotel, the **Erawan shrine** (San Phra Phrom; Map pp694–5; cnr Th Ratchadamri & Th Phloenchit) is dedicated to the Hindu deity of creation and is credited for bringing good fortune and lottery winnings to many of the faithful. If a wish is granted, the wishmaker repays the favour by hiring musicians and dancers to perform in front of the shrine.

Wat Benchamabopit (Map pp694–5; cnr Th Si Ayuthaya & Th Phra Ram V; admission 20B; ☸ 8am–5.30pm), built under the reign of Rama V in 1899, is made of white Carrara marble and is a stunning example of modern temple architecture. The real treasure here is a rear courtyard containing a large collection of Buddha images from all periods of Thai Buddhist art. Wat Ben is diagonally opposite Chitlada Palace. Buses 503 (air-con) and 72 stop nearby.

A small Hindu Shiva temple, **Sri Mariamman** (Maha Umi Devi, Wat Phra Si Maha Umawethi; Map pp694–5; ☸ 5am–8pm) sits on the corner of Th Pan and Th Silom.

FREE STUFF

Despite Bangkok's consumer frenzy, you can soak up city life without spending a baht. In the evenings, break dancers practise their moves on the elevated walkway between the Siam Sq Skytrain station and the various shopping malls. This walkway has become an urban park with cuddling couples, as well as an unsanctioned bazaar with sellers displaying their wares and keeping an eye out for the police.

The narrow lanes of **Little Arabia** (Map pp694-5; Soi 3, Th Sukhumvit), a Middle Eastern transplant that feels like a modern medina, come complete with lively cafés and smoky *sheesha* (water pipe) bars.

More spectacular and synchronised are the evening aerobics classes that occur in **Lumphini Park** (Map pp694-5) and also in **Santichaiprakan Park** (Map p698; Th Phra Sumen, Banglamphu). The combination of the techno beat, setting sun and crowd of bouncing bodies attracts almost as many onlookers as participants.

COURSES**Cooking**

One of the best ways to crack Thailand's lengthy menu is to take a cooking course.

Thai House (Map pp690-1; ☎ 0 2903 9611; www.thaihouse.co.th; 32/4 Moo 8, Bang Yai, Nonthaburi; programme 3550-16,650B) Set in a homely traditional teak house about 40 minutes north of Bangkok by boat. Choose from a one- to three-day programme, which includes preparing Thai standards (*tôm yam*, pad thai and various curries). There are also cooking and lodging packages available.

Language & Culture

AUA Language Centre (Map pp694-5; ☎ 0 2252 8170; www.auathai.com; 179 Th Ratchadamri) One of the most popular places to study Thai, the American University Alumni school is also one of the largest private language institutions in the world.

Chulalongkorn University Continuing Education Centre (Map pp694-5; ☎ 0 2218 3908; www.ccc.chula.ac.th; 5th fl, Vidhyabhathan Bldg, 12 Soi Chulalongkorn, Chulalongkorn University; course US\$950) The most prestigious university in Thailand offers a two-week intensive Thai studies course called Perspectives on Thailand. The 60-hour programme includes classes in Thai culture, history, politics, art and language.

Siri Pattana Thai Language School (Map pp694-5; ☎ 0 2286 1936; YWCA, 13 Th Sathon Tai) This place offers Thai language courses and preparation for the *paw hók* exam, required for teaching in Thai public schools.

Massage

Wat Pho Thai Massage School (Map pp694-5; ☎ 0 2221 3686; watpottm@netscape.net; 392/25-28 Soi Phenphat 1, Th Maharat; course 7000B) Affiliated with Wat Pho, this massage school offers two 30-hour courses – one on general Thai massage, the other on massage therapy – that you attend for three hours per day for 10 days, or two

hours per day for 15 days. Other coursework includes a 15-hour foot massage course (3600B) and longer one- to three-year programmes that combine Thai herbal medicine with massage for a full curriculum in Thai traditional medicine. Some knowledge of Thai will ease the communication barrier for all of these courses.

Meditation

Contact the Buddhist Meditation Centre (☎ 0 2623 5881), affiliated to Wat Mahathat, for information on meditation centres or English-speaking teachers.

Wat Mahathat (Map p698; ☎ 0 2222 6011; Th Maharat) This 18th-century wat opposite Sanam Luang provides meditation instruction daily at Section 5, a meditation hall near the monks' residences. Some of the Thai monks here speak English, and there are often Western monks or long-term residents available to interpret.

World Fellowship of Buddhists (Map pp690-1; ☎ 0 2661 1284; www.wfb-hq.org; Soi 24, Th Sukhumvit) At the back of Benjasiri Park, next to the Emporium, this is a centre for information on Theravada Buddhism. It also sells a handy booklet listing meditation centres throughout Thailand.

Muay Thai (Thai Boxing)

Sor Vorapin Thai Boxing Gym (Sor Vorapin; Map p698; ☎ 0 2282 3551; www.thaiboxings.com; 13 Soi Krasab, Th Chakraphong; courses per day/week/month 400/2500/8000B) In Banglamphu near Th Khao San, this school specialises in training foreign students (women and men). Especially serious boxers should enquire about Sor Vorapin Gym 2, a nearby live-in training facility.

TOURS

ABC Amazing Bangkok Cyclists (☎ 0 2665 6364; www.realasia.net; tour 1000B; ☎ 1-6pm) Discover another side to Bangkok on a cycling tour through Thonburi. The trip starts with a longtail boat ride across the river and includes a slice of village life in the city.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Chinese New Year Thai-Chinese celebrate the lunar new year in February or March, with a week of house-cleaning, lion dances and fireworks. Festivities centre on Chinatown.

Kite-Flying Season In March, during the windy season, colourful kites battle it out over the skies of Sanam Luang and Lumphini Park.

Songkran Held from 13 to 15 April, the celebration of the Thai new year has morphed into water warfare with high-powered pistols and lots of talc being launched at unsuspecting and unsuspecting participants around Th Khao San. Prepare to be soaked or stay away.

Royal Ploughing Ceremony His Majesty the King commences rice-planting season with a royal-religious ceremony at Sanam Luang, in early May.

Loi Krathong A beautiful festival where on the night of the full moon in early November, small lotus-shaped boats made of banana leaf containing a lit candle are set adrift on the river.

King's Birthday On 5 December locals celebrate their monarch's birthday with lots of parades and fireworks.

SLEEPING

Bangkok possesses arguably the best variety and quality of budget places to spend the night of any Asian capital city, which is one of the reasons it's become such a popular destination for roving world travellers. Due to the geographic spread of places, narrow the options by working out where you want to base yourself.

Where there are backpackers, there you will find Th Khao San wannabes. The guesthouse rooms come in every shape and size from cheap cells to fancy frills; the late-night bars are loud and the constant pedestrian traffic is an attraction in itself. Banglamphu, the neighbourhood surrounding Th Khao San, is a sedate residential area with better-value guesthouse options. The drawback is that Banglamphu is far removed from central Bangkok, so trips to other parts of town take some time.

The Siam Sq area is centrally located and on both Skytrain lines. Accommodation in Siam Sq is more expensive than Banglamphu, but then so is the real estate in this popular shopping district.

Th Sukhumvit is a major business area with only a handful of budget hotels. Many hotels attract sex tourists visiting the nearby go-go bars. The Skytrain and Metro have made this otherwise congested area much easier to traverse, but taxi travel is still a nightmare.

Other options include hotels near Hualamphong train station or somewhere near the airport if you have an early flight.

In Bangkok, budget accommodation includes places with rooms ranging from about 100B to 750B per night.

Thàon̄n Khao San & Banglamphu

If you are on a tight budget, head straight to the *soi* around Th Khao San, the main travellers' centre. It is getting a little gentrified of late, and there are some superb options with swimming pools along Soi Rambutri. Along Khao San itself room rates tend to be higher than smarter places just a few blocks beyond. At the budget end, rooms are quite small and the dividing walls are thin. Bathrooms are usually down the hall. Stepping up the price scale, rooms are a smidgen bigger with real walls; another leap forward brings a bathroom, a hot shower and air-con. Some of these guesthouses have small attached cafés with limited menus.

Delving deeper into Banglamphu brings more bang for your baht. The places off Th Samsen are close to Tha Saphan Ram VIII, where you can catch the river taxi.

River Guest House (Map p698; ☎ 0 2280 0876; Soi 3/Soi Wat Samphraya, Th Samsen; r 140-380B) Popular with couples, this place is tucked away down a mazelike *soi*. Bathrooms are shared and breakfast is included.

My House (Map p698; ☎ 0 2629 5861; 37 Soi Chanasongkran; s 150-190B, d 250-500B; ☎ ☎) One of the most consistently popular old-timers on this continuation of Soi Rambutri, My House packs in the lounging shoestring set with nightly videos and cheap food. Rooms are a bit rough around the edges.

Prakorb's House (Map p698; ☎ 0 2281 1345; 52 Th Khao San; s/d/tr 160/250/360B) Small but heavy on atmosphere, the nine rooms here – all with shared bathrooms – are inside a gorgeous old house with teakwood floors. If you're looking for intimacy with flavour, Prakorb's could be a good fit.

our pick Lamphu House (Map p698; ☎ 0 2629 5861; www.lamphuhouse.com; 75-77 Soi Rambutri; s 190-360B, d 350-890B; ☎ ☎) The cheapest rooms here are tiny Khao San standards, but the higher-end digs here have a modern, boutique-hotel feel. The large and serene courtyard café is one of the area's nicest retreats, where even nonguests congregate for wireless access (per hour 40B).

Bella Bella House (Map p698; ☎ 0 2629 3090; 74 Soi Chanasongkran; s 200-250B, d 270-520B; 🍽️) Rooms are nondescript at this big, modern guesthouse, although some have wonderful neighbourhood views. Satellite TV can be found in the café, making this a decent alternative if the more popular places nearby are full.

New Joe Guesthouse (Map p698; ☎ 0 2281 2948; www.newjoe.com; 81 Trok Mayom; s 280B, d 300-450B, tr 400-550B; 🍽️ 🚿) Tucked away in an alley just off Th Khao San and consistently packed, amenities here include a garden restaurant, a large lobby complete with pool table, and young and friendly staff.

Khao San Palace Inn (Map p698; ☎ 0 2282 0578; 139 Th Khao San; s 290-450B, d 400-750B; 🍽️ 🚿) New, comfortable, clean and much more Westernised than your average Khao San fleapit. Ascend to the top floor for swimming pool bliss and a knockout city view.

Rambuttri Village Inn (Map p698; ☎ 0 2282 9162; www.khaosan-hotels.com; 95 Soi Rambutri; s 290-580B, d 580-950B; 🍽️ 🚿 🚿) This sprawling budget guesthouse is awash in cleanliness and comfort, although there's not much atmosphere to speak of. The massive rooftop swimming pool offers unspeakable luxury during those boiling-hot Bangkok afternoons.

Villa Guest House (Map p698; ☎ 0 2281 7009; 230 Soi 1, Th Samsen; s 300B, d 400-600B) If you're dying to spend the night in a traditional teak house, head to this place. Rooms are furnished with battered antiques, and there's a decent travel library in the living room. Bathrooms are shared.

Other places worth considering:

New Merry V Guest House (Map p698; ☎ 0 2280 3315; 18-20 Th Phra Athit; s 140-350B, d 200-500B; 🍽️ 🚿) Conveniently located opposite the Phra Athit pier, this is one of the better cheapies around here.

Riverline Guest House (Map p698; ☎ 0 2282 7464; 59/1 Soi 1, Th Samsen; r 150-470B; 🍽️) Around the corner from River Guest House, each room has its own bathroom here, and the rooftop lounge boasts an impressive river view.

Baan Sabai (Map p698; ☎ 0 2629 1599; 12 Soi Rong-mai; s 170B, tw 270-550B; 🍽️) Quiet and relaxing, with a shaded sitting garden.

Bamboo Guest House (Map p698; ☎ 0 2282 3412; 67 Soi 1, Th Samsen; s/d 200/260B; 🍽️) This large, traditional Thai house appeals to long-stay travellers. A great choice if you need to escape the crowds and Khao San mayhem for a while.

Hualamphong

Hotels near the train station are cheap, but the area is so noisy that the traffic along Th Phra

Ram IV has to be heard to be believed. Exercise a lot of street smarts around the station, which is crawling with razor artists, scammers and lowlives.

Sri Hualamphong Hotel (Map pp694-5; 44 Th Rong Meuang; d 250B) Along the eastern side of Hualamphong station, this Chinese-run hotel is a creaky old spot with a grand staircase and terrace seating. Share bathrooms only.

Krung Kasem Srikung Hotel (Map pp694-5; ☎ 0 2225 0132; 1860 Th Krung Kasem; d 600B; 🍽️) West of the station, Krung Kasem is worth the extra investment, as it is a well-managed business hotel. Large, clean rooms have TV, air-con and hot water.

Siam Square

Siam Sq is a microcosm of this megacity: supermodern shopping centres, nonstop traffic jams and a simple village with traveller-friendly facilities hidden in the small *soi* off Th Phra Ram 1.

Bed & Breakfast Inn (Map pp694-5; ☎ 0 2215 3004; Soi Kasem San 1; s/d 500/600B; 🍽️) The décor doesn't seem to have been updated since the 1970s, and the two poodles living in the lobby look like they could use a serious dose of Wellbutrin. But every room comes with air-con, and – surprise! – breakfast is included.

Wendy House (Map pp694-5; ☎ 0 2216 2436; www.wendyguesthouse.com; Soi Kasem San 1; s/d from 800/900B; 🍽️ 🚿) Easily the slickest and most modern digs on the street, with wireless access in the lobby. The staff are especially eager to please.

Thànnōn Sukhumvit

North of Th Phra Ram IV and east of the railway line, Th Sukhumvit is a major commercial artery, with several enclaves of long-term expats. Most hotels are out of the budget traveller's price range, but it provides a change of scene after an overdose of Banglamphu.

Suk 11 (Map pp694-5; ☎ 0 2253 5927; www.suk11.com; 1/33 Sukhumvit 11, Sukhumvit Rd; dm/s/d 250/480/650B; 🍽️) Once a well-kept secret, this Robinson Crusoe-style guesthouse is popular with seasoned backpackers who've graduated from the Khao San scene. All rooms have air-con, and free breakfast is served in the leafy courtyard. Advance reservations required.

Atlanta (Map pp694-5; ☎ 0 2252 1650; www.theatlantahotelbangkok.com; 78 Soi 2, Th Sukhumvit; r 353-590B; 🍽️ 🚿 🚿) A Bangkok institution, a conceptual art project, a chic refuge from the fast-paced,

postmodern world outside – the Atlanta is all of these things and more. The timeless 1950s lobby, which is filled with an astonishing collection of literary accoutrements and a checkerboard floor, often doubles as a film set. Check out the brilliant guidebook filled with tips on Bangkok travel and Thai culture, and have at least one meal in the retro coffee shop. Sex tourists are not permitted.

Airport

Finding decent, moderately priced accommodation in the airport area is difficult. Most of the hotels charge nearly twice as much as comparable hotels in the city. The following option is convenient only to those travellers flying into or out of Don Mueang Airport, which handles domestic flights.

We-Train International House (Map pp690-1; ☎ 0 2967 8550; www.we-train.co.th; 501/1 Mu 3, Th Dechatungkha, Sikan, Don Mueang; dm 280B, r from 400B; 🍽️ 🚿) Run by a nonprofit women's group, We-Train offers a free pick-up from Don Mueang Airport. Download a map and directions from the hotel's website if making your own way. An especially large pool and a gym are open to guests.

EATING

No matter where you go in Bangkok, food is never far away. The variety of places to eat is simply astonishing and defeats all but the most dogged food samplers in their quest to say they've tried everything. Street surfing the stalls may be the cheapest option, but don't neglect to explore the city's food courts in the shopping centres, as these are the indoor versions (pollution free and air-conditioned) of the city's outdoor markets.

While Thai food may be sufficiently exotic, Bangkok offers an incredible international menu thanks to its many immigrant communities. Chinatown is naturally a good area for Chinese food and the Phahurat quarter around Th Silom is Little India, where cubicle-sized Indian restaurants turn out the best of the subcontinent. In the crowded bazaarlike area of Little Arabia, just off Th Sukhumvit, there is Muslim cuisine from every far-flung corner of the region. Western cuisine, ranging from Italian to Mexican, is prepared in the latest, greatest way for power diners or as pub grub to keep the homesickness at bay.

Vegetarians are onto a good thing in Bangkok. In addition to all of the veggie-speciality

spots, Indian and Muslim restaurants frequently have veggie options, as do most Thai and Chinese restaurants. During the vegetarian festival in October, the whole city goes mad for tofu, and stalls and restaurants indicate their nonmeat menu with yellow flags.

Thànnōn Khao San & Banglamphu

Th Khao San is lined with restaurants, but the prices tend to be higher and the quality somewhat lower than in the surrounding streets of Banglamphu. Serial snackers can survive by surfing up and down the many street vendors here. For a cheap and authentic meal, leave Khao San behind and head to the stalls along Soi Rambutri or Th Chakraphong. Fresh seafood barbecues are now a big hit on Soi Rambutri, washed down with dirt-cheap Beer Chang at 50B a go.

Arawy (Map p698; 152 Th Din So; dishes 35B; 🍽️ breakfast, lunch & dinner) When it comes to genuine vegetarian delights, Arawy is one of the best Thai restaurants in the city. Pre-prepared point-and-eat dishes keep it simple. The restaurant was inspired by ex-Bangkok governor Chamlong Srimuang's strict vegetarianism. The roman-script sign reads 'Alloy' and it is opposite the Municipal Hall.

ourpick Café Corner (Map p698; ☎ 0 1342 4755; www.cafe-corner.tk; 106/13 Soi 2, Th Samsen; dishes 40-120B; 🍽️ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Part organic-vegetarian restaurant and part ambient chill-out lounge, the menu here is a mix of standard Thai soups, salads and entrées, all of them inventively prepared. Don't miss the fruit shakes.

Je Hoy (Map p698; Soi 2, Th Samsen; dishes 50-100B; 🍽️ dinner) Don't be fooled by its rough-and-ready atmosphere; the dishes at this open-air Chinese-Thai restaurant are considered by many to be some of the finest in all of Banglamphu. Open until 4am nightly.

Hemlock (Map p698; ☎ 0 2282 7507; 56 Th Phra Athit; dishes 80-200B; 🍽️ lunch & dinner) On the small stretch of Phra Athit where trend-setting Thais congregate nightly for dinner and drinks, Hemlock is a current favourite. The kitchen prepares Thai dishes you're not likely to spot on other menus, and the atmosphere is both artsy and intimate.

Also worth seeking out: **Roti-Mataba** (Map p698; ☎ 0 2282 2119; 136 Th Phra Athit; dishes 50-80B; 🍽️ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Fried Indian flat breads are what you'll find here, in practically every possible form. And because rotis are small snack foods, you'll want to order a bunch.

Ton Pho (Map p698; ☎ 0 2280 0452; Th Phra Athit; dishes 60-100B; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Overlooking the Mae Nam Chao Phraya, this is a great spot for authentic Thai standards. No roman-script sign.

Sabah Café & Cinema (Map p698; ☎ 0 1552 4439; 131 Th Samsen; dishes 100-450B; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Should you find yourself consistently disappointed by the Western breakfasts on and around Khao San, head straight to Sabah, where you'll find heaping portions with real sausage, bacon, coffee and homemade bread. Films are screened in a tiny upstairs cinema (80B).

Hualamphong, Chinatown & Phahurat

Hualamphong Food Centre (Map pp694-5; Hualamphong station; dishes 30-60B; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) In most countries, station food is the blandest of the bland, but in Thailand the vendors know the importance of fulfilling their customers' needs before a long journey. Stop here for a top selection of Thai, Chinese and Indian dishes.

Royal India Restaurant (Map pp694-5; 392/1 Th Chakraphet; dishes under 80B; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Hidden away down a dark alley across from the ATM Shopping Centre, Royal India has long been considered one of the best North Indian restaurants in town. Staying in Khao San and feeling lazy? Check out Royal India's smart sister restaurant on Soi Rambutri (open for breakfast, lunch and dinner), set around a pond in the grounds of Rambutri Village Inn (p702).

Other options:

ATM Food Centre (Map pp694-5; Th Chakraphet, Phahurat; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Indian food centre on the top floor, plus Indian food stalls in the nearby alley.

Hong Kong Noodles (Map pp694-5; Th Phra Ram IV; dishes 30-80B; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Just outside Hualamphong Metro station, this air-conditioned place has slick Chinese food.

Siam Square

Food vendors on Soi Kasem San 1 do a brisk business of feeding hungry clockwatchers and lounging *faràng*; they are masters at communicating with hand gestures.

Mahboonkroong Food Centre (MBK; Map pp694-5; nr Th Phra Ram I & Th Phayathai; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) The 7th-floor food court in this shopping centre is one of the busiest in the city, thanks to an assortment of tasty dishes that competes with the best on offer in the streets below.

Thànõn Sukhumvit

Larry's Dive Center, Bar & Grill (Map pp694-5; ☎ 0 2663 4563; www.larrysdive.com; 8 Soi 22, Th Sukhumvit; dishes

95-175B; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) A Tex-Mex restaurant with a surf-and-sand beach theme. There's also a sports bar and, yes, an attached dive shop. Seriously. Diners can work up an appetite at the pool table or pinball machines before digging into *quesadillas*, burritos, chilli con carne or even a good ol' American steak. Free wireless internet access.

Cabbages & Condoms (Map pp694-5; ☎ 0 2229 4610; Soi 12, Th Sukhumvit; dishes 100-200B; ☺ lunch & dinner) Founded by a Thai philanthropist with a soft spot for birth control, diners at this eatery are offered condoms instead of after-meal mints. But this is no novelty theme restaurant – all proceeds go to a nonprofit population control organisation, which spends the money on sex education and AIDS prevention programmes. Most of the standard Thai dishes have been thoughtfully tweaked to accommodate sensitive *faràng* palates.

Tamarind Café (Map pp694-5; ☎ 0 2663 7421; 27 Soi 20, Th Sukhumvit; dishes 100-250B; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Try the Tamarind for divine desserts and one of the most creative vegetarian menus in town. This artistic space, home to the F-Stop photographic gallery, includes a sweeping bar, making for hard choices: should you take the innovative fruit shake or the ice-cold beer?

Al-Hussain (Map pp694-5; 1/4 Soi 3/5, Th Sukhumvit; dishes 100-300B; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Just off Th Sukhumvit and Soi 3 (Soi Nana Neua), there is a winding maze of cramped sub-*soi* known as 'Little Arabia', where the number of Middle Eastern and African residents makes this seem like the foreigners. This open-air café has a colourful table of subtly spiced curries and dhal. Air-con inside, street action outside.

Also recommended:

Crepes & Co (Map pp694-5; ☎ 0 2653 3990; 18/1 Soi 12, Th Sukhumvit; dishes 140-280B; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Crepes of all kinds, European-style breakfasts and a nice selection of Mediterranean dishes.

Mrs Balbir's (Map pp694-5; ☎ 0 2651 0498; 13/2 Soi 11/1, Th Sukhumvit; dishes 150-250B, buffet lunches 150B; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Mrs Balbir has been teaching Indian and Thai cooking for many years.

Thànõn Silom & Thànõn Surawong

The small *soi* on the western end of Th Silom and parallel Th Surawong are home to an active Muslim and Indian community, which provides visiting business folk with a taste of home. Also well worth a diversion south

towards the river are the food vendors on Soi 20 (Soi Pradit), off Th Silom near the mosque. The street throngs with office workers at lunchtime and the smells are divine.

Muslim Restaurant (Map pp694-5; 1356 Th Charoen Krung; dishes under 40B; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This faded old restaurant may not look all that great, but it has been feeding various Lonely Planet authors for more than 20 years. Near the intersection of Th Charoen Krung and Th Silom, the assortment of curries and roti is displayed in a clean glass case for easy pointing and eye-catching allure.

Naaz (Map pp694-5; Soi 43, Saphan Yao; dishes 50-70B; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Pronounced 'Naaf' in Thai, this neighbourhood café is often cited as having the richest *khão mòk kài* (chicken biryani) in the city. Dabble with a dessert, as the house speciality is *firni*, a Middle Eastern pudding spiced with coconut, almonds, cardamom and saffron.

Ban Chiang (Map pp694-5; ☎ 0 2236 7045; 14 Soi Si Wiang, Th Surasak; dishes 90-150B; ☺ lunch & dinner) Ban Chiang pays homage to the fiery cuisine of the northeast. Occupying a restored wooden house with simple décor, get acquainted with the tastes of Isan by trying *yam plaa duk fook* (fried shredded catfish salad).

Greater Bangkok

Both of the following places are easily accessible by riding the Skytrain to Victory Monument.

GAY & LESBIAN BANGKOK

Bangkok's gay community is loud, proud and knows how to party. A newcomer might want to visit the website of **Utopia** (www.utopia-asia.com), a great resource for news and happenings in Thailand and Southeast Asia. **Anjaree** (☎ 0 2477 1776) is a lesbian group that organises social events and community outreach programmes. The **Lesbian Guide to Bangkok** (www.bangkoklesbian.com) is one of the only English-language trackers of the scene.

A four-storey gay sauna, **Babylon Bangkok** (Map pp694-5; ☎ 0 2213 2108; 50 Soi Atakanprast, Th Sathon Tai; ☺ 5am-11pm) has been described as one of the top 10 gay men's saunas in the world. Facilities include a bar, roof garden, gym, massage room, steam and dry saunas, and spa baths. The spacious, well-hidden complex also has accommodation.

Conveniently located near Lumpini Park, **Shela** (Map pp694-5; ☎ 0 2254 6463; 106 Soi Lang Suan, Th Ploenchit) is one of Bangkok's very few must-visit lesbian nightclubs. A live band bangs out Thai and Western covers nightly.

Patpong Soi 2 and Soi 4 have the highest concentration of gay dance clubs in the city. DJ Station and JJ Park are just two of many clubs that pack narrow Soi 2 with late-night energy. DJ Station also boasts *kathoe* (transvestite) cabaret. Chill out at Espresso, beside the waterfall wall, for a bird's-eye view of the pretty boys. On Soi 4, Telephone, Bangkok's oldest gay bar, has a 'telephone' by which patrons can get to know one another. Across the street, Balcony has prime people-watching tables.

Victory Point (Map pp694-5; nr Th Phayathai & Th Ratwithi; dishes 25-50B; ☺ dinner) Lining the busy roundabout is a squatters' village of stalls known collectively as 'Victory Point'. Near the fairy lights is a beer-and-food garden with live music. Order a pitcher and a few plates of the zesty Thai classics for a thoroughly satisfying meal.

Pickle Factory (Map pp694-5; ☎ 0 2246 3036; 55 Soi 21, Th Ratwithi; dishes 150-200B; ☺ dinner) Occupying a 1970s-vintage Thai house, the Pickle Factory creates a dinner-party mood with indoor sofa seating and outdoor tables around a swimming pool – the perfect place to chill out for an evening. The menu includes creatively topped pizzas such as Chiang Mai sausage and holy basil paste with wing beans.

DRINKING

Officially Bangkok has a curfew of 1am for bars and 2am for clubs, and this is quite strictly enforced at most establishments. The Khao San area is the exception, where guesthouses and restaurants let the drinks flow, but disguise them in plastic cups. Most short-term travellers passing through stick around Khao San, where the carnival atmosphere keeps drinkers entertained till dawn. There are also some great bars in the surrounding *soi*, as this area is now attracting as many Thais as tourists. If you can rouse yourself from a Beer Chang stupor, brave a pub crawl in such nightspots as Th Silom-Patpong or Th Sukhumvit.

The Khao San area is a cheap place to warm up for a night out, thanks to the proliferation of street bars. Sometimes they are stalls, sometimes VW camper vans with the roof hacked off, but all of them offer dirt-cheap beer and 'very strong' cocktails. Throw in the informal draught beer stands and you are never more than a few metres from an alcoholic drink.

Bars

Sunset Street (Map p698; Th Khao San) Essentially a small assortment of bars and cafés, the establishments along this mini-*soi* represent the polar opposite of your average Banglamphu beer hall. In other words, they're slightly sophisticated and upscale, with a price point to match.

Gullivers Traveller's Tavern (Map p698; Th Khao San) This place pulls the punters as the night wears on. Downstairs is mayhem most nights, but upstairs is usually quieter with a couple of pool tables. Four free internet terminals encourage drunk emailing.

Bangkok Bar (Map p698; 149 Soi Rambutri) One of the very few clubs in backpacker-land where the thump of dance music won't drown out all attempts at conversation. The slick interior design wins extra points as well, although do beware that weekend nights often find this place predictably packed.

Susie Pub (Map p698; Soi 11, Th Khao San) In a covered *soi* off the northern side of Khao San, this longstanding favourite pumps out a nightly dance marathon with the volume cranked to 11. It's especially popular with Thai university students.

Bull's Head (Map pp690-1; Soi 33/1, Th Sukhumvit) One of many British pubs in the Sukhumvit area, the Bull's Head is a beautiful galleried bar that looks like it has been shipped in from London. This is a popular stop for stand-up comedians touring Asia, plus there are quiz nights.

Cheap Charlie's (Map pp694-5; Soi 11, Th Sukhumvit; ☹ closed Sun) Owned and operated for more than 25 years by a truly legendary Bangkok character, this outdoor beer stall is decorated with hundreds of novelty gewgaws and other curious *objets d'art*. As the name suggests, drinks are easy on the wallet, so it figures that expats flock here in big numbers. On a sub-*soi* off Soi 11, look for the 'Sabai Sabai Massage' sign.

Vertigo (Map pp694-5; ☎ 0 2679 1200; Banyan Tree Hotel, 21/100 Th Sathon Tai) Definitely not for Cheap

Charlies, this sky-high, open-air bar will quite literally take your breath away. From ground level, the elevator delivers you to the 59th floor where you emerge above the roar of Bangkok traffic far below. Expensive, but the view is priceless.

Live Music

Saxophone Pub & Restaurant (Map pp694-5; ☎ 0 2246 5472; 3/8 Th Phayathai) A popular live-band jazz and blues venue for more than 20 years now, Saxophone is also a perennial favourite with fans of reggae and rock. Appetising Thai and Western dishes are on offer, as are more than 100 cocktail varieties. Accessible via Skytrain to Victory Monument station.

Ad Here the 13th (Map p698; 13 Th Samsen) Just over the Khlong Banglamphu bridge, elbow space is at a premium in this lively hole-in-the-wall bar. A blues band bangs out crowd favourites six nights a week from 9.30pm (no music on Sundays), which is also when the international Khao San crowd filters in.

Brown Sugar (Map pp694-5; ☎ 0 2250 0103; 231/20 Th Sarasin) Jazz up your life by dropping in on this popular club near Lumpini Park; live blues is occasionally on the menu as well. On Sunday nights, the serious musicians touring the luxury hotels come here to jam. Skytrain to Ratchadamri.

Radio City (Map pp694-5; ☎ 0 2266 4567; Soi Patpong 1) A refreshing slice of slickness in an otherwise seedy locale, this club is next door to Lucifer in the infamous Patpong night market. A live rock band cranks out sing-along cover songs nightly. And make sure you don't miss the Thai Elvis, a longtime Patpong legend who performs at 11pm nightly, except Sundays.

CLUBBING

High-powered cocktails and high heels are the name of the game in the dance and lounge clubs in the City of Angels. The fickle beautiful people are constantly on the move, leaving behind the stylish carcasses to tourists and working girls. Cover charges range from 500B to 700B and usually include a drink or two. Don't even think about showing up before 11pm.

Bed Supperclub (Map pp694-5; ☎ 0 2651 3537; 26 Soi 11, Th Sukhumvit) One of Bangkok's most terminally trendy see-and-be-seen spots, clubbers here lounge about on mattresses while downing overpriced cocktails or noshing on four-

BANGKOK A GO-GO

'We don't come to Thailand for the ruins', was an overheard insult delivered by a veteran sex tourist to an unsuspecting backpacker. True enough, many male visitors come solely for the women or, in some cases, the men. The shopping venues for potential partners occupy a whole subset of Bangkok's nightlife, from massage parlours and go-go clubs to pick-up bars.

Patpong (Soi Patpong 1 & 2, Th Silom), Bangkok's most famous red-light district, has mellowed a lot over the years and now draws more sightseers than flesh-seekers. The open-air tourist market on Patpong 1 has drawn much of the attention away from erotica. There is still a handful of go-go bars that have morphed into a circus of ping-pong shows for tourists and couples. Avoid bars touting 'free' sex shows, as there are usually hidden charges and when you try to ditch the outrageous bill the doors are suddenly blocked by muscled bouncers.

The gay men's equivalent can be found on nearby Soi Thaniya, Soi Pratuchoi and Soi Anuman Ratchathon. Along with male go-go dancers and 'bar boys', several bars feature live sex shows, which are generally much better choreographed than the hetero equivalents on Patpong.

Soi Cowboy (btwn Soi 21 & Soi 23, Th Sukhumvit), a single-lane strip of 25 to 30 bars, claims direct lineage to the post-Vietnam War '70s, when a black American ex-GI nicknamed 'Cowboy' was among the first to open a self-named go-go bar off Th Sukhumvit.

Nana Plaza (Soi 4/Soi Nana Tai, Th Sukhumvit) is a three-storey place that's quite literally a strip-mall, complete with its own guesthouses and used almost exclusively by female bar workers for illicit assignments. The 'female' staff at Casanova consists entirely of Thai transvestites and transsexuals – this is a favourite stop for foreigners visiting Bangkok for sex-reassignment surgery.

course meals. Both resident and international DJs create the minimalist mood.

Q Bar (Map pp694-5; ☎ 0 2252 3274; 34 Soi 11, Th Sukhumvit) Supposedly home to the city's largest cocktail selection, the Q Bar experience is meant to mirror that of an exclusive New York lounge. Touring international DJs of the house, hip-hop and drum-and-bass varieties perform here often. To find it, take Soi 11 all the way to the end and hang a left. No sandals and no shorts.

Narcissus (Map pp694-5; ☎ 0 2258 2549; 112 Soi 23, Th Sukhumvit) A typically over-the-top European-style disco, the opulent Narcissus offers all the stereotypical club trappings: multiple bars and dance floors, techno and trance on the sound system, and split levels all around. The building's Romanesque architecture must be seen to be believed.

Tapas (Map pp694-5; Soi 4, Th Silom) Mix it up Moroccan style at this Th Silom dance club. The drapes and décor are straight out of Marrakesh, but the tunes are jazz, Latin and other world grooves.

Lucifer (Map pp694-5; 76/1-3 Patpong Soi 1, Th Silom) Trance- and techno-heavy Lucifer, with its amusing cave and flaming torch décor, is inside the Patpong night market.

Also check out the string of dance clubs near Lucifer on Soi 2 and Soi 4 (Soi Jaruvan), both parallel to Soi Patpong 1 and 2,

off Th Silom, which attract a mixed clubbing crowd.

ENTERTAINMENT Muay Thai (Thai Boxing)

Lumphini Boxing Stadium (Map pp694-5; Th Phra Ram IV; ☎ bouts 6pm Tue & Fri, 5pm & 6pm Sat), near Lumpini Park, and **Ratchadumnoen Boxing Stadium** (Map pp694-5; Th Ratchadumnoen Nok; ☎ bouts 5pm Mon, Wed & Thu, 6pm Sun), near the Democracy Monument, both host popular *muay thai* fights. The cheapest seats are 500B for the outer circle, 800B for the middle circle and 1500B for ringside. This is for eight to 10 fights of five rounds each; the last three are the headliner events when the stadiums fill up. Aficionados say the best-matched bouts are reserved for Tuesday night at Lumpini and Thursday night at Ratchadumnoen. Always buy tickets from the ticket window, not from a hawkker hanging around outside the stadium.

Ratchadumnoen Stadium can be reached via air-con bus 503 and ordinary bus 70. Lumpini Stadium can be reached via ordinary bus 47.

Thai Classical Dance

Chalermkrung Royal Theatre (Sala Chaloe Krung; Map pp694-5; ☎ 0 2222 0434; cnr Th Charoen Krung & Th Triphet) In this Thai Art Deco building at the edge of the Chinatown-Phahurat district, Chalermkrung provides a striking venue for *khôhn*

performances (see p684). When it opened in 1933, the royally funded Chalermkrung was the largest and most modern theatre in Asia, with state-of-the-art film-projection technology and the first chilled-water air-con system in the region.

National Theatre (Map p698; ☎ 0 2224 1342; Th Na Phra That; admission 20-200B) Near Saphan Phra Pin Klao, the National Theatre hosts performances of the traditional *khóhn*. The theatre holds performances on the last Friday and Saturday of each month, but call ahead for confirmation.

Maneeya Lotus Room (Map pp694-5; ☎ 0 2282 6312; 518/5 Th Ploenchit) Sponsors dinner-theatre performances of Thai classical dance; the food is nothing special, but the prices are reasonable (200B to 500B).

To see some examples of Thai classical dancing for free, hang out at Lak Muang Shrine (Map pp694-5), near Sanam Luang, or Erawan Shrine (Map pp694-5), next to Grand Hyatt Erawan. Dancers are hired in thanks for the shrines' mystical assistance in picking winning lottery numbers.

SHOPPING

Bangkok is not the place for recovering shopaholics, as the temptation to stray from the path is overwhelming. From mesmerising markets to state-of-the-art shopping centres, shopping in Bangkok sets the pulse racing in even the most ardent of antishoppers.

Markets

Phenomenal bargains are on offer at the city's informal markets. Most are an odd assortment of plastic toys, household goods, copy clothing and some knock-off designer watches and bags. Even more interesting are the food markets where food-savvy Thais forage for brightly coloured tapioca desserts, spicy curries and fruits that look like medieval torture devices.

Chatuchak Market (Map pp690-1; Th Phahonyothin; ☎ 8am-6pm Sat & Sun) Chatuchak is the mother of all markets. It sprawls over a huge area with 15,000 stalls and an estimated 200,000 visitors a day. Deep in the bowels of the market, you'll forget that it is daylight. Everything is sold here, from live chickens and snakes to handicrafts and antiques to aisles and aisles of clothes. Everyone leaves thoroughly exhausted with empty wallets and armfuls of plastic bags – it's great fun. To navigate the market like a

WARNING: THE GEM SCAM

Unless you really know your stones, Bangkok is no place to seek out 'the big score'. Never accept an invitation from a friendly stranger to visit a gem shop, as you will end up with an empty wallet and a nice collection of coloured glass. See p806 for more on this.

local, pick up a copy of *Nancy Chandler's Map of Bangkok*, which comes with a detailed Chatuchak section. North of central Bangkok off Th Phahonyothin, air-con buses 502, 503, 509, 510, 512 and 513, ordinary bus 77 and a dozen others serve the market. The Skytrain runs direct to Moh Chit station, which looks over the market.

Other recommendations:

Banglamphu Day Market (Th Chakraphong, Th Tanao & Th Tani) Clothes, foodstuffs and household goods.

Patpong Soi 2 Night Market More popular than the ping-pong shows these days.

Th Khao San Night Market T-shirts, artwork, souvenirs and traveller ghetto gear.

Shopping Centres

All of the following places are shown on Map pp694-5.

Central World Plaza (nr Th Ploenchit & Th Ratchadamri) Formerly known as World Trade Center, Central World is Bangkok's glass-panelled embodiment of consumer excess, complete with eight floors of restaurants, beer gardens, cinemas – even an ice-skating rink. The plaza's lifeblood is the Zen department store, which is dotted with high-end fashion brands. Skytrain to Chit Lom.

Siam Center (nr Th Phayathai & Th Phra Ram I) Thailand's first shopping centre, Siam Center opened its doors in 1976. And while it has aged well, there's even more fun to be had at Siam Paragon and Siam Discovery Center, both of which are attached by pedestrian walkways to Siam Center. The Paragon is probably the most bizarre of the three. In its basement, for instance, you'll find a rather impressive aquarium known as Siam Ocean World, and on the 2nd floor there are actual showrooms for Maserati, Lamborghini and Ferraris. Culture vultures should head directly to the large Kinokuniya bookstore on the 3rd floor, or to the cinema or IMAX theatre on the upper levels. Skytrain to Siam Sq.

Mahboonkrong (MBK; nr Th Phayathai & Th Phra Ram I) Thai teenagers worship this shopping centre, which is just across the road from Siam Sq. Small, inexpensive stalls and shops sell mobile phone accessories, cheap T-shirts, wallets and handbags, plus there is the midrange Tokyu department store.

River City Shopping Complex (Th Charoen Krung) Almost worshipped as a museum, River City contains a number of high-quality art and antique shops on its 3rd and 4th floors. Acala (shop 312) is a gallery of unusual Tibetan and Chinese artefacts. Old Maps & Prints (☎ 0 2237 0077, ext 432; shop 432), owned by two German expats, stocks an impressively wide selection of one-of-a-kind rare and antique maps of Asia. You'll also find pre-20th-century books, prints and engravings.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air Bangkok acts as the air travel hub for Thailand and mainland Southeast Asia. For airlines with representation in Bangkok, see p685. For a list of mainly domestic airlines, see p686. Most domestic flights currently use Bangkok's Don Mueang Airport, 25km outside the city. The city's new Suvarnabhumi International Airport, which opened in September 2006, now handles some domestic and all international flights. Find more information at www.suvarnabhumiairport.com.

Bus

Buses departing from the government bus station are recommended over those departing from Th Khao San and other tourist areas, due to a lower incidence of theft and greater reliability. The Bangkok bus terminals (all with left-luggage facilities) are as follows:
Eastern Bus Terminal (Ekamai; Map pp690-1;

☎ 0 2391 2504; Soi 40/Soi Ekamai, Th Sukhumvit) Pat-taya, Rayong, Chanthaburi and Trat (mainland departure points for boats to Ko Samet and Ko Chang).

Northern & Northeastern Bus Terminal (Moh Chit; Map pp690-1; ☎ northern routes 0 2936 3659, northeastern routes 0 2936 2841; Th Kamphaeng Phet) All northern and northeastern cities including Chiang Mai, Nakhon Ratchasima, as well as central destinations such as Ayuthaya, Lopburi and Aranya Prathet (near the Cambodian border). The terminal's near Chatuchak Park.
Southern Bus Terminal (Sai Tai Mai; Map pp690-1; ☎ 0 2435 7192; nr Hwy 338 & Th Phra Pin Klao, Thonburi) Nakhon Pathom, Damnoen Saduak, Kanchanaburi, Hua Hin, Surat Thani, Phuket, Hat Yai and all points south.

Train

There are two main train stations in Bangkok.
Hualamphong station (Map pp694-5; ☎ general information 0 2220 4334, advance booking 0 2220 4444; Th Phra Ram IV) handles services to the north, northeast and most of the services to the south.
Thonburi station (Bangkok Noi; Map pp690-1) handles Kanchanaburi and some services to the south. If you're heading south, check which station you need.

GETTING AROUND

The main obstacle to getting around Bangkok is the troubling traffic, which adds a half-hour to an hour delay to daytime outings, depending on the route. See p697 for handy routes to popular destinations.

Boat

Slow barges being pulled by determined tug boats, kids splashing around the river banks, majestic Wat Arun rising in the distance like a giant lingam – all these sights are courtesy of the inexpensive river taxis, which ply a regular route along the Mae Nam Chao Phraya. The **Chao Phraya River Express** (☎ 0 2623 6001-3)

GETTING TO CAMBODIA

Anyone undertaking the Angkor pilgrimage into Cambodia will want to cross over the Thai-Cambodian border at Aranya Prathet-Poipet. Most people start this run from Bangkok, which makes for an epic journey: start out early, bring a lot of snacks and practise Buddhist calm.

Frequent daytime buses (four hours) and two trains per day (six hours) connect Bangkok with Aranya Prathet, and from Poipet buses go to Siem Reap (three to six hours). To travel between the two border towns, you must take a tük-tük (motorised rickshaw) or säwngthäew (small pickup). The immigration post is open from 7.30am to 5pm. If the ticket offered to you on Th Khao San sounds too good to be true, it is; they are setting you up for a ride on the Bangkok to Siem Reap Bus Scam (see p89 for more details on avoiding this).

See p97 for information on crossing from Cambodia into Thailand.

operates between Tha Wat Ratchasingkhon in south central Bangkok northwards to Nonthaburi Province. There are four boat lines: two express lines (indicated by yellow or orange flags), the local line (without a flag) and the tourist line. Express boats stop at certain piers during morning and evening hours (usually 6am to 9am and 3pm to 7pm) and cost 10B to 25B, depending on the destination. Local boats stop at all piers from 6am to 7.40pm, and fares range from 6B to 10B, plus small boats ply the width of the river for 2B.

See p697 for the closest *thâa* to your destination.

Bangkok Metropolitan Authority operates two **Khlong Taxi** (ticket 5-8B; ☎ 6am-7pm) routes along the canals: Khlong Saen Saep (Banglamphu to Bang Kapi) and Khlong Phasi Charoen in Thonburi (Kaset Bang Khae port to Saphan Phra Ram I). The Khlong Saen Saep canal service is the most useful one for short-term visitors as it provides a traffic-free trip between Siam Sq and Banglamphu. In Siam Sq, the pier (Tha Ratchathewi) is by the bridge next to the Asia Hotel; in Banglamphu (the last stop on the line) the pier is near Wat Saket and Phra Samen Fort. If travelling from Banglamphu to Siam Sq, it is really easy to miss the stop, so let the person sitting next to you know that you want 'See-yahm Sa-square'. The canals make the Chao Phraya river look like a mountain spring, so try not to get splashed.

Bus

The Bangkok bus service is frequent and frantic, so a bus map (*Tour 'n' Guide Map to Bangkok Thailand*) is an absolute necessity. Don't expect it to be 100% correct though, as routes change regularly.

Fares for ordinary buses vary according to the type of bus: from 3.50/4B (red/green buses) to 5B (white-and-blue buses) for any journey under 10km. There are also the cream-and-blue air-con buses that start at 8B but jump to 20B on longer trips. Orange Euro 2 air-con buses are 12B for any distance, while white-and-pink air-con buses cost 25B to 30B. The least crowded are the red minibuses, which stop taking passengers once every seat is filled, and cost a 25B flat fare (have exact change ready).

Metro

The first line of Bangkok's subway or underground (depending on your nationality!) opened in 2004 and is operated by

the **Metropolitan Rapid Transit Authority** (MRTA; www.mrta.co.th). Thais call it the Metro, which no doubt pleases the French. The line connects the train station of Bang Sue with Chatuchak (Skytrain interchange to Moh Chit), Sukhumvit (Skytrain interchange to Asoke), Lumpini Park and Silom (Skytrain interchange to Sala Daeng), and terminates at Hualamphong station.

Trains operate from 5am to midnight and cost 14B to 36B, depending on distance. Future extensions will connect Hualamphong to Chinatown and Thonburi.

Motorcycle Taxi

Motorcycle taxis typically camp out at the beginning of a residential *soi* to transport people the last few kilometres home. Since the corners are always overstaffed, drivers will gladly take you anywhere for the right price. Fares for a motorcycle taxi are about the same as *túk-túk* fares except during heavy traffic, when they may cost more. Riding on the back of a speeding motorcycle taxi in Bangkok traffic is a close approximation to an extreme sport.

Skytrain

The ultramodern elevated **Bangkok Mass Transit System Skytrain** (BTS; ☎ 0 2617 7300; www.bts.co.th) arrived at just the right time to rescue Bangkok from choking traffic jams. OK, the jams are still there, but everyone smart enough to use the Skytrain can consider themselves rescued. The Skytrain offers a new perspective on the city from on high, plus you get to sit in air-conditioned comfort.

Trains run frequently from 6am to midnight along two lines. The trains are labelled with their final destination and handy maps in the stations explain the layout. Free maps also outline the system, and friendly English-speaking ticket vendors are old-hands at helping confused *farang*.

The Sukhumvit line starts at Moh Chit station, near Chatuchak Market and the Northern & Northeastern Bus Terminal and eventually swings east along Th Sukhumvit with plenty of stations along this popular strip. The Silom line runs from the National Stadium station, near Siam Sq, through the popular Th Silom area to Saphan Taksin on the banks of the Mae Nam Chao Phraya. The two lines share an interchange at Siam station and there are Skytrain interchanges with the

newer Metro at Silom (called Sala Daeng by the Metro) and Asoke.

Fares vary from 10B to 40B, and machines only accept coins (get change from the ticket windows). There is a variety of stored-value tickets for one-day and multiday unlimited trips; inquire at the stations.

Taxi

Fares for metered taxis are always lower than those for nonmetered taxis; look for ones with signs on top reading 'Taxi Meter'. Don't be shy about asking the driver to use the meter; sometimes they 'forget'. In tourist haunts they may refuse to use the meter; just find another taxi. Fares should generally run from 50B to 100B. In most large cities, the taxi drivers are seasoned navigators familiar with every out-of-the-way neighbourhood or street. However, this is not the case in Bangkok where, if you succeed in correctly pronouncing your destination, the taxi driver might still stare vacantly at your map. To ensure that you'll be able to return home, grab your hotel's business card, which will have directions in Thai.

Túk-Túk

You must fix fares in advance for *túk-túks* and they are only really sensible for shorter trips, if at all. Many have seemingly graduated from the Evel Knievel school of driving and that doesn't always work with three wheels on a sharp bend! Some travellers swear by *túk-túk*, others have a hard time bargaining a fair price – it all depends on your patience and a winning smile. Beware of *túk-túk* drivers who offer to take you on a sightseeing tour for 10B or 20B – it's a touting scheme designed to pressure you into purchasing overpriced goods.

AROUND BANGKOK

If you're tied to Bangkok for several days but feel the urge for some fresh air, take a day trip to some of the nearby attractions.

DAMNOEN SADUAK FLOATING MARKET

The image is iconic: wooden canoes laden with multicoloured fruits and vegetables, paddled by Thai women wearing indigo-hued clothes and wide-brimmed straw hats. This is the realm of postcards. The reality

reveals a scene of commercial chaos, more souvenir stalls than market vendors, more tourists than locals. But like all jamborees, it can still be fun. The action takes place on the water and the key is to get here early before the big buses arrive.

The smart money says arrive in Damnoen Saduak the night before, crash at the conveniently located **Noknoi Hotel** (Little Bird; ☎ 0 3225 4382; s/d 220/350B) and get up at 7am to see the market while the light is good, the sun forgiving and the tourists absent. By 9am the hordes from Bangkok arrive and the atmosphere drains away.

You can hire a boat from any pier that lines Th Sukhaphiban 1, which is the land route to the floating market area. The going rate is 150B to 200B per person, per hour. If the boat operator wants to charge you more, keep shopping.

Damnoen Saduak is 105km southwest of Bangkok. Air-con buses 78 and 996 (65B, two hours, every 20 minutes from 6.30am to 9pm) go direct from Bangkok's Southern Bus Terminal to Damnoen Saduak.

NAKHON PATHOM

Nakhon Pathom, 56km west of Bangkok, claims to be the oldest city in Thailand, but the only clue to its longevity is the **Phra Pathom Chedi**, originally erected in the early 6th century by the Theravada Buddhists of Dvaravati. The contemporary bell-shaped structure was built over the original in the early 11th century by the Khmer king, Suryavarman I of Angkor. This alteration created the world's tallest Buddhist monument, 127m high. Sitting in the middle of town, Phra Pathom Chedi makes for a pleasant stroll or interesting sketching subject. Opposite the *bòht* (central sanctuary) is a **museum** (admission 20B; ☎ 9am-4pm Wed-Sun), which contains some Dvaravati sculpture. In November, there's the **Phra Pathom Chedi Fair**, which packs in everyone from fruit vendors to fortune-tellers.

Air-con buses 997 and 83 (35B, one hour, frequent) leave from Bangkok's Southern Bus Terminal to Nakhon Pathom. To return to Bangkok, catch one of the idling buses from Th Phayaphan on the canal side of the road, a block from the train station. Bus 78 to Damnoen Saduak Floating Market (left) leaves from the same stop.

Two trains daily (7.45am and 1.45pm) depart Thonburi (Bangkok Noi) station for

Nakhon Pathom (3rd class 14B, about 1¼ hours). Returning to Thonburi there are also two departures (8.55am and 4.20pm). There are also connections with Hualamphong, but the journey takes longer.

SAMUT PRAKAN'S ANCIENT CITY

Samut Prakan's claim to fame is the **Ancient City** (Muang Boran; ☎ 0 2323 9253; www.ancientcity.com; adult/child 300/200B; ☎ 8am-5pm), alleged to be the world's largest outdoor museum. Around 12km south of the city centre, it is home to 109 scaled-down replicas of Thailand's most famous historic sites, including some that no longer survive. Visions of Las Vegas and tiny tacky treasures may spring to mind, but the Ancient City is architecturally sophisticated and a preservation site for classical buildings and art forms. For students of Thai architecture or even for those who want an introduction to the subject, it is definitely worth the trip. It is also a good place for leisurely walks or bicycle rides (50B rental), as it's rarely crowded.

Ordinary bus 25 (3.50B) and air-con buses 507, 508 and 511 (16B) ply regular routes between central Bangkok and Samut Prakan. The trip can take up to two hours depending on traffic. Ancient City is 33km from Bangkok along the Old Sukhumvit Hwy. From Samut Prakan take a green minibus 36 (6B), which passes the entrance to Ancient City; sit on the left-hand side of the bus to spot the 'Muang Boran' sign. To return to town, cross the main highway and catch white säwngthäew 36 (5B).

CENTRAL THAILAND

The fertile plains of central Thailand are the geographic and cultural heart of the country. Along the banks of life-giving Mae Nam Chao Phraya, the cultural and military identity of the early Thai nation is known to have evolved in the ancient capitals of Sukhothai and Ayuthaya. Once known as the Siamese language, today the region's dialect is considered standard Thai. Featuring history, superb scenery and easy adventures, central Thailand is fast becoming a must for travellers.

KANCHANABURI

pop 61,800

West of Bangkok, Kanchanaburi is blessed with an idyllic location, nestled in between rugged limestone peaks and the pretty Mae Nam Khwae

(Kwai River). The peaceful atmosphere belies the town's tragic past as the site of a WWII prisoner-of-war camp and the infamous bridge over the River Kwai. Today visitors come to pay their respects to fallen Allied soldiers or to discover for themselves more about the town's dark past. But Kan, as locals call it, is also a great place to relax at riverside guesthouses or venture to nearby natural attractions.

Information

Check out www.kanchanaburi-info.com for general information on the town and around. Several major Thai banks can be found around Th Saengchuto near the market and bus terminal. There are plenty of places to get online along Th Mae Nam Khwae.

Post office (Th Saengchuto)

TAT office (☎ 0 3451 1200; Th Saengchuto; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm) Near the bus terminal, it provides information on trips beyond Kanchanaburi, as well as bus and train schedules.

Thanakarn Hospital (☎ 0 3462 2358) Best-equipped place for foreigners.

Tourist police (☎ 0 3451 2668) Several locations around town.

Sights

THAILAND-BURMA RAILWAY CENTRE

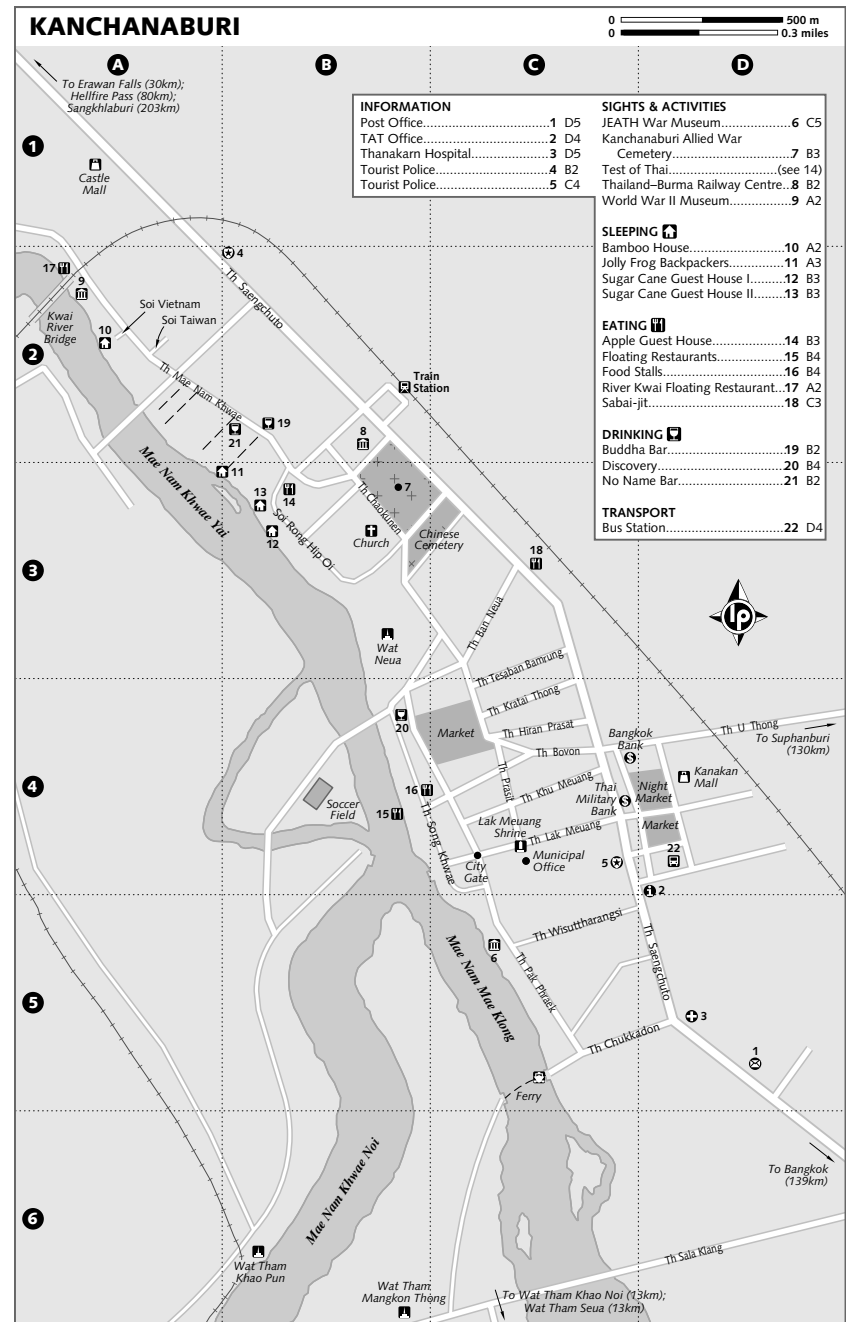
Before you head out to the Kwai River Bridge, get a little history under your belt at this **museum** (☎ 0 3451 0067; 73 Th Jaokannun; adult/child 60/30B; ☎ 9am-5pm). Professional exhibits outline Japan's aggression in Southeast Asia during WWII and its plan to connect Yangon (in Burma) with Bangkok via rail for transport of military supplies. Captured Allied soldiers as well as Burmese and Malay captives were transported to the jungles of Kanchanaburi to build 415km of rail – known today as the Death Railway because of the many lives (more than 100,000 men) the project claimed.

KANCHANABURI ALLIED WAR CEMETERY

Across the street from the Thailand-Burma Railway Centre, the **Kanchanaburi Allied War Cemetery** (Th Saengchuto; admission free; ☎ 7am-6pm) is a touching gift from the Thai people to remember the POWs, mainly from Britain and Holland, who died on their soil.

KWAI RIVER BRIDGE (DEATH RAILWAY BRIDGE)

While the story made famous by the film *The Bridge on the River Kwai* is one of endurance,



heroism and suffering, the span itself is just an ordinary bridge with an extraordinary history. A bit of imagination and some historical context will help to enliven a visit to the bridge, which was a small but strategic part of the Death Railway to Burma. Engineers estimated that construction would take five years, but the human labourers were forced to complete the railway in 16 months. Allied planes destroyed the bridge in 1945 but later repairs restored the span; the bomb damage is still apparent in the pylons closest to the riverbanks.

During the first week of December there's a nightly sound-and-light show put on at the bridge. It's a pretty impressive scene, with simulations of bombers and explosions and fantastic bursts of light. The town gets a lot of tourists during this week, so book early.

The bridge is roughly 3km from the town centre and the best way for you to reach it is by bicycle. You can also catch a *sǎwngthǎew* (5B) going north along Th Saengchuto, but it isn't obvious when to get off; if you get to the Castle Mall, you've gone too far. There are also three daily departures across the bridge on the Kanchanaburi–Nam Tok train.

WORLD WAR II MUSEUM

Near the bridge is a privately owned museum (Th Mae Nam Khwae; admission 30B; ☎ 9am–6pm), a veritable temple to kitsch, sometimes also known as the JEATH War Museum to capitalise on the popularity of another museum by the same name in town. The collection might be the oddest assortment of memorabilia under one roof, but the building does afford picture-postcard views of the bridge.

JEATH WAR MUSEUM

This outdoor museum (Th Pak Phraek; admission 30B; ☎ 8.30am–6pm), the original JEATH, is run by monks as a testament to the atrocities of war. The displays of historic photographs are housed in a bamboo hut, much like the ones the POWs used. More a photo gallery than museum, it isn't very informative, but it is heartfelt, especially the fading pictures of surviving POWs who returned to Thailand for a memorial service.

Courses

Run by friendly Apple Guest House, **Test of Thai** (52 Soi Rong Hip Oi) is a full-day Thai cooking course (900B per person), held in a specially designed kitchen. You get to pick which dishes

you want to make from the menu for Apple's restaurant.

Sleeping

The most atmospheric places to stay are the many simple raft guesthouses built along the river. Everything is conducive to a day of chilling out until mid-afternoon on weekends and holidays when the floating karaoke bars and discos fire up. The noise polluters are supposed to be in bed by 10pm but Thai time, in this case, runs an hour or two behind.

Jolly Frog (☎ 0 3451 4579; 28 Soi China; s 70B, d 150–290B; ☎) A favourite with young backpackers, Jolly Frog is a happening spot with a social café and riverfront lawn. Rooms aren't the cleanest but neither are the guests.

Sugar Cane Guest House I (☎ 0 3462 4520; 22 Soi Pakistan, Th Mae Nam Khwae; s/d from 150/250B; ☎) Sugar Cane has the cleanest interior fan rooms in town. Its river-raft rooms share a wide veranda but don't stand out against the competition. There is a second location closer to the bridge at 7 Soi Cambodia.

Bamboo House (☎ 0 3462 4470; 3–5 Soi Vietnam, Th Mae Nam Khwae; r 200–500B; ☎) Serene, well-kept Bamboo House is close to the bridge, and far from all the hubbub in town.

Eating

There are plenty of places to eat along the northern end of Th Saengchuto. The quality can usually be judged by the size of the crowds. The cheap and cheerful night market sets up on Th Saengchuto in the parking lot between Th U Thong and Th Lak Meuang.

Sabai-jit (28–45/55 Th Saengchuto; dishes 40–80B; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Close to the River Kwai Hotel, this lively local restaurant has consistently good food and an English menu. Beer and whisky at bargain prices might lead to an unexpected session!

River Kwai Floating Restaurant (☎ 0 3451 2595; 415 Th Mae Nam Khwae; dishes 50–200B; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Anyone visiting the infamous bridge should consider a short stop here for refreshment. The menu is huge if a little pricey, but the view doesn't come more iconic than this for a sunset beer.

Floating restaurants (Th Song Khwae; dishes 100–150B; ☎ dinner) It is worth taking a lucky dip here, where it's hard not to enjoy the atmosphere, even if the quality of the food varies.

Across the road from the floating restaurants are several smaller food stalls open for

breakfast, lunch and dinner; perfect for the thrifty drifter, with dishes from 50B.

Most of the popular guesthouses have restaurants churning out the greatest hits from banana pancakes to *tôm yam* (spicy and sour soup). The food at **Apple Guest House** (☎ 0 3451 2017; 52 Soi Rong Hip Oi; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) is a cut above the rest, but it lacks a river view.

Drinking

Buddha Bar (Th Mae Nam Khwae) There is a whole strip of small bars opposite the 7-Eleven, but most are about pink lights and pretty girls. Buddha Bar is the not-so-Zen exception – it's more of a biker's haunt, rocker's bar and hard-drinking club.

No Name Bar (Th Mae Nam Khwae) With the slogan 'Get shitfaced on a shoestring', who could resist this brash backpacker hang-out? Besides coming here for suds, there's a range of Western snacks, and satellite TV for football games and the BBC.

Discovery (Th Song Khwae) Loud and flashy, this riverside disco fills to the gills on weekends with locals and Bangkok Thais who don't need karaoke to have a good time.

Getting There & Away

Kanchanaburi's bus station is located on Th Saengchuto, near Th Lak Meuang and the TAT office.

Bus trips go to Bangkok's Southern Bus Terminal (air-con 62B to 79B, three hours, every 15 minutes until 7pm), Nakhon Pathom (ordinary 28B, 1½ hours), Ratburi (36B, 2½ hours), Sangkhlaburi (90B, five hours) and Suphanburi (35B, 2½ hours) for connections to Ayuthaya.

Kanchanaburi is on the Thonburi (Bangkok Noi)–Nam Tok train line. The **train station** (Th Saengchuto) is 500m from the river. There are only two trains a day originating from Thonburi (25B). West of Kanchanaburi to Nam Tok, the train travels a portion of the Death Railway (17B, two hours, three daily).

Getting Around

Sǎamlǎw within the city cost 30B a trip. Regular *sǎwngthǎew* in town are 5B to 10B and ply Th Saengchuto, but be careful you don't accidentally 'charter' one – these are a rip-off at 500B an hour.

There are plenty of places hiring motorbikes along Th Mae Nam Khwae. The going rate is 150B to 250B per day and it's a good

way of getting to the rather scattered attractions around Kanchanaburi.

Bicycles can be rented from most guesthouses for around 50B a day.

AROUND KANCHANABURI

Most of the popular guesthouses in town offer tours that take in the main attractions around Kanchanaburi. Shop around for the best deal.

Erawan National Park (☎ 0 3457 4222; admission per person 200B; ☎ 8am–4pm) is the home of the seven-tiered **Erawan Falls**, which makes for a refreshing day trip; bring along a swimsuit for a plunge in some of the enticing pools. To get yourself to the park take an early morning bus (26B, 1½ hours, hourly from 8am) from Kanchanaburi to the end of the line, from where you will have to walk a couple of kilometres to the waterfall trail. The last bus back to Kanchanaburi leaves at 4pm.

Carved out of unforgiving mountain terrain, the section of the Death Railway called **Hellfire Pass** (suggested donation 30–100B; ☎ 9am–4pm) was so named for the unearthly apparitions cast by the nightly fires of the labouring POWs. Today a 4km-long trail follows the old route with some remnants of the rail line still intact. Located near Km Marker 66 on the Sai Yok–Thong Pha Phum road, Hellfire Pass can be reached by a Sangkhlaburi-bound or Thong Pha Phum-bound bus (27B, 1½ hours, last bus back at 4pm); use the Thai script for 'Hellfire Pass' that is printed on the TAT-distributed map to inform the attendant of your destination.

SANGKHLABURI & THREE PAGODAS PASS

Northwest of Kanchanaburi is a legal day-trip crossing into Myanmar at Three Pagodas Pass (Chedi Sam Ong). The village on the Myanmar side has been the scene of fire fights between minority insurgents and the Burmese government; both parties want to control the collection of 'taxes' levied on smuggling. In 1990, the Burmese government regained control of the area, rebuilt the bamboo village in wood and concrete and renamed it Payathonzu. A row of souvenir shops and the three pagodas, which are rather inconspicuous, are all the town offers. The trip is more for bragging rights of being in Myanmar than a rewarding excursion. At the time of writing the border was open to foreigners.

Sleeping

Burmese Inn (☎ 0 3459 5146; www.sangkhlaburi.com; 52/3 Mu 3; r 80-500B; ♿) It isn't the cleanest in town, but it is the cheapest. The flimsy huts are hammered into a hillside overlooking the wooden bridge, and the Austrian co-owner is knowledgeable about the area.

P Guest House (☎ 0 3459 5061; www.pguesthouse.com; 8/1 Mu 1; r 200-700B) Well worth the 1.2km walk from the bus stop, P Guest House has spacious, stone bungalows with verandas along a slope overlooking the lake. Cheaper rooms share a remarkably clean bathroom. P also organises elephant treks and rents canoes and kayaks.

Getting There & Away

To travel from Kanchanaburi to Sangkhlaburi, take ordinary bus 8203 (90B, five hours, 6am, 8.40am, 10.20am and noon) or the air-con bus (151B, four hours, 9am and 1.30pm).

A minivan service to Kanchanaburi via Thong Pha Phum (118B, three hours, six daily from 7.30am to 4.30pm) leaves Sangkhlaburi from near the market.

If you go by motorcycle or car, you can count on about three to four hours to cover the 203km from Kanchanaburi to Sangkhlaburi. Alternatively, you can make it an all-day trip and stop off in Ban Kao (a museum displaying Neolithic artefacts), Meuang Singh (the remains of a 13th-century shrine of the Khmer empire) and Hellfire Pass. Be warned, however, that this is not a trip for inexperienced motorcycle riders. The Thong Pha Phum to Sangkhlaburi section of the journey (74km) requires sharp reflexes and previous experience on moun-

tain roads. This is also not a motorcycle trip to do alone, as stretches of the highway are practically deserted.

From Sangkhlaburi, there are hourly *sāwngthāew* (30B, 40 minutes) to Three Pagodas Pass all day.

AYUTHAYA

pop 81,400

In their race to reach the Gulf of Thailand, three rivers (Mae Nam Lopburi, Chao Phraya and Pa Sak) converge to form the island of Ayuthaya, the former Thai capital, named after the home of Rama in the Indian epic *Ramayana*.

The rivers formed both a natural barrier to invasion and an invitation to trade. From 1350 to 1767, Ayuthaya was the cultural centre of the emerging Thai nation. Throughout Ayuthaya's domination of central Thailand, Asian and Western foreign powers eyed up this strategic city and successive Thai kings had to foil coups and play foreign powers off against one another. But the river defences were unable to repulse persistent attacks by the Burmese. After two years of war, the capital fell; the royal family fled to Thonburi, near present-day Bangkok, and the Burmese looted the city's architectural and religious treasures.

Today a modern city has sprung up around the holy ruins. Life revolves around the river, which acts as transport, bath and kitchen sink for its residents. The holiday of **Loi Krathong** – held on the proper full-moon night, when tiny votive boats are floated on rivers as a tribute to the River Goddess – is celebrated with great fanfare in Ayuthaya.

Information

ATMs are abundant, especially along Th Naresuan near Amporn Shopping Centre. The internet shops on and around Soi 1, Th Naresuan, offer the cheapest deals.

Main post office (Th U Thong)

Nakorn Sri Ayutthaya Hospital (☎ 0 3524 1027)

TAT office (☎ 0 3524 6076; 108/22 Th Si Sanphet;

☎ 9am-5pm) Distributes an Ayuthaya tourist map and bus schedule.

Tourist police (☎ 0 3524 1446, emergency 1155; Th Si Sanphet)

Sights

A Unesco World Heritage site, Ayuthaya's historic temples are scattered throughout this once magnificent city, and along the encircling rivers. The ruins are divided into two geographical areas: ruins 'on the island', in the central part of town between Th Chee Kun and the western end of Th U Thong, which are best visited by bicycle; and those 'off the island' on the other side of the river, which are best visited on an evening boat tour (from 250B; book through guesthouses) or by bicycle. Getting a handle on the religious and historical importance of the temples is difficult to do without some preliminary tutoring. **Ayuthaya Historical Study Centre** (☎ 0 3524 5124; Th Rotchana; adult/student 100/50B; ☎ 9am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, to 5pm Sat & Sun) has informative, professional displays that paint an indispensable picture for viewing the ancient city. Also purchase the *Ayuthaya* pamphlet (15B) for sale at Wat Phra Si Sanphet's admission kiosk.

There are also two national museums in town. The building that houses the **Chantharakasem National Museum** (admission 30B; ☎ 9am-4pm Wed-Sun) is a museum in itself. King Rama IV had this palace rebuilt and established as a museum in 1936. The less charming but larger **Chao Sam Phraya National Museum** (cnr Th Rotchana & Th Si Sanphet; admission 30B; ☎ 9am-4pm Wed-Sun) has a first-class collection of gold artefacts in a secure room upstairs.

Most of the temples are open from 8am or 9am until 5pm or 6pm daily.

ON THE ISLAND

The most distinctive example of Ayuthaya architecture is **Wat Phra Si Sanphet** (admission 30B) thanks to its three bell-shaped *chedi* that taper off into descending rings. This site served as the royal palace from the city's founding until the mid-15th century, when it was converted

into a temple. Although the grounds are now well tended, these efforts cannot hide the ravages of war and time. The surrounding buildings are worn through to their orange bricks, leaning to one side as gravity takes its toll. The complex once contained a 16m-high standing Buddha covered with 250kg of gold, which was melted down by the Burmese conquerors.

The adjacent **Wihaan Phra Mongkhon Bophit** houses a huge bronze seated Buddha, the largest in Thailand.

Wat Phra Mahathat (admission 30B) has one of the first Khmer-style *praeng* built in the capital. One of the most iconic images in Ayuthaya is the Buddha head engulfed by tentacle-like tree roots.

OFF THE ISLAND

The main *withaan* (large hall in a Thai temple) of **Wat Phanan Choeng** (admission 30B) contains a 19m-high sitting Buddha image, which reportedly wept when the Burmese sacked Ayuthaya. The temple is dedicated to Chinese seafarers and on weekends is crowded with Buddhist pilgrims from Bangkok who pay for saffron-coloured cloth to be ritually draped over the image.

Wat Chai Wattanaram used to be one of Ayuthaya's most overgrown lost-city ruins, with stately rows of disintegrating Buddhas. Today, some harsh restoration work (and the wonders of cement) has produced a row of brand-new Buddhas. It is still a lovely temple and a photogenic subject for sunset photo shoots.

The **Golden Mountain Chedi** (Phu Khao Thong) lies to the northwest of the city and has a wide view over the flat country. Also to the north is the **elephant kraal**, a restored version of the wooden stockade once used for the annual roundup of wild elephants. To the southeast, **Wat Yai Chai Mongkon** has a massive ruined *chedi*, which contrasts with the surrounding contemporary Buddha statues.

Sleeping

Baan Lotus Guest House (☎ 0 3525 1988; 20 Th Pamaphrao; s 200-250B, d 350B) The university lecturer who operates this old and somewhat secluded wooden house was also born and raised inside it. Staying here will likely remind you more of staying with a kindly relative than a stranger.

Tony's Place (☎ 0 3525 2578; 12/18 Soi 1, Th Naresuan; r 200-700B; ♿) Tony's Place is an Ayuthaya old-timer, and continues to be the town's top choice among the backpacking

GETTING TO MYANMAR

Foreigners are allowed to enter Myanmar for a day trip at Three Pagodas Pass, and all immigration formalities can be arranged at the border. This crossing does not issue extensions for Thai visas. You will need to temporarily surrender your passport, along with a passport photo, to the Thai immigration office before crossing the border. At the Myanmar immigration office, you must submit a copy of the photo page of your passport and a passport photo, in addition to 500B or US\$10. Upon your return into Thailand, you will receive your passport back. There is a small photocopy shop near the Thai immigration office where you can arrange border documentation.

Occasionally this border is closed, especially during conflicts between ethnic armies and the central Myanmar government, but these incidents are now less frequent than in years past.

Sāwngthāew (small pick-up trucks with two benches in the back) leave Sangkhlaburi's bus station (30B) every half-hour from 6am to 4pm. Along the way you'll pass little bamboo-hut villages inhabited by Mon or Karen people. The border is only a short walk from the *sāwngthāew* stop in Three Pagodas Pass.

WHAT'S A WAT?

Planning to conquer Thailand's temples and ruins? With this handy guide, you'll be able to sort out your wats from your what's that:

chedi – large bell-shaped tower usually containing five structural elements symbolising (from bottom to top) earth, water, fire, wind and void; relics of Buddha or a Thai king are housed inside the *chedi*; also known as a stupa
praang (prang) – towering phallic spire of Khmer origin serving the same religious purpose as a *chedi*
wat – temple monastery

wihaan – main sanctuary for the temple's Buddha sculpture and where laypeople come to make their offerings; classic architecture typically has a three-tiered roofline representing the triple gems: Buddha (the teacher), Dharma (the teaching) and Brotherhood (the followers)

Buddha Images

Elongated earlobes, no evidence of bone or muscle, arms that reach to the knees, a third eye: these are some of the 32 rules, originating from 3rd-century India, that govern the depiction of Buddha in sculpture. With such rules in place, why are some Buddhas sitting and others walking? Known as 'postures', the pose of the image depicts periods in the life of Buddha:

reclining – exact moment of Buddha's enlightenment

sitting – Buddha teaching or meditating: if the right hand is pointed towards the earth, Buddha is shown subduing the demons of desire; if the hands are folded in the lap, Buddha is turning the wheel of law

standing – Buddha bestowing blessings or taming evil forces

walking – Buddha after his return to earth from heaven

usually stopping at Don Mueang Airport. From Ayuthaya, the train continues north to Lopburi (13B, one hour) and beyond.

From Ayuthaya's train station, on the eastern banks of the Mae Nam Pa Sak, the quickest way to reach the old city is to walk west to the river, where you can take a short ferry ride across (3B).

Getting Around

Bikes can be rented at most guesthouses (40B to 50B). *Túk-túk* can be hired for the day to tour the sites (200B per hour); a trip within the city should be about 20B or about 30B to the train station.

LOPBURI

pop 57,600

An ancient town even by Thai standards, Lopburi has been inhabited since at least the Dvaravati period (6th to 11th centuries AD). Yet while the city is abundant in picturesque stone ruins and statuary, Lopburi actually owes the majority of its tourism-generated income to a renegade gang of trouble-making monkeys who reside in and around Prang Sam Yot, the area's principal shrine.

Information

Hospital (☎ 0 3641 1250)

Post office (Th Phra Narai Maharat)

TAT office (☎ 0 3642 2768; Th Phraya Kamjat)

Tourist police (☎ 0 3641 1013)

Sights

The former palace of King Narai, **Phra Narai Ratchaniwet** (Th Sorasak; ☎ 7.30am-5.30pm) is a good place to begin a tour of Lopburi. Built between 1665 and 1677, it was designed by French and Khmer architects, creating an unusual blend of styles. Inside the grounds is the **Lopburi National Museum** (admission 30B; ☎ 8.30am-noon & 1-4pm Wed-Sun), which contains an excellent collection of Lopburi period sculpture, as well as an assortment of Khmer, Dvaravati, U Thong and Ayuthaya art, plus traditional farm implements.

Opposite the San Phra Kan, near the Muang Thong Hotel, **Prang Sam Yot** (Sacred Three Spires; admission 30B; ☎ 8am-6pm) represents classic Khmer-Lopburi style and is a Hindu-turned-Buddhist temple. Originally, the three towers symbolised the Hindu trinity of Shiva, Vishnu and Brahma. Now two of them contain ruined Lopburi-style Buddha images.

Directly across from the train station, **Wat Phra Si Ratana Mahathat** (admission 30B; ☎ 7am-5pm Wed-Sun) is a large 12th-century Khmer temple that's worth a look.

Sleeping & Eating

Noom Guest House (☎ 0 3642 7693; 15-17 Th Phraya Kamjat; r 150-250B) A tiny little dive attached to the

Come On Bar, this budget-backpacker place has a handful of fan rooms with mattress-only beds and shared bathrooms.

Lopburi City Hotel (☎ 0 3641 1245; 1/1-1/5 Th Naprakan; r 300B; ☎) If you've come to Lopburi for the monkeys, this is where you'll want to stay. The creatures have turned the window bars here into their own personal jungle gym. This is otherwise a standard business hotel with air-con and clean showers in every room.

Come On Bar (15-17 Th Phraya Kamjat; dishes 30-120B; ☎ breakfast & dinner) Attached to Noom Guest House, this open-air bar offers affordable Western breakfasts from 8am to 11am, as well as traditional Thai and Western dishes for dinner. Come nightfall, it's a decent place to mix with backpackers.

Central market (Th Ratchadamnoen & Th Surasongkhram) Just north of the palace, this is a great place to pick up *kàì thâwt* or *kàì yâang* (fried or grilled chicken) with sticky rice for a long trip further north.

In the evenings a night market sets up along Th Na Phra Kan, with some great little treats for compulsive snackers.

Getting There & Away

Ordinary buses leave from Ayuthaya (47B, 1½ hours, every 10 minutes) or from Bangkok's Northern & Northeastern Bus Terminal (130B, three hours, every 20 minutes). For Kanchanaburi, take a bus to Suphanburi (55B, 2½ hours) and change. The scenery is beautiful along this route.

You can also reach Lopburi by local train from Ayuthaya (3rd class 13B, one hour) or by express train from Bangkok (170B, 1½ hours). One way of visiting Lopburi on the way north is to take the train from Ayuthaya (or Bangkok) early in the morning, leave your gear at the station while you look around, then continue north on the night train.

Getting Around

Sāamlāw go anywhere in old Lopburi for 30B. Sāwngthāew run a regular route between the old and new towns for 8B per person.

PHITSANULOK

pop 100,300

Partly because of its convenient location on an important train route, many travellers use vibrant Phitsanulok as a base for visiting the ancient city of Sukhothai, as well as other parts

of the lower north. The town's own attractions include **Wat Phra Si Ratana Mahathat** (known locally as Wat Yai), which contains Phra Phuttha Chinnarat, one of the most beautiful and revered Buddha images in Thailand. Phitsanulok is often abbreviated as 'Philok'.

Information

Internet shops dot the streets around the railway station and on the western bank of the river.

Bangkok Bank (35 Th Naresuan) ATM, plus after-hours exchange window.

Post office (Th Phuttha Bucha)

Pra Buddha Chinnaraj Hospital (☎ 0 5371 1303)

TAT office (☎ 0 5525 2742; 209/7-8 Th Borom Trailokanat; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm)

Sleeping

London Hotel (☎ 0 5522 5145; 21-22 Soi 1, Th Sailuthai; d 100-150B; ☎) Near Th Phuttha Bucha, this rickety old wooden house resembles a Chinese junk shop; nostalgia buffs will eat this place up. To walk here from the train station, turn left on the main road, then take the first right on to Th Sailuthai.

Phitsanulok Youth Hostel (☎ 0 5524 2060; phit sanulok@tyha.org; 38 Th Sanam Bin; dm/s/d/tr 120/200/300/450B) Philok's youth hostel has something of a lost-in-the-jungle feel to it, complete with swinging hammocks and a large outdoor dining area overflowing with knick-knacks. There is a friendly café here and breakfast is included in the rates. The hostel is 1.5km east of the city centre; take a sāamlāw (30B).

Lithai Guest House (☎ 0 5521 9626; 73/1-5 Th Phayalithai; r 220-460B; ☎) The 60 rooms here are plain and a touch depressing, although there is a wide variety of options. The priciest choices have air-con, TV and hot showers. Breakfast is included. For something cosier, try the slightly more expensive Bon-Bon Guesthouse next door.

Eating

Phitsanulok is a market crossroads for the country's vegetable industry and gets the pick of the harvest. A good sampler dish is *phàt phàk ruam* (stir-fried vegetables). Sniff out this and other veggie dishes at the **food stalls** (dishes 20-40B), just west of London Hotel near the cinema.

At the night market along the river, a couple of **street vendors** (dishes 40-80B; ☎ dinner) specialise in preparing *phàk búng lawy fáa*, which

translates as ‘flying vegetable’ – referring to the ‘air’ the dish catches as it’s tossed in the wok. It’s all about the preparation, like watching a cocktail waiter in full flow, as the dish is a fairly standard water spinach stir-fried in soya bean sauce and garlic.

Pa Lai (Th Phuttha Bucha; dishes 20-30B) This noodle shop has become a local legend thanks to its famous *kúaytiaw háwy khàa* (literally, ‘legs-hanging rice noodles’). The name comes from the way customers sit on a bench facing the river, with their legs dangling below.

Phae Fa Thai (Th Wangchan; dishes 30-80B) Floating restaurants on the Mae Nam Nan are a hit at night. This old favourite fulfils the senses as much as the stomach with its dinner river cruise; pay a small fee to board the boat and order away from the menu – there is no minimum charge.

Drinking

Along Th Borom Trailokanat near the Pailyn Hotel is a string of popular, rockin’ Thai pubs. **Jaosamran** (Th Borom Trailokanat) features live Thai-folk and pop with food from 6pm and music from 8pm.

The most happening nightspot in town is the **Phitsanulok Bazaar** (Th Naresuan), where several pubs and dance clubs are clustered in a hedonist’s mall. It doesn’t get started until at least 9pm, but it is heaving by midnight.

Getting There & Away

Thai Airways International (☎ 0 5525 8020; www.thaiair.com; 209/26-28 Th Borom Trailokanat) offers daily connections between Phitsanulok and Bangkok.

Phitsanulok is a major junction between the north and northeast. Most buses stop at the government bus station on Hwy 12 about 1.5km from the town centre. Buses for Bangkok depart from private bus company offices in the town centre on Th Ekathotsarot, south of the train station.

Available bus trips include Bangkok (air-con 185B to 250B, six hours), Chiang Mai (ordinary/air-con 140/196B, five hours), Sukhothai (ordinary/air-con 24/33B, one hour, every 30 minutes from 6am to 6pm), Kamphaeng Phet (ordinary/air-con 43/60B, two hours) and Khon Kaen (ordinary 130B, air-con 153B to 203B, five hours).

The train station is located in the centre of town on Th Ekathotsarot and Th Naresuan. Trains to Bangkok (1st/2nd/3rd class 324/159/69B, ordinary eight to nine hours,

rapid seven hours) are a more convenient option, since Bangkok’s train station is in the centre of the city.

Trains north to Chiang Mai (1st/2nd/3rd class 269/122/52B, five hours) usually depart in the afternoon.

Getting Around

Buses run between the town centre and the airport (bus 4) or bus terminal (bus 1) for 4B. The TAT office distributes a local bus route hand-out. The terminal for city buses is south of the train station on Th Ekathotsarot. Sāamlāw rides within the town centre should cost you around 20B to 30B per person.

Run by TAT, the Phitsanulok Tour Tramway (PTT) lets you see all the sights in one day. The tram leaves from Wat Yai at 9am, costs 20B and stops at 15 sights before returning to Wat Yai at 3pm.

Motorcycles can be rented at **PN Motorbike** (☎ 0 5524 2424; Th Borom Trailokanat). Rates are 200B per day for a 125cc motorbike.

SUKHOTHAI

pop 39,800

Established in the 13th century and subsequently going on to be the centre of rule for more than 150 years, Sukhothai (Rising Happiness) was the first independent kingdom of Siam. Before its rise, the Khmer empire had extended its own influence deep into modern-day Thailand. But thanks to Sukhothai’s formidable sway, the emerging Thai nation managed to flourish in massive leaps and bounds – artistically, and especially architecturally – before it was eventually superseded by Ayuthaya to the south. If you can only digest one ‘ancient city’, Sukhothai should top the list; the ruins here are better preserved and less urban than those at Ayuthaya.

The modern town of Sukhothai (12km from the ruins) doesn’t quite live up to its ancestor. It is a standard provincial town, and many travellers opt for Sukhothai as a day trip from nearby Phitsanulok.

Information

There are banks with ATMs scattered around the central part of New Sukhothai, plus one in Old Sukhothai. Internet is common in New Sukhothai and some guesthouses offer access. The tourist police maintain an office in the Sukhothai Historical Park, opposite the Ramkhamhaeng National Museum.

Post office (Th Nikhon Kasem, New Sukhothai;

☎ 8.30am-noon Mon-Fri, 1-4.30pm Sat & Sun) has an attached international phone office.

TAT office (Th Prawet Nakhon; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri) North of the River View Hotel in New Sukhothai.

Sights

The original capital of the first Thai kingdom was surrounded by three concentric ramparts and two moats bridged by four gateways. Today the area is known as the Sukhothai Historical Park, and the remains of 21 historical sites can be seen within the old walls, plus there are 70 sites within a 5km radius. The ruins are divided into five zones and there is a 30B admission fee for each zone; the central zone is 40B, plus 10B if you ride in on a bicycle. Invest in the 150B ticket that includes entrance to all sites and associated museums.

A lot of the religious symbolism here is lost on a Westerner; see What’s a Wat? (p720) for a beginner’s dip into this complicated realm.

The historical park (or *meuang kào* – ‘old city’) is best reached from town by sāwngthāew (10B, every half-hour from 6am to 6pm) leav-

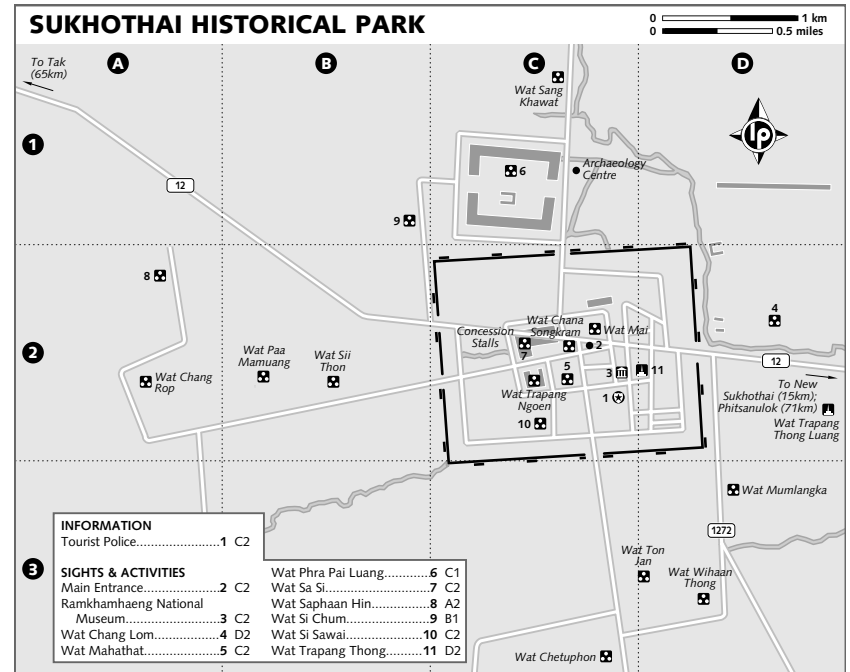
ing from Th Jarot Withithong near the Mae Yom, across the street from the 7-Eleven. Bicycles (20B) are essential for getting around the park and can be rented at the gate.

CENTRAL ZONE

Ramkhamhaeng National Museum (admission 30B; ☎ 9am-4pm) provides an introduction to Sukhothai history and culture and is a good place to begin exploring. If it were air-conditioned there would be a lot more 30B scholars.

The crown jewel of the old city, **Wat Mahathat** is one of the best examples of Sukhothai architecture, typified by the classic lotus-bud stupa that features a conical spire topping a square-sided structure on a three-tiered base. This vast assemblage, the largest in the city, once contained 198 *chedi*, as well as various chapels and sanctuaries. Some of the original Buddha images remain, including a 9m standing Buddha among the broken columns.

Wat Si Sawai, just south of Wat Mahathat, has three Khmer-style *praang* and a moat. From images found in the *chedi*, this was originally a Hindu temple, later retrofitted for Buddhism.



Wat Sa Si is a classically simple Sukhothai-style temple set on an island. **Wat Trapang Thong**, next to the museum, is reached by the footbridge crossing the large, lotus-filled pond that surrounds it. It remains in use today.

OTHER ZONES

In the northwestern corner, **Wat Si Chum** contains a massive seated Buddha tightly squeezed into this open, walled building. Somewhat isolated to the north of the city, **Wat Phra Pai Luang** is similar in style to Wat Si Sawai. **Wat Chang Lom**, to the east, is surrounded by 36 elephants. **Wat Saphaan Hin** is a couple of kilometres west of the old city walls on a hillside and features a large Buddha looking back to Sukhothai.

Sleeping

At the bus station a small *sǎwngthǎew* mafia has emerged to promote guesthouses that pay commissions. If you're set on a particular guesthouse, don't believe them when they say the place is closed or dirty – always check for yourself.

Ban Thai (☎ 0 5561 0163; guesthouse_banThai@yahoo.com; Th Prawet Nakhon; d with shared bathroom 150-450B, bungalows 450B) With its welcoming staff, good café and wealth of useful information for travellers, you may find yourself sticking around for a while here. Rooms are large and thoroughly clean, although it's shared bathrooms for everyone. The pretty bungalows include a private bathroom and share a small garden. This is an ideal place to meet fellow backpackers.

No 4 Guest House (☎ 0 5561 0165; 140/4 Soi Khlong Mae Lamphan, Th Jarot Withithong; s & d 150-450B) Close to the bus depot and ultra-secluded, this was the original guesthouse in town. A long row of rustic bamboo-thatch bungalows claims the bulk of the space; there's also a balcony overlooking a large plot of farmland.

our pick **Sukhothai Guest House** (☎ 0 5561 0453; www.sukhothaiguesthouse.com; 68 Th Wichien Chamhong; d 350-750B; 🚻 🚶 🚲) It's a 10-minute walk from the main guesthouse quarter, but it's also the most luxurious budget choice in town. The modern bungalows come with a spacious teak terrace, and the garden-and-pond area surrounding the rooms is kept up with immaculate precision. There's free wireless access during the day.

Other possibilities in town:

Ninety-Nine Guest House (☎ 0 5561 1315; 234/6 Soi Panitsan, Th Jarot Withithong; d 150B) Not far west of

No 4, this teak family house has cheap, clean rooms with shared bathroom.

JJ Guest House (jguesthouse@hotmail.com; Soi Khlong Mae Ramphan; r 300-600B; 🚻 🚶 🚲) Large and modern bungalows, friendly staff and a kitchen famous for its fresh breads and pastries.

Eating

Thai towns love to claim a signature dish as their own and Sukhothai weighs in with its own version of *kūaytiaw* (noodle soup). In addition to the basic recipe, cutting-edge cooks add pickled cabbage, pork skins and peanuts for a local twist. Only *kūaytiaw* purists will notice the difference. The **night market** (Th Jarot Withithong & Th Rat Uthit), near the Mae Nam Yom bridge, and the **municipal market** (btwn Th Rat Uthit & Th Ratchathani) are purveyors of this and other quick eats.

Evening meals centre on the series of open-air restaurants south of Chinnawat Hotel just off Th Nikhon Kasem.

Dream Cafe (86/1 Th Singhawat; dishes 80-150B) Decorated with the owner's own 19th-century Thai antique collection, this restaurant is truly a feast for the eyes. The menu features a bevy of Western dishes at slightly inflated prices; some of the tasty Thai dishes come from the management's old family recipes. After dining, buy the table a round of herbal 'stamina drinks'. Then take a stroll through the gorgeously artistic Cocoon Guest House, which is behind the café.

Sukhothai Suki-Koka (Th Singhawat; dishes 30-90B; 🚻 🚶 🚲) Here's your chance to experience the phenomenon of Thai-style *sukiyaki* restaurants. Diners choose a handful of uncooked meat, dumplings and seafood from the menu, which arrive with their very own simmering pot of broth.

Getting There & Away

Sukhothai airport is located 27km outside of town off Rte 1195. **Bangkok Airways** (☎ 0 5563 3266; www.bangkokair.com) operates two flights daily that connect Sukhothai with Bangkok and Chiang Mai, and Luang Prabang in Laos.

The bus station is 4km northwest of the town centre on Hwy 101. Options include Bangkok (ordinary/air-con 142/273B, seven hours, hourly 7am to 11pm), Chiang Mai (167/234B, six hours, frequent), Phitsanulok (30/42B, one hour, every 30 minutes from 6am to 8pm), Sawankhalok (ordinary 40B,

hourly), Si Satchanalai (27/38B, one hour, hourly) and Tak (40/56B, 1½ hours, hourly).

Getting Around

From the bus station a chartered *sǎwngthǎew* should cost 40B to any guesthouse. When returning to the bus station, catch a public *sǎwngthǎew* (6B) in front of the 7-Eleven on Th Jarot Withithong. Across the road is the stop for buses to the old city (15B).

SI SATCHANALAI-CHALIANG HISTORICAL PARK

Set amid rolling mountains, Si Satchanalai and Chaliang were a later extension of the Sukhothai empire. The **park** (admission 40B, plus per car/bicycle/motorcycle 50/10/30B; 🕒 8.30am-5pm) encompasses ruins of the old cities of Si Satchanalai and Chaliang, 56km north of Sukhothai.

Climb to the top of the hill supporting **Wat Khao Phanom Phloeng** for a view over the town and river. **Wat Chedi Jet Thaew** has a group of stupas in classic Sukhothai style. **Wat Chang Lom** has a *chedi* surrounded by Buddha statues set in niches and guarded by the fine remains of some elephant buttresses. Walk along the riverside for 2km or go back down the main road and cross the river to **Wat Phra Si Ratana Mahathat**, a very impressive temple that has a well-preserved *praang* and a variety of seated and standing Buddhas.

The Si Satchanalai-Chaliang area was traditionally famous for its beautiful **pottery**, much of which was exported. The Indonesians were once keen collectors, and some fine specimens can still be seen in the National Museum in Jakarta. Much of the pottery was made in Si Satchanalai. Rejects, buried in the fields, are still being discovered. Several of the old kilns have been carefully excavated and can be viewed along with original pottery samples at the **Si Satchanalai Centre for Study & Preservation of Sangkhalok Kilns** (admission 30B). So far the centre has opened two phases of its construction to the public: a site in Chaliang with excavated pottery samples and one kiln; and a larger outdoor site, 2km northwest of the Si Satchanalai ruins. The exhibits are very well presented despite the lack of English labels.

Si Satchanalai-Chaliang Historical Park is off Rte 101 between Sawankhalok and new Si Satchanalai. From Sukhothai, take a Si Satchanalai bus (ordinary/air-con 27/38B, one

hour) and ask to get off at *meuang kào* (old city). The last bus back leaves around 4pm.

KAMPHAENG PHET

pop 27,500

Kamphaeng Phet (Diamond Wall) previously played a role as an important front line of defence for the Sukhothai kingdom. It's a nice place to spend a day or so wandering around the ruins and experiencing a small northern provincial capital that sees few tourists.

The **Kamphaeng Phet Historical Park** (☎ 0 5571 1921; admission 40B, plus per bicycle/motorcycle 10/20B; 🕒 8am-5pm) contains a number of temple ruins, as well as the very fine remains of a long city wall. Wat Phra Sri Iriyabot features the shattered remains of standing, sitting, walking and reclining Buddha images. Wat Chang Rop (Temple Surrounded by Elephants) is just that – a temple that has an elephant-buttressed wall.

Sleeping & Eating

Teak Tree Guest House (☎ 0 1675 6471; Soi 1 Th Chakungrao; s/d 170/250B) Next to the old city wall, the Teak Tree Guest House is the original guesthouse in town – just three fan rooms set in a tidy wooden house on stilts with shared hot-water bathroom. Open high season only.

Three J Guest House (☎ 0 5571 3129; threejguest@hotmail.com; 79 Th Rachavitee; r 200-400B; 🚻 🚶 🚲) Mr Charin, the congenial host of this backpackers' bungalow set-up, is happy to pick up guests from the bus terminal. Each of the bungalows is different, and the cheaper ones share a clean bathroom. Bicycles and motorbikes are available for rent.

A small night market sets up every evening in front of the provincial offices, near the old city walls, and there are some cheap restaurants near the roundabout.

Getting There & Away

The government bus station is located across the river from town and is served by the following destinations: Bangkok (ordinary/air-con 125/165B), Sukhothai (45B, 1½ hours), Phitsanulok (ordinary/air-con 43/60B, two hours) and Tak (35B).

MAE SOT

Like many border towns, Mae Sot is a hotbed of illicit activities. Gems, drugs and even the Burmese people themselves are smuggled here from neighbouring Myanmar, although the

chances are quite low that an average tourist will bear witness to any of these questionable goings-on. What visitors will see, however, is nearly as unique: due to its strategic border location and its proximity to hill-tribe regions, Mae Sot is a colourful and curious mix of Indo-Burmese, Chinese, Karen, Hmong and Thai. The town also hosts a relatively large population of Western doctors and NGO aid workers, whose presence attests to the human cost of an unstable border.

Sǎwngthǎew can take you right to the Mae Nam Moei border for 10B.

Route 1085 runs north from Mae Sot to Mae Hong Son Province and makes an interesting trip.

Information

There are several banks with ATMs in the town centre.

DK Book House (Th Intharakhiri) Attached to the DK Mae Sot Square Hotel, it has good maps.

River Book Exchange (☎ 0 5553 4700; Th Intharakhiri; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Fri) Good for tourist information, plus free maps and lots of information about local volunteer opportunities and Thai language lessons. Ask for Prasong.

Southeast Asia Tours (Th Intharakhiri) Internet access and international calls.

Tourist police (☎ 0 5553 3523, 0 5553 4341; Th Asia) One block east of the bus terminal.

Sleeping

Green Guest House (☎ 0 5553 3207; www.green.guesthouse.th.gs; 460/9 Th Intharakhiri; dm/s/d from 100/150/200-250B; ☎) Run by an English-teaching husband-and-wife team, this friendly place is close to the main sǎwngthǎew departure terminal. At the time of research, a new dorm building was being constructed. Wi-fi access available for 10B an hour.

our pick **Ban Thai Guest House** (☎ 0 5553 1590; www.mountain-designs.com/accom/ban thai.html; 740 Th Intharakhiri; s/d from 250/450B; ☎) The guesthouse of choice among volunteers, this is Mae Sot's best budget accommodation. Five converted Thai houses sit atop a well-manicured lawn, and the common area, where you're practically guaranteed to meet someone interesting, has free wi-fi access. Ask about long-term discounts.

Eating

The day market intersects with Th Prasat Withi near Siam Hotel and extends for several winding blocks to a covered area sur-

GETTING TO MYANMAR

Frequent sǎwngthǎew (10B) go to the Burmese border across the Mae Nam Moei, 6km from Mae Sot, to Myawaddy. This border periodically closes due to fighting, but currently foreigners are allowed to do a day crossing into Myawaddy, a fairly typical Burmese town, for a fee of US\$10. The Pan-Asian Hwy (Asia Rte 1) continues from here west to Mawlamyine (Moulmein) and Yangon – and eventually Istanbul – but that adventure still fits in the 'some day' category. The border is open from 6am to 6pm.

rounded by simple Burmese food counters. A favourite local snack is *krabawng jaw* (Burmese for 'fried crispy'), a sort of vegetable tempura. While you tuck into your curry, other customers might stop in for a nip of the under-the-counter hooch.

Food stalls set up at night along Th Prasat Withi. Several Burmese-Indian shops, opposite the mosque, serve curries, *khǎo sawy* (chicken curry with noodles) and tasty samosas (in the morning).

Aiya Restaurant (533 Th Intharakhiri; dishes 30-160B; ☎ lunch & dinner) Directly across the street from the popular Bai Fern restaurant, this (definitely superior) eatery offers a unique menu of Thai and Burmese dishes along with some Western standards and vegetarian dishes. There's a small art gallery upstairs and live music on Friday and Saturday at 8pm; inquire here about Burmese language conversation courses.

Drinking

For a night on the town Mae Sot style, head to the bars at the western end of Th Intharakhiri. A current favourite is **Thaime's** (Th Intharakhiri), featuring an extensive selection of mixed drinks, live music and many drunken travellers and volunteers. It's between No 4 Guest House and Bai Fern.

Getting There & Away

The Mae Sot airport was not operating at the time of research. For updates, contact **Phuket Air** (code 9R; ☎ 0 5553 1440; www.phuketairlines.com).

The government bus station, which is located just off Th Asia, handles transport to Bangkok (air-con/VIP 365/565B, nine hours).

For travel to any other destination, it is best to change in Tak (ordinary/air-con 53/74B), which offers smooth connections to points in the north such as Lampang and Chiang Mai. You can also travel the western rim of Thailand by catching a bus or sǎwngthǎew to Mae Sariang (160B, six hours) for transport to Mae Hong Son.

NORTHERN THAILAND

The peaks and valleys of northern Thailand are the guardians of an abundance of natural and cultural attractions that make it a must for most travellers traversing the kingdom. These ancient mountains cascade across northern Thailand, Myanmar and south-western China, where Yunnanese trading caravans of mule-driven carts once followed the mountain ridges all the way to the sea. Centuries before, another group, considered to be the original Thais, followed a similar route into the lush river valleys of what is modern-day Thailand. Eventually the independent state known as Lanna Thai (Million Thai Rice Fields) emerged here; its modern descendants maintain a distinct northern culture that is not easily diluted by the passage of time. Other wanderers, such as the autonomous hill-tribe peoples, traversed the range, limited only by altitude rather than political boundaries.

Travellers trek through the wilderness towards hill-tribe villages hoping to find out what they lost when life became as easy as the flick of a switch. Along twisting mountain roads, small towns awaken to a thick morning fog, offering the simple pleasures of reflective walks and breathtaking vistas.

CHIANG MAI

pop 1.6 million

To Thais, Chiang Mai is a national treasure – a cultured symbol of nationhood. For visitors, it's a cool place to kick back and soak up some of the Thai-ness that may have been missed on the beaches of the south coast. The climate is forgiving, bookshops outmuscle synthetic shopping centres, and the region's unique cultural heritage is worn as proudly as its vibrant hand-woven textiles. For culture vultures, Chiang Mai forms a playground, with classes in Thai language, cooking, meditation and massage.

The old city of Chiang Mai is a neat square bounded by moats and remnants of a medieval-style wall built 700 years ago to defend against Burmese invaders. A furious stream of traffic flows around the old city, but inside narrow *soi* branch off the clogged arteries into a quiet world of charming guesthouses, leafy gardens and friendly smiles.

Orientation

Th Moon Muang, along the east moat, is the main traveller centre. Intersecting with Th Moon Muang, Th Tha Pha runs east from the exterior of the moat towards the Mae Nam Ping. Once it crosses the river, the road is renamed Th Charoen Muang and eventually arrives at the main post office and train station.

Finding your way around Chiang Mai is fairly simple. A copy of Nancy Chandler's *Map Guide to Chiang Mai* is a good investment if you plan extensive exploration of the city. Pick up a copy at bookshops or guesthouses.

Information

BOOKSHOPS

Booze, billiards and used books – what a concept!

DK Book House (Th Kotchasan) New books on history, culture and travel in the region.

Gecko Books (☎ 0 5387 4066; Th Chiang Mai Kao) Largest choice of used books in the city.

Suriwong Book Centre (☎ 0 5328 1052; 54 Th Si Donchai) Best selection of new books in town.

EMERGENCY

Tourist police (☎ 0 5327 8798, 24hr emergency 1155; Th Chiang Mai-Lamphun; ☎ 6am-midnight) Near the TAT office, Chiang Mai's tourist police enjoys a good reputation.

INTERNET ACCESS

Internet cafés are everywhere.

Chiang Mai Disabled Center (☎ 0 5321 3941; www.infothai.com/disabled; 133/1 Th Ratchaphakhinai; per hr 20B) A nonprofit organisation funding services for the disabled. Provides internet access, bicycle rental and massages.

INTERNET RESOURCES

Chiang Mai Online (www.chiangmai-online.com) Basic background on Chiang Mai, along with comprehensive accommodation listings.

City Life (www.chiangmainews.com) Articles on local events, culture and art, plus current news.

Yellow Chiang Mai (www.yellowthailand.com/chiangmai) A searchable citywide phonebook complete with user-generated content.

MEDIA

Chiangmai Mail Weekly newspaper, good for local news.
City Life Popular with residents and tourists; articles on local culture and politics, and events listings.

MEDICAL SERVICES

Chiang Mai Ram Hospital (☎ 0 5322 4861; Th Bunreuangrit) The most sophisticated hospital in town.
Malaria Centre (☎ 0 5322 1529; 18 Th Bunreuangrit) Does free blood checks for malaria.
McCormick Hospital (☎ 0 5324 1311; Th Kaew Nawarat) The best-value place for minor treatment.

MONEY

All major Thai banks have several branches throughout Chiang Mai, many of them along Th Tha Phae, and there is no shortage of ATMs around town.

POST

Main post office (Th Charoen Muang) East of town; there's also a handy branch at the airport.

TELEPHONE

Overseas calls can also be made from one of the private offices along Th Tha Phae.
CAT office (Th Charoen Muang; ☎ 7am-10pm) Behind the main post office.

TOURIST INFORMATION

TAT office (☎ 0 5324 8604; 105/1 Th Chiang Mai-Lamphun; ☎ 8am-4.30pm) Has a list of registered trekking guides, plus maps and brochures.

Dangers & Annoyances

Many travellers have reported that their belongings (particularly credit cards) stored at Chiang Mai guesthouses have gone walkabout while they are trekking. Most guesthouses recommend you take such sensitive items with you, but be sure that you are travelling in safe areas as there are occasional incidents of whole trekking groups being robbed in the jungle. You can't win on this one, so before you stow your bags, make an itemised list of all belongings, including travellers cheques, and note your credit card balance.

Guesthouses in Chiang Mai have recently reported a rise in bag snatchings; local men on motorbikes are the usual perpetrators, and women carrying conspicuous purses seem to

be the most common victims. See p732 for more crafty scams.

Sights

TEMPLES

Chiang Mai has more than 300 temples – almost as many as Bangkok, which is a far larger city. The temple architecture here is markedly different from other parts of Thailand. Notice the intricate woodcarvings and colourful murals; these are hallmarks of the Lanna period (13th and 14th centuries). Three-tiered umbrellas adorning the tops of the temples, Singha lions guarding the entrances and high-base *chedi* are all Burmese influences imported into the city by wealthy teak merchants when they migrated to this important trade centre.

Wat Phra Singh (☎ 0 5381 4164; Th Singharat; ☎ 6am-6pm) is the real star amid the inner city's soaring stupas, and a perfect example of Lanna architecture. Established in 1345, this wat contains murals depicting Lanna customs and dress, as well as a scripture repository. It is also the focal point for Songkran (Water Festival) festivities in mid-April.

Wat Chiang Man (☎ 0 5337 5368; Th Ratchaphakhinai; ☎ 6am-6pm) is the oldest wat within the city walls and was erected by King Mengrai, Chiang Mai's founder, in 1296. Two famous Buddha images (Buddha Sila and the Crystal Buddha) are kept here in the *wihāan* to the right of the main *bòht*. The Crystal Buddha is believed to have the power to bring seasonal rains.

Wat Chedi Luang (☎ 0 5327 8595; Th Phra Pokkiao; ☎ 6am-6pm) contains the ruins of a huge *chedi* that collapsed during an earthquake in 1545. A partial restoration has preserved the 'ruined' look while ensuring the *chedi* doesn't crumble further. The venerable Emerald Buddha, now housed in Bangkok's Wat Phra Kaew, occupied the eastern niche here in 1475.

Wat Jet Yot (☎ 0 5321 9483; Superhighway; ☎ 6am-6pm) is modelled somewhat imperfectly on the Mahabodhi Temple in Bodhgaya, India. The seven spires represent the seven weeks Buddha was supposed to have spent in Bodhgaya after his enlightenment. Find it near the National Museum, 1.5km northwest of town.

Wat Suan Dok (☎ 0 5327 8967; Th Suthep; ☎ 6am-6pm) contains a 500-year-old bronze Buddha image and colourful jataka murals showing scenes from Buddha's past lives. Scenic sunsets are the temple's biggest attraction, especially for shutterbugs. A 'monk chat' from

5pm to 7pm Monday, Wednesday and Friday is hosted, free of charge, on the grounds, for foreigners to meet and chat with novice monks studying at the monastic university. It's 1km west of town.

Wat U Mong (☎ 0 5327 3990; Soi Wat U Mong; ☎ 6am-6pm) is a forest temple dating from Mengrai's rule and has a fine image of the fasting Buddha. Brick-lined tunnels in an unusual-looking large, flat-topped hill were supposedly fashioned around 1380 for a clairvoyant monk; some are still open for exploration. Resident foreign monks give talks in English on Sunday afternoon at 3pm by the lake. It's 4km west of town.

CHIANG MAI NATIONAL MUSEUM

Lanna history and artworks are documented at the **Chiang Mai National Museum** (☎ 0 5322 1308; Hwy 11/Superhighway northern loop; admission 30B; ☎ 9am-4pm Wed-Sun), 500m past Wat Jet Yot, northwest of town. Buddha images, northern Thai handicrafts and pottery fill the halls.

TRIBAL MUSEUM

If you decide against trekking through the hill-tribe villages, check out the worthwhile **Tribal Museum** (☎ 0 5321 0872; Th Chotana; admission free; ☎ 9am-4pm Mon-Fri, slide & video shows 10am-2pm) at Ratchamangkhla Park north of the city. This renovated museum houses a large collection of artefacts and other displays on the various cultural nuances and ethnic backgrounds of the hill tribes in Thailand.

CHIANG MAI NIGHT BAZAAR

Chiang Mai's leading tourist attraction is in fact the legacy of the original Yunnanese trading caravans that stopped here along the ancient trade route between Simao (in China) and Mawlamyine (on Myanmar's Indian Ocean coast). Today commerce is alive and well, sprawling over several blocks on Th Chang Khlan from Th Tha Phae to Th Si Donchai, towards the river. Made up of several different covered areas, ordinary glass-fronted shops and dozens of street vendors, the market offers a huge variety of Thai and northern Thai goods. Some good buys include Phrae-style *sêua mào hawm* (blue cotton farmer's shirt), northern and northeastern Thai hand-woven fabrics, *yàam* (woven shoulder bags) and hill-tribe crafts – many tribespeople set up their own

stalls here, while the Akha wander around on foot.

Activities

ROCK CLIMBING

Chiang Mai Rock Climbing Adventures (☎ 0 6911 1470; www.thailandclimbing.com; 55/3 Th Ratchaphakhinai; day trips per person 1500-2000B, multiday intensives 5500-9500B) organises climbs of the limestone cliffs called Crazy Horse Buttress, behind Tham Meuang On, about 20km east of Chiang Mai.

TREKKING

Chiang Mai is one of the most popular places in Thailand to arrange a trek. Many guesthouses and lots of travel agents are looking for a slice of the action in this 'competitive' (read cut-throat) business, so it pays to shop around before signing up. Most treks include visits to minority villages, some jungle action, plus the option of rafting or elephant rides. See p740 for more on trekking in northern Thailand.

Courses

BUDDHIST MEDITATION

Northern Insight Meditation Centre (☎ 0 5327 8620; watrampoeng@hotmail.com; Wat Ram Poeng; admission free) Ten- to 26-day individual intensive courses in *vipassana* (insight meditation) are taught by a Thai monk or nun, with Western students or bilingual Thais acting as interpreters.
Wat Suan Dok (☎ 0 5327 3105/20/49; Th Suthep; admission free) An English-language introduction to Buddhist meditation from Sunday afternoon to Monday morning, with an overnight stay at the monastery, 4km west of town.

COOKING

Cooking classes are a big hit in Chiang Mai and typically include an introduction to Thai herbs and spices, a local market tour, cooking instructions and a recipe booklet. Plus you get to eat the delicious Thai food you cook – everything from Chiang Mai-style chicken curry to steamed banana cake. Cooking classes usually cost 700B to 1000B a day.

We've heard consistently good things about the following places:

Baan Thai (☎ 0 5335 7339; www.cookintha.com; 11 Soi 5, Th Ratchadamnoen) Lunch and dinner courses.
Chiang Mai Thai Cookery School (☎ 0 5320 6388; www.thaicookeryschool.com; 1-3 Th Moon Muang) Owned by a famous Thai TV chef.
Gap's Thai Culinary Art School (☎ 0 5327 8140; gap_house@hotmail.com; Gap's House, 3 Soi 4, Th Ratchadamnoen)

Festivals & Events

Flower Festival The mother of Chiang Mai festivals, including parades, the Queen of the Flower Festival beauty contest and plenty of flower-draped floats. It's held in the first week of February.

Songkran (Water Festival) Think you can handle a water pistol? Chiang Mai is the place to find out, as it is water-world here in mid-April.

Winter Fair Held from late December to early January, this is a big event in the Chiang Mai calendar, with all sorts of activities and interesting visitors from the hills.

Sleeping

Most of the leading guesthouses are clustered on either side of the east moat. If you're having problems finding a room during peak periods (December to March and July to August), stop by the TAT office and pick up a free copy of *Accommodation in Chiang Mai*.

Most guesthouses make their 'rice and curry' from running trekking tours and reserve rooms for those customers. Usually a guesthouse will inform you in advance how many days (usually two to three) the room is available for nontrekkies, but to avoid surprises, check first.

The most atmospheric places are tucked away into narrow *soi* where pedestrians outnumber vehicles, and most will arrange free transport from the bus station with advance warning.

Julie Guesthouse (☎ 0 5327 4355; www.julieguesthouse.com; 7/1 Soi 5, Th Phra Pokklao; dm 70B, r 100-350B) The raging popularity of nearby Banana Guest House seems to have transferred here, and for good reason: the common area is huge, and packed at all hours with friendly backpackers. There's a pool table and relaxing down tempo on the stereo. The rooms could use a good scrubbing, but they're passable for the price. Don't miss the rooftop chill-out area.

Daret's House (☎ 0 5323 5440; daret's-house@yahoo.com; 7/1 Soi 5, Th Chaiyaphum; r 100-350B) One of CM's old-school backpacker spots, Daret's is best known for the great-food-and-low-prices combo at its open-air café. Rooms are clean enough but not exactly desirable; stay here if you're dying to re-create the Khao San experience.

Chiang Mai Srivichai YHA (☎ 0 5389 2192; www.yhathailand.com; 72/9 Moo 1, Th Huay Kaew; dm 150B, r 300-500B; ♿) Quite possibly the hippest Hostel International location in Thailand, the rooms here seem to have come straight from an IKEA catalogue. There are also dorms, a wheelchair accessible room, and One Red

MORE CRAFTY SCAMS

Bus or minivan services from Th Khao San in Bangkok often advertise a free night's accommodation in Chiang Mai if you buy a Bangkok-Chiang Mai ticket. What usually happens on arrival is that the 'free' guesthouse demands you sign up for one of the hill treks immediately; if you don't, the guesthouse is suddenly 'full'. Sometimes they levy a charge for electricity or hot water. The better guesthouses don't play this game.

Dog, a fashion-forward café and bar. The hostel organises city tours.

Same-Same Guesthouse (☎ 0 5320 8056; www.samesameguesthouse.net; 104 Th Ratchaphakhinai; r 250-450B; ♿) Not yet as popular as the affiliated Same-Same location on Ko Pha-Ngan, this new spot is nevertheless catching on quickly. Graffiti covering the walls sings its praises, and there's a great crash-pad vibe.

Spicythai Backpackers (☎ 0 5340 0444; www.spicythaibackpackers.com; 4/80 Nanthawan Village, Th Nimmanhaemin; dm 250B, r 360-700B; ♿) Aside from its slightly inconvenient location outside of the old city, Spicythai is easily one of the most comfortable and unique places to stay in CM. Guests enjoy free breakfast, high-speed internet and cable TV. Choose from a mixed dorm, a female-only dorm or one of the two private rooms.

SK House (☎ 0 5321 0690; www.sk-riverview.com; 30 Soi 9, Th Moon Muang; r 400-800B; ♿) More of a hotel than a guesthouse, this is the place to stay if you're looking for modern comfort and are willing to spend just a bit more than you'd shell out at the surrounding dives.

Also recommended out of the hundreds of other options:

Eagle House 2 (☎ 0 5341 8494; www.eaglehouse.com; 26 Soi 2, Th Ratwithi; dm 80B, r 200-360B) Fairly standard rooms, but the lush garden is perfect for killing a day or three with a good book. This place has a good reputation for treks, and its cooking school, the Chill Club Cooking Academy, has received top marks from readers.

Grace House (☎ 0 5341 8161; 27 Soi 9, Th Moon Muang; s/d 150/250B) One of the cheapest sleeps in the backpacker ghetto; rooms are sufficiently clean.

Eating

Indulge your intestines in Chiang Mai as the food here is top drawer. You can become a

disciple of northern cuisine at one of the age-old institutions, or chase up some comfort food from home.

THAI

Chiang Mai is famed for its fine *khào sawy*. The oldest area for this dish is the Jin Haw (Yunnanese Muslim) area around the Ban Haw Mosque on Soi 1, Th Charoen Prathet, not far from the night market.

Khao Soi Islam (Soi 1, Th Charoen Prathet; dishes 20-40B; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) A reliable choice for *khào sawy*, this place also serves Muslim curries and a good goat biryani. There is no roman-script sign out the front.

Aroon (Rai) Restaurant (☎ 0 5327 6947; 45 Th Kotchasan; dishes 30-80B; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) To watch all of CM drive by while you eat, grab a plastic chair near the front entrance at this open-air dining hall. On the menu is a solid selection of traditional northern Thai dishes at very agreeable prices, along with standard Thai and Chinese plates. It's situated on the eastern side of the moat, south of Th Tha Phae.

Heuan Phen (☎ 0 5327 7103; 112 Th Ratchamankha; dishes 30-120B; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This famous local eatery suffers from a split personality. The outdoor eating area out front is just like any other local canteen, but the northern and northeastern menu is one of the strongest in town. Well worth the detour.

Heuan Sunthari (☎ 0 5325 2445; 46/2 Th Wan Singkham; dishes 40-90B; ☎ lunch & dinner) Northeast of the old town, the menu of northern, central and Isan cuisine draws a crowd here, and so

does the rustic riverfront setting. But the real pulling power is the owner, famous northern Thai singer Soontaree Vechanont, who performs nightly. No roman-script sign.

Also recommended is the busy **Somphet market** (Th Moon Muang), north of Th Ratwithi, which sells cheap takeaway Thai food and northern-style sausages. **Pratu Chiang Mai night market** (Th Bamrungburi) has plenty of tables where people make an evening of eating and drinking. **Kalare Food Centre** (dishes 20-50B; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner), opposite the main night market building, is a food court with lots of Thai dishes and free Thai classical dancing.

INTERNATIONAL

Indian Restaurant (☎ 0 5322 3396; Soi 9, Th Moon Muang; dishes 20-60B; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) You'll find this family-run place directly underneath Grace House. Vegetarians are especially well cared for here, and a very popular Indian cooking class is run out of the restaurant.

Jerusalem Falafel (☎ 0 5327 0208; 35/3 Th Moon Muang; dishes 40-80B; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner, closed Fri) The falafel is fast becoming Thailand's most popular adopted dish and this hole-in-the-wall place does a good range of Middle Eastern favourites.

Art Café (☎ 0 5320 6365; nr Th Tha Phae & Th Kotchasan; dishes 50-120B; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner; ♿) Has a massive menu with everything from Italian entrées to Mexican food to standard Thai dishes and banana splits.

Zest (☎ 0 5321 3088; Th Moon Muang; dishes 50-150B; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Serving Thai, Chinese, Western and even macrobiotic food, this is a

NORTHERN CUISINE

Thanks to northern Thailand's cooler climate, your dreaded or beloved vegetables from home – such as broccoli and cauliflower – might make an appearance in a stir-fry or bowl of noodles. Untranslatable herbs and leaves from the dense forests are also incorporated into more regional dishes, imparting a distinct flavour of mist-shrouded hills. Even coffee grows here, and with a little luck you can find a chewy cup of arabica, although somewhere in that mythical handbook on foreigners that all Thais read, Nescafé is the *faràng* prescription. Day-market vendors sell blue sticky rice, which is dyed by a morning-glory-like flower and topped with a sweetened egg custard that will rot a whole row of teeth.

Showing its Burmese, Chinese and Shan influences, the north prefers curries that are more stewlike than the coconut-milk curries of southern and central Thailand. Sour notes are enhanced with the addition of pickled cabbage and lime, rather than the tear-inducing spiciness favoured in most Thai dishes. The most famous example of northern cuisine is *khào sawy*, a mild chicken curry with flat egg noodles, which is comforting on a cool foggy morning. A Burmese expat, *kaeng hang-leh*, is another example of a northern-style curry and is accompanied by sticky rice, which is eaten with the hands.

spacious and roomy garden restaurant where breakfast is served from morning till night. Rock bands and folk musicians occasionally set up on the small stage.

Pulcinella da Stefano (☎ 0 5387 4189; 2/1-2 Th Chang Moi Kao; dishes 100-200B; ☎ lunch & dinner) This romantic little trattoria is the perfect place to bring a date, and you won't need to max out the credit card in the process. Great seafood pastas, professional antipasto and one of the better wine lists in town.

VEGETARIAN

Chiang Mai has a huge choice of vegetarian food thanks to its reputation for all things healthy and holistic.

Vegetarian Centre of Chiang Mai (☎ 0 5327 1262; 14 Th Mahidon; dishes 10-15B; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Sponsored by the Asoke Foundation, this cafeteria offers the cheapest Thai vegetarian food this side of the street vendors. The restaurant is south of the southwestern corner of the city wall.

Biaporn (Soi 1, Th Si Phum; dishes 20-40B; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Right in the heart of the guesthouse ghetto, this tiny café sells healthy vegetarian classics. Chlorophyll drinks are 20B each.

our pick **AUM Vegetarian Restaurant** (☎ 0 5327 8315; 65 Th Moon Muang; dishes 30-70B; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Popular with Chiang Mai expats and visitors alike. The traditional northern Thai dishes are astounding, but so is the restaurant's massive collection of used paperbacks (AUM doubles as a bookstore). Sit upstairs, where you'll find low tables and floor seating.

Drinking

The ale flows fast and furiously at the strip of bars along Th Moon Muang near the Pratu Tha Phae. It's a familiar sight: lots of sweaty *faràng*, cheap beer and lots of neon. Some of the best bar-restaurants with live music are on the east bank of the Mae Nam Ping.

Riverside Bar & Restaurant (☎ 0 5321 1035; Th Charoenrat; dishes 60-200B) Chiang Mai's version of the Hard Rock Café, Riverside has been serving fantastic meals on the banks of the Mae Nam Ping for almost 25 years. Two live bands set up on either side of the building, making for a roaring party atmosphere most nights.

Brasserie (☎ 0 5324 1665; 37 Th Charoenrat) This intimate little café plays host to the clinking of knives and forks until around 10pm when the drinkers drift in. The famous guitarist Khun Took is the house musician here; he plays

superb blues guitar, but entertains the crowd most nights with classic rock covers.

THC (19/4-5 Th Kotchasan) The marijuana motif says it all. This place is so chilled out it's horizontal. Occupying a rooftop overlooking the old city, there is a rave up here every Sunday and beers daily.

Rasta Art Bar & Restaurant (☎ 0 1690 1577; Th Si Phum) Formerly the most popular place to party on the always hoppin' Music St, the Rasta Bar has a new location just a stone's throw from the northeast corner of the moat. Old-school regulars will no doubt be pleased to experience the more-than-ample elbow room here – ideal for the spontaneous dance parties that materialise with startling frequency. Expect reggae cover versions of 'My Girl' and 'Under the Boardwalk'.

UN Irish Pub (24/1 Th Ratwithi) Originally known as the Crusty Loaf, this place still runs a popular bakery. Come early and grab one of the coveted window seats upstairs, where you can watch the night unfold below while pounding back pints.

Drunken Flower (end of Soi 1, Th Nimanhaemin) The posh end of town, this is where you will find well-heeled Thais and the local expat crowd of NGO workers. Lonely Planet's own Joe Cummings performs here often with his band, The Tonic Rays.

Drunk Studio (☎ 0 9997 7037; 32/3 Th Atsathon) An alternative, industrial bar near the flower market, this is Chiang Mai's unofficial headquarters for live alternative music. Thai bands play grunge, hardcore, nu-metal and *phèua chiiwít* (Thai 'songs for life') nightly.

Near Eagle House 2, in what at first glance is just a dusty car park, there is a cluster of low-key garden bars turning out cheap beers and cool tunes. This strip is referred to as Music St or Reggae St; much of the live music here is in fact of the reggae variety.

Entertainment

Major Cineplex (☎ 0 5328 3939; Central Airport Plaza, 2 Th Mahidon) is the best cinema spot in town. Every Sunday at 3pm, **Chiang Mai University** (☎ 0 5322 1699; Th Huay Kaew; admission free), 1.5km northwest of the old town, presents a different foreign film in the main auditorium of the Art & Culture Centre.

Shopping

Long before tourists began visiting the region, Chiang Mai was an important centre

for handcrafted pottery, weaving, umbrellas, silverwork and woodcarvings, and today it's still the country's number-one source of handicrafts. The **Pratu Chiang Mai night market** (Th Bamrungburi), on the southern edge of town, is a great place to bargain like a local. A former royal cremation grounds, Warorot Market (also locally called Kat Luang, or Great Market) is the oldest market in Chiang Mai. It's a good spot for Thai fabrics, cooking implements and prepared foods (especially northern Thai foods).

Getting There & Away

AIR

Regularly scheduled international flights arrive at **Chiang Mai International Airport** (☎ 0 5327 0222) from the following cities: Kunming (China), Singapore, Taipei (Taiwan), Vientiane and Luang Prabang (Laos), and Yangon and Mandalay (Myanmar).

Domestic routes include Bangkok, Chiang Rai, Mae Hong Son, Mae Sot, Nan, Phitsanulok, Phrae, Phuket and Sukhothai. Worthwhile options include the short hop to Mae Hong Son with Thai Airways International and the discount flights to Bangkok with Air Asia and Nok Air, almost as cheap as a VIP bus.

Airlines operating out of Chiang Mai:
Air Asia (code AK; ☎ 0 2515 9999; www.airasia.com)
Air Mandalay (code 6T; ☎ 0 5381 8049; www.air-mandalay.com)

Bangkok Airways (code PG; ☎ 0 5321 0043; www.bangkokair.com)

Lao Airlines (code QV; ☎ 0 5322 3401; www.lao-airlines.com)

Mandarin Airlines (code AE; ☎ 0 5320 1268; www.mandarin-airlines.com)

Nok Air (code DD; ☎ 1318; www.nokair.com.th)

Orient Thai (code OX; ☎ 0 5392 2159; www.orient-thai.com)

SilkAir (code MI; ☎ 0 5327 6459; www.silkair.com)

Thai Airways International (THAI, code TG; ☎ 0 5321 1044; www.thaiair.com)

BUS

There are two bus stations in Chiang Mai: **Arcade bus station** (Th Kaew Nawarat), northeast of town, handles Bangkok and most of the long-distance cities, while **Chang Pheuk bus station** (Th Chang Pheuk), north of the town centre, handles buses to Fang, Tha Ton, Lamphun and destinations within Chiang Mai Province. From the town centre, a tük-tük or chartered *sáwngtháew* to the Arcade bus station should cost about 40B; to the Chang Pheuk bus station get a *sáwngtháew* at the normal 10B-per-person rate.

TRAIN

The **train station** (☎ 0 5324 5363; Th Charoen Muang) is on the eastern edge of town. There are four express trains and two rapid trains per day between Chiang Mai and Bangkok

BUSES FROM CHIANG MAI

Destination	Class	Fare (B)	Duration (hr)	Frequency
Bangkok	VIP	558-863	10	several daily
Chiang Rai	ordinary	100	3	frequent daily
	air-con	140		
Khon Kaen	ordinary	267	12	regular daily
	air-con	421-469		
Mae Hong Son	ordinary	187	8	regular daily
	air-con	337	5	
Mae Sai	ordinary	126	4	regular daily
	air-con	176		
Mae Sariang	ordinary	100	5	7 daily
	air-con	180		
Mae Sot	ordinary	253	6	2 daily
	air-con	326		
Nan	ordinary	158	6	5 daily
	air-con	221		
Pai	ordinary	80	4	5 daily
	air-con	142		
Phitsanulok	ordinary	227	6	hourly
	air-con	292		7am-3pm

BORDER PATROLS

In an effort to stop the smuggling of drugs and other contraband, staffed patrol posts search all vehicles headed towards the Burmese border. Police usually board public buses, sniff around a bit, give the evil eye to boys wearing make-up and perfunctorily check everyone's ID or passport. *Faràng* are usually ignored, but if you don't want trouble, don't look for it. And stuff that souvenir opium pipe deep inside your bag.

(1st/2nd class 593/281B, fare without surcharges). Advance booking is advised. Transport to the station via *sáwngtháew* should cost 20B.

Getting Around

Airport taxis cost 100B. Pick up a ticket at the taxi kiosk just outside the baggage-claim area, then present the ticket to the taxi drivers outside arrivals. The airport is only 3km from the city centre. You can charter a *túk-túk* or red *sáwngtháew* from the centre of Chiang Mai to the airport for 50B or 60B.

Plenty of red *sáwngtháew* circulate around the city with standard fares of 10B per person, but drivers often try to get you to charter (60B or less). If you're travelling alone, they typically ask for 20B. The *sáwngtháew* don't have set routes; you simply flag them down and tell them where you want to go. *Túk-túk* only do charters at 30B for short trips and 40B to 60B for longer ones. Chiang Mai still has loads of *sáamláw*, especially in the old city around Talat Warorot. *Sáamláw* cost around 20B to 30B for most trips.

You can rent bicycles (30B to 50B a day) or 100cc motorcycles (from 100B to 200B) to explore Chiang Mai. Bicycles are a great way to get around the city.

Chiang Mai Disabled Center (☎ 0 5321 3941; www.infothai.com/disabled; 133/1 Th Ratchaphakhinai) Bicycle rental to assist Chiang Mai's disabled community.

Contact Travel (☎ 0 5327 7178; www.activethailand.com; 73/7 Th Charoen Prathet; per day 200B) Topnotch 21-speed mountain bikes.

AROUND CHIANG MAI Doi Suthep

Perched on a panoramic hilltop, **Wat Phra That Doi Suthep** (admission 30B) is one of the north's most sacred temples. The site was 'chosen

by an honoured Buddha relic mounted on the back of a white elephant; the animal wandered until it stopped (and died) on Doi Suthep, making this the relic's new home. A snaking road ascends the hill to a long flight of steps, lined by ceramic-tailed *naga*, that leads up to the temple and the expansive views of the valley below. Watching the sunset from up here is an institution.

About 4km beyond Wat Phra That Doi Suthep are the palace gardens of **Phra Tamnak Phu** (admission free; ☎ 8.30am-12.30pm & 1-4pm Sat, Sun & holidays), a winter residence for the royal family. The road that passes the palace splits off to the left, stopping at the peak of Doi Pui. From there, a dirt road proceeds for a couple of kilometres to a nearby **Hmong village**, which is well toured and sells handicrafts.

Sáwngtháew to Doi Suthep leave from Th Huay Kaew, near the main gate of Chiang Mai University, for the 16km trip (40B up, 30B down); for another 10B, you can take a bicycle up with you and zoom back downhill.

Bo Sang & San Kamphaeng

The 'umbrella village' of Bo Sang (Baw Sang) is 9km east of Chiang Mai. It's a picturesque though touristy spot where the townspeople engage in just about every type of northern Thai handicraft, including making beautiful paper umbrellas.

About 5km further down Rte 1006 is San Kamphaeng, which specialises in cotton and silk weaving.

Frequent buses to Bo Sang (6B) and San Kamphaeng (8B) leave from Chiang Mai near the main post office on the northern side of Th Charoen Muang. White *sáwngtháew* (6B) leave from the Chang Pheueak bus station and make the trip to either destination.

Doi Inthanon

The highest peak in the country, Doi Inthanon (2595m), and the surrounding **national park** (admission 200B), can be visited as a day trip from Chiang Mai. There are some impressive waterfalls and popular picnic spots on the road to the summit. Between Chiang Mai and Doi Inthanon, the small town of Chom Thong has a fine Burmese-style temple, **Wat Phra That Si Chom Thong**, where 26-day *vipassana* meditation courses are available.

Buses to Chom Thong (23B) leave from inside Pratu Chiang Mai at the south moat, as well as from the Chang Pheueak bus sta-

tion in Chiang Mai. From Chom Thong there are regular *sáwngtháew* to Mae Klang (15B), about 8km north. *Sáwngtháew* from Mae Klang to Doi Inthanon leave almost hourly until late afternoon and cost 30B per person.

Lampang & Around

Lampang is like a low-key, laid-back little Chiang Mai. Like its larger sibling, Lampang was constructed as a walled rectangle and boasts magnificent temples, many of which were built from teak by Burmese and Shan artisans. Lampang is also known throughout Thailand as Meuang Rot Mah (Horse Cart City) because it's the only town in Thailand where horse-drawn carriages are still used as transport.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Temples

The old town's fine structures include **Wat Si Rong Meuang**, **Wat Si Chum** and **Wat Phra Kaew Don Tao** (one of the many former homes of the Emerald Buddha, now residing in Bangkok's Wat Phra Kaew) on the bank of the Mae Nam Wang, north of town.

In the village of Ko Kha, about 18km to the southwest of Lampang, lies **Wat Phra That Lampang Luang**, arguably the most beautiful wooden Lanna temple in northern Thailand. It is an amazing structure with walls like a huge medieval castle. To get there, catch a blue *sáwngtháew* south on Th Praisani to the market in Ko Kha (10B), then take a Hang Chat-bound *sáwngtháew* (5B) 3km north to the entrance of Wat Phra That Lampang Luang. A motorcycle taxi from Ko Kha to the temple costs approximately 30B.

Thai Elephant Conservation Center

At one time in Thai society, elephants were war machines, logging trucks and work companions. The automobile has rendered the elephant jobless and orphaned in the modern world. The **Thai Elephant Conservation Center** (☎ 0 5422 9042; www.changthai.com; admission 50B; ☎ public shows 10am & 11am daily, 1.30pm Fri, Sat & holidays Jun-Feb) attempts to remedy this by promoting ecotourism, providing medical care and training young elephants.

The centre offers elephant rides (from 200B for 15 minutes) and elephant bathing shows. The animals appreciate a few pieces of fruit – 'feels like a vacuum cleaner with a wet nozzle', reported one visitor. Travellers can sign

on for a one-day mahout course (1500B) or a three-day programme (4000B).

To reach the elephant camp, take a bus or *sáwngtháew* bound for Chiang Mai from Lampang's main bus station and get off at the Km 37 marker. Free vans shuttle visitors the 2km distance between the highway and the centre.

Pasang

Only a short *sáwngtháew* (10B) ride south of Lamphun, Pasang is a centre for **cotton weaving**. Near the wat is a cotton-products store called Wimon (no roman-script sign), where you can watch people weaving on looms or buy floor coverings, cotton tablecloths and other utilitarian household items. You'll also find a few **shops** (opposite Wat Pasang Ngam) near the main market in town.

SLEEPING & EATING

Boonma Guest House (☎ 0 5432 2653; 256 Th Talat Kao; r 250-300B) This family-run place features a couple of rooms in a gorgeous teak home, and cement rooms behind. Some have shared bathrooms. It lacks a comfortable place to hang out.

Kim Hotel (☎ 0 5421 7721; fax 0 5422 6929; 168 Th Boonyawat; r 250-350B; ☎) On the other side of the road to Kelangnakorn Hotel, the rooms in this three-storey place have tiled walls, making the bedrooms feel like bathrooms; however, they are clean, comfortable and have cable TV.

Kelangnakorn Hotel (☎ 0 5421 6137; Th Boonyawat; r 260-340B; ☎) Popular with travelling salesmen, this hotel has modernish rooms with wooden furniture and cable TV, and a friendly reception.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

From Chiang Mai, buses to Lampang (ordinary 25B, air-con 50B to 65B, two hours, every half-hour) leave from the Arcade bus station and also from near the TAT office in the direction of Lamphun. Buses also depart for Lamphun (29B).

You can also travel to Lampang from Chiang Mai by train (2nd/3rd class 37/15B, two hours).

PAI pop 3000

The hippy trail is alive and well in Pai, a flashback to stories from the '70s and counterculture colonies in Kabul and Kathmandu. Pai

emerged from nowhere in a cool, moist corner of a mountain-fortressed valley along a rambling river. Foreigners stumbled through here on their way to somewhere else and realised Pai was a mountain paradise of easy living. A steady scene has since settled in with the town's more permanent population of Shan, Thai and Muslim Chinese. The town itself can be explored in a matter of minutes, but the real adventure lies along the paths in the hills beyond.

Information

Pick up a copy of the *Pai, Soppong, Mae Hong Son Tourist Map* (20B) for extensive listings. Several places around town offer internet services and they all charge around 40B per hour.

Krung Thai Bank (Th Rangsiyanon) Has an ATM and foreign-exchange service.

Siam Used Books (Th Rangsiyanon) Best place for second-hand books in town.

Activities

All the guesthouses in town can provide heaps of information on local trekking and a few offer guided treks for as little as 600B per day if there are no rafts or elephants involved.

Thai Adventure Rafting (TAR; ☎ 0 5369 9111; www.activethailand.com; Th Rangsiyanon; per person 2000B) has two-day, white-water rafting trips on the Mae Nam Pai from Pai to Mae Hong Son. The main rafting season runs from July to December. Cheaper river activities include tubing; tubes can be hired for 50B around town.

Thom's Pai Elephant Camp Tours (☎ 0 5369 9286; www.geocities.com/pai_tours; 4 Th Rangsiyanon; 1hr/3hr rides per person 400/800B) offers jungle rides year-round from Thom's camp near the hot springs, which include a soak in the camp's hot-spring-fed tubs afterwards.

Pai Traditional Massage (☎ 0 5369 9121; Th Sukhapiban 1; massages per hr 150B, saunas 60B; ☎ 4.30am-8.30pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-8.30pm Sat & Sun) has very good northern Thai massage, as well as a sauna where you can steam yourself in *sămün phrai* (medicinal herbs).

Need to cool off and chill out? Sun yourself on the deck, sip a drink and take a dip at **Fluid** (admission 50B; ☎ 9am-8.30pm), a 25m swimming pool. To find it, head over the bridge towards the waterfall, then walk up the steep hill on your left.

Sleeping

From December to March it can be difficult to find a room. The most atmospheric guesthouses are spread along the banks of the Mae Nam Pai and they number in the dozens.

Baan Pai Riverside (☎ 0 5369 8152; r 150-250B) This rambling village of creaky bungalow huts sits right on the banks of the Mae Nam Pai, on the opposite side of town. The more expensive huts come with attached bathrooms and hot-water showers. The carpet-covered platform restaurant is perfect for lounging.

Golden Hut (☎ 0 5369 9949; 107 Moo 3; r 150-400B) The rooms and bungalows here encircle a decent-sized lawn, and the main common area looks directly out over the Pai river. If it's empty (and if you're a steady climber), give the tree house a try.

Pai River Lodge (☎ 0 9520 2898; s/d 200/250B) The lengthy lawn is a draw here, ringed by typical A-frame huts (with share bathrooms) and a couple of smarter options. It's south of Th Ratchadamnon.

Sun Hut (☎ 0 5369 9730; www.thesunhut.com; 28/1 Mae Yen; s/d from 250/350B) You'll need a motorbike to reach this destination, a psychedelic collection of zodiac-inspired bungalows that seems to have come straight out of the hippie-era cliché encyclopaedia. The turn-off is signposted about 3km from town on the road to the hot springs.

Eating & Drinking

There is an incredible number of places to get a good feed in Pai. Many of the riverfront guesthouses are capitalising on their location with rustic restaurants built on stilts near the water.

All About Coffee (☎ 0 5369 9429; Th Chaisongkham; dishes 35-65B; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) The espresso here isn't cheap, but if you're having trouble waking up, look no further. Like most everything in Pai, the décor is creative and inviting. The sandwiches are fantastic here too. It closes at 6pm.

Phu Pai Art Café (Th Rangsiyanon; dishes 40-100B; ☎ 6pm-midnight) One of Pai's more sophisticated on-the-town destinations, Phu Pai is a beautifully decorated room with local art on the walls and a small beer and wine bar in the corner. The live music is a world away from the bad cover bands you've grown accustomed to in Thailand; you might hear acoustic guitarists, violinists or genuine gypsy bands.

Bebop Restaurant & Music (Th Rangsiyanon; ☎ 6pm-1am) If you want to become a card-carrying member of the Pai nightlife patrol, simply show up at Bebob around midnight, when half the town seems to arrive. Live rock and cover bands perform nightly, and when it's time to close, do like the locals and head to one of the late-night places across the bridge.

Getting There & Away

The **bus stop** (Th Chaisongkham) is in a dirt lot in the centre of town. All buses that stop here follow the Chiang Mai-Pai-Mae Hong Son-Mae Sariang loop in either direction. Buses to Chiang Mai (air-con/ordinary 142/80B, four hours) and Mae Hong Son (97/62B, four hours) leave five times daily. The road is savagely steep and snaking; grab a window seat and ride on an empty stomach if motion sickness is a problem.

MAE HONG SON

pop 8300

Hemmed in by mountains on all sides, Mae Hong Son feels like the end of the road, but sees its fair share of foreigners thanks to the daily flights from Chiang Mai. Many travellers skip the sales pitch in Chiang Mai in favour of the localised trekking scene in Mae Hong Son, Thailand's far northwestern provincial capital. The town's population is predominantly Shan, but the feel is more a Thai town than minority mountain getaway. Head down to the shores of Nong Jong Kham (Jong Kham Lake) to escape the bustle of the busy streets.

Information

Most of the banks on Th Khunlum Praphat have ATMs. Internet access is widely available in the town centre but connections can be slow.

Post office (Th Khunlum Praphat)

Sri Sangworn Hospital (☎ 0 5361 1378; Th Singhanat Bamrung)

TAT office (☎ 0 5361 2982; Th Khunlum Praphat; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri) Across from the post office.

Thai Airways International (☎ 0 5361 1297; www.thaiair.com; 71 Th Singhanat Bamrung)

Tourist police (☎ 0 5361 1812, emergencies 1155; Th Singhanat Bamrung; ☎ 8.30am-9.30pm) To report thefts or lodge complaints against trekking companies or guesthouses.

Sights & Activities

Wat Jong Klang and **Wat Jong Kham** (south of Nong Jong Kham) are the focal point of the **Poi**

Sang Long Festival in March, when young Shan boys are ordained as novice monks. The boys are carried on the shoulders of friends and paraded round the wat under festive parasols.

Guesthouses in town arrange **treks** to nearby hill-tribe villages, as well as **white-water rafting** on the Mae Nam Pai. Reliable operators:

Nam Rim Tours (☎ 0 5361 3925; Th Khunlum Praphat) Funny, professional and knowledgeable.

PA Tours (Th Pradit Jong Kham) Across the street from Friend House; recommended by locals.

Sunflower Café (Th Udom Chaonithet) Consistently good feedback.

Sleeping & Eating

Johnnie House (Th Pradit Jong Kham; d 100-200B) An established crash pad near Nong Jong Kham, this place is a bit rustic and has only a few rooms. The 200B rooms come with a hot-water shower.

Friend House (☎ 0 5362 0119; 20 Th Pradit Jong Kham; r 100-400B) Clean, efficient and deservedly popular. The management here is, in fact, quite friendly, and the affiliated trekking company (PA Tours, across the street) is said to be good. Shared hot-water showers.

Palm House Guest House (☎ 0 5361 4022; 22/1 Th Chamnansthit; r from 300B; ☎) It's not exactly exploding with character, although everything here is scrubbed clean and even the fan rooms have satellite TV and little balconies. Popular with families.

Salween River Restaurant (☎ 0 5361 2050; dishes 35-80B; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Salween is the place to come for hill-tribe coffee and hearty Western breakfasts. The owners are a rich source of information and it's a popular hang-out for volunteers. Thai, Shan and Burmese food is available.

Lakeside Bar & Restaurant (Th Pradit Jong Kham; buf-fets 59B; ☎ lunch & dinner) With a sharp setting on the shores of the lake, this open-air restaurant and bar has a popular daily buffet. By night, it livens up and slowly but surely the drinkers outnumber the diners. There's live music until midnight most nights.

Getting There & Away

Mae Hong Son is 368km from Chiang Mai, but the terrain is so rugged (and beautiful) that the trip takes at least eight long, sweaty hours. For this reason, many people fly to or from Chiang Mai with **Thai Airways International** (THAI, code TG; ☎ 0 5361 2220; www.thaiair.com; Th Singhanat Bamrung), which has four flights daily.

TREKKING TO THE CORNERS

One of the most popular activities from Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai or Mae Hong Son is to take a trek through the mountains to observe the region's traditional hill-tribe villages. The term 'hill tribe' refers to ethnic minorities living in mountainous northern and western Thailand. The Thais refer to them as *chao khao*, literally meaning 'mountain people'. Each hill tribe has its own language, customs, mode of dress and spiritual beliefs. Most are of seminomadic origin, having migrated to Thailand from Tibet, Myanmar, China and Laos during the past 200 years or so, although some groups may have been in Thailand for much longer. The Tribal Research Institute in Chiang Mai recognises 10 different hill tribes, but there may be up to 20 in Thailand. The institute estimates the total hill-tribe population to be around 550,000. Lonely Planet's *Hill Tribes Phrasebook* gives a handy, basic introduction to the culture and languages of a number of the tribes.

BE AN INFORMED TREKKER

For the hill-tribe groups of Southeast Asia, tourism is a mixed blessing. It has helped to protect these cultures from widespread dismantling by majority governments, but has also contributed to the erosion of traditional customs through continued exposure to outside influences. Because trekking is big business, some villages have become veritable theme parks with a steady supply of visitors filtering in and out, creating exactly the opposite environment to the one trekkers hope to find, and eroding the fabric of the village.

Do your homework before you sign up for a trek. Find out if the tour group will be small, if the guide speaks the hill-tribe language and can explain the culture, and how many other groups will visit the village on the same day. Also find out if the village has a voice in its use as an attraction and whether it shares in the profits.

Remember that these villages are typically the poorest in the region, and what you consider to be your 'modest' belongings might be viewed as unthinkable luxuries to your hosts. While it is impossible to leave the community unaffected by your visit, at least respect its culture by observing local taboos:

- Dress modestly no matter how hot and sweaty you are.

- Don't take photographs unless permission is granted. Because of traditional belief systems, many individuals and even whole tribes may object strongly to being photographed. Always ask first, even if you think no-one is looking.
- Show respect for the community's religious symbols and rituals. Don't touch totems at village entrances, or any other object of obvious symbolic value, without asking permission. Unless you're asked to participate, keep your distance from ceremonies.
- Don't use drugs; set a good example to hill-tribe youngsters by not smoking opium or using other drugs.
- Don't litter while trekking or staying in villages; rather, take your rubbish away with you.
- Don't hand out sweets and refrain from giving out other forms of charity (such as pens and money) to children, as this encourages begging and undermines the parents' ability to be breadwinners for their families. Talk to your guide beforehand about materials the local school or health centre may need in order to benefit the community as a whole.

HILL-TRIBE COMMUNITIES

Akha (Thai: I-kaw)

Population: 48,500

Origin: Tibet

Present Locations: Thailand, Laos, Myanmar, Yunnan (China)

Economy: rice, corn, opium

Belief Systems: animism, with an emphasis on ancestor worship

Distinctive Characteristics: The Akha wear headdresses of beads, feathers and dangling silver ornaments. Villages are set along mountain ridges or on steep slopes 1000m to 1400m in altitude. They are among the poorest of Thailand's ethnic minorities and tend to resist assimilation into the Thai mainstream. Like the Lahu, the Akha often cultivate opium for their own consumption.

Hmong (Thai: Meo or Maew)

Population: 124,000

Origin: southern China

Present Locations: southern China, Thailand, Laos, Vietnam

Economy: rice, corn, opium

Belief Systems: animism

Distinctive Characteristics: Hmong tribespeople wear simple black jackets and indigo trousers with striped borders, or indigo skirts, and silver jewellery. Most women wear their hair in a large bun. They usually live on mountain peaks or plateaus. Kinship is patrilineal and polygamy is permitted. They are Thailand's second-largest hill-tribe group and are numerous in Chiang Mai Province.

Karen (Thai: Yang or Kariang)

Population: 322,000

Origin: Myanmar

Present Locations: Thailand, Myanmar

Economy: rice, vegetables, livestock

Belief Systems: animism, Buddhism or Christianity, depending on the group

Distinctive Characteristics: The Karen have thickly woven V-neck tunics of various colours (unmarried women wear white). They tend to live in lowland valleys and practise crop rotation rather than swidden (slash and burn) agriculture. Kinship is matrilineal and marriage is endogamous (ie only within the tribe). There are four distinct Karen groups: White Karen (Skaw Karen), Pwo Karen, Black Karen (Pa-o) and Kayah. These groups combined comprise the largest hill tribe in Thailand, numbering well over a quarter of a million people, or about half of all hill-tribe people. Many Karen continue to migrate into Thailand from Myanmar, fleeing Burmese government persecution.

Lahu (Thai: Musoe)

Population: 73,000

Origin: Tibet

Present Locations: southern China, Thailand, Myanmar

Economy: rice, corn, opium

Belief Systems: theistic animism (supreme deity is Geusha), Christianity

Distinctive Characteristics: Lahu wear black-and-red jackets, with narrow skirts for women.

They live in mountainous areas at about 1000m. Their intricately woven *yam* (shoulder bags) are prized by collectors. There are four main groups: Red Lahu, Black Lahu, Yellow Lahu and Lahu Sheleh.

Lisu (Thai: Lisaw)

Population: 28,000

Origin: Tibet

Present Locations: Thailand, Yunnan (China)

Economy: rice, opium, corn, livestock

Belief Systems: animism with ancestor worship and spirit possession

Distinctive Characteristics: The Lisu women wear long multicoloured tunics over trousers and sometimes wear black turbans with tassels. Men wear baggy green or blue pants that are pegged in at the ankles. They also often wear lots of bright colours. Lisu villages are usually in the mountains, located at about 1000m. Premarital sex is said to be common in the villages, along with freedom in choosing marital partners. Patrilineal clans have pan-tribal jurisdiction, which makes the Lisu unique among the hill-tribe communities (most hill tribes have power centred at the village level with either the shaman or a village headman as leader).

Mien (Thai: Yao)

Population: 40,000

Origin: central China

Present Locations: Thailand, southern China, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam

Economy: rice, corn, opium

Belief Systems: animism with ancestor worship and Taoism

Distinctive Characteristics: Women wear black jackets with red furlike collars and trousers decorated with intricately embroidered patches, along with large dark-blue or black turbans. They tend to settle near mountain springs at between 1000m and 1200m. They have been heavily influenced by Chinese traditions and use Chinese characters to write the Mien language. Kinship is patrilineal and marriage is polygamous.

The **airport** (☎ 0 5361 2057; Th Nivit Pisan) is near the centre of town.

The **bus station** (Th Khunlum Praphat) is near the Siam Hotel. There are two routes from Mae Hong Son: the northern route is faster by

about an hour, but the southern route includes more bathroom stops. Buses travelling south from Mae Hong Son stop at Mae Sariang (ordinary 80B, four hours, five daily), while buses heading north stop at Pai (ordinary

105B, four hours, seven to eight daily). Both eventually reach Chiang Mai (ordinary/air-con 200/261B).

THA TON & AROUND

In the far northern corner of Chiang Mai Province, Tha Ton is the launching point for river trips to Chiang Rai. The ride down Mae Nam Kok is a big hit with tourists and the villages along the way are geared to groups, but it remains a relaxing route to avoid the bone-rattling buses for a day. Tha Ton is little more than a boat dock with a few guesthouses and souvenir stands, so come equipped with money and other sundries.

Guesthouses line the main road into town on either side of the river. **Chan Kasem Guest House** (☎ 05345 9313; d 90-300B) is the nearest spot to the boat dock, and has simple rooms with shared bathroom in the old house and smarter rooms in a brick block. There's also an atmospheric restaurant on the river.

Buses from Chiang Mai (70B, four hours, six departures daily) leave Chang Pheuk starting at 6am, which is the only departure that will arrive in time for the 12.30pm boat to Chiang Rai. From Tha Ton, yellow sawngtháew run north to Mae Salong (50B, 1½ hours, departures every 30 minutes) and south to Fang (12B, 40 minutes).

Chiang Rai-bound boats taking up to 12 passengers leave from the pier in Tha Ton at 12.30pm only (250B, three to five hours). Six-person charters are available for 1700B between 7am and 3pm. Many travellers like to do the trip in stages, stopping in minority villages along the way. Guesthouses in Tha Ton can arrange combination rafting and trekking trips ending in Chiang Rai.

CHIANG RAI

pop 40,000

Leafy and well groomed, Chiang Rai is more liveable than visitable, lacking any major tourist attractions except being a gateway to the Golden Triangle and an alternative spot for arranging hill-tribe treks. Of late, Chiang Rai has become more popular with well-heeled international conventioners than with those lacking an expense account.

Information

Chiang Rai has a good number of banks, especially along Th Thanalai and along Th Utarakit. Internet access is readily available.

CAT office (cnr Th Ratchadat Damrong & Th Ngam Meuang; ☎ 7am-11pm Mon-Fri)

Chiang Rai Prachanukroh Hospital (☎ 0 5371 1303)

Garé Garon (869/18 Th Phahonyothin; ☎ 10am-10pm) New and used English books, plus coffee, tea and handicrafts in an artsy environment.

Orn's Bookshop (1051/61 Soi 1, Th Jet Yot; ☎ 8am-8pm) By far the city's best selection of second-hand English books, and with lower prices than Garé Garon. A separate room is devoted to various European-language titles.

Post office (Th Utarakit) South of Wat Phra Singh.

TAT office (☎ 0 5371 7433; 448/16 Th Singkhla; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm)

Tourist police (☎ 0 5371 1779)

Sights & Activities

In the mid-14th century, lightning struck open the *chedi* at **Wat Phra Kaew** (cnr Th Trairat & Th Reuang Nakhon), thus revealing the much-honoured Emerald Buddha hiding inside.

Hilltribe Museum & Handicrafts Center (☎ 0 5374 0088; www.pda.or.th/chiangrai; 620/1 Th Thanalai; admission 50B; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-6pm Sat & Sun), run by the nonprofit PDA, displays clothing and the history of major hill tribes. PDA also organises hill-tribe treks.

In excess of 20 travel agencies, guesthouses and hotels offer trekking, typically in the Doi Tung, Doi Mae Salong and Chiang Khong areas. **Fat Free Mountain Bikes** (☎ 0 5375 2532; contact@fatfreebike.com; 542/2 Th Banphapraikan) has imported mountain bikes for sale or rent, does bike repairs and organises mountain biking trips. Three agencies in Chiang Rai operate treks and cultural tours where profits from the treks go directly to community development projects:

Natural Focus (☎ 0 5371 5696; natfocus@loxinfo.co.th) Specialises in nature tours.

PDA Tours & Travel (☎ 0 5374 0088; Hilltribe Museum & Handicrafts Center, 620/1 Th Thanalai) Culturally sensitive tours led by PDA-trained hill-tribe members.

Sleeping

Chat House (☎ 0 5371 1481; chathouse32@hotmail.com; 3/2 Soi Saengkaew, Th Trairat; dm/s 70/80B, d 150-250B; ☎) Rooms here are small and somewhat plain, but the sprawling common area makes up for it. The young Thai employees are fun and eager to speak English. Bicycles and motorcycles for rent, plus guided treks offered.

Garden House (☎ 0 5371 7090; 163/1 Th Banphapraikan; r 100-200B) Aesthetically speaking, this is the most creative guesthouse in town.

CHIANG RAI

0 600 m
0 0.4 miles

INFORMATION

CAT Office.....	1 A2	PDA Tours & Travel.....	(see 14)
Chiang Rai Prachanukroh Hospital.....	2 B1	Wat Phra Kaew.....	9 A1
Garé Garon.....	3 C2	SLEEPING	
Orn's Bookshop.....	4 B3	Baan Bua.....	10 B3
Post Office.....	5 B2	Chat House.....	11 B1
TAT Office.....	6 B1	Garden House.....	12 A2
Tourist Police.....	7 B1	EATING	

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Fat Free Mountain Bike Shop.....	8 C2	Boonsita.....	13 C3
Hilltribe Museum & Handicrafts Center.....	(see 14)	Cabbages & Condoms.....	14 C2
		Day Market.....	15 B2
		Night Market.....	16 C3

DRINKING

Tepee Bar.....	17 C2	TRANSPORT	
		Bus Station.....	18 C3
		Tha Nam Mae Kok.....	19 C1

Traditional A-frame bungalows, lots of teak and a lovingly cared-for garden complete the picture. Stay here if it's comfort and quiet you're craving.

Baan Bua (☎ 0 5371 8880; baanbua@yahoo.com; 879/2 Th Jet Yot; s/d from 180/200B; ☎) Currently the pearl of Chiang Rai, this place boasts a large garden area that's perfect for breakfast in the morning. All rooms have private bathrooms with hot showers. This place always seems to be full, so book ahead.

Eating & Drinking

our pick Boonsita (☎ 0 5375 5055; Th Prasopsuk; dishes 25B; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) A cafeteria-style vegetarian restaurant, this is one of the very few restaurants in Thailand serving unbleached

brown rice. The food is absolutely perfect, and in it you'll find no dairy, poultry or MSG. It's across Th San Pannat from the bus station.

Cabbages & Condoms (☎ 0 5374 0784; 620/1 Th Thanalai; dishes 35-90B; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Right next door to the Hilltribe Museum, profits from this restaurant are used to distribute condoms and fund sex-education initiatives throughout Thailand. Especially toothsome northern Thai dishes are on the menu.

Tepee Bar (Th Phahonyothin) This hole-in-the-wall hang-out is dark, dank and in serious need of a good dusting. But it's also seriously fun, and you'll find a mixture of backpackers, volunteers and expats stuffed onto the 2nd floor nearly every night. (Good luck finding the staircase.)

GETTING TO LAOS

From the Mekong River village of Chiang Khong, you can cross into the Lao village of Huay Xai; ferry boats make the passage for 40B. The border post is open from 8am to 6pm, and 30-day Lao visas are available on arrival for US\$30. From Huay Xai, you can catch boats to Luang Prabang, Luang Nam Tha and Xieng Kok, a bus to Luang Nam Tha or minivans to Vientiane. Buses connect Chiang Khong with Chiang Rai and Chiang Mai to the south, and you can travel southeast to Nong Khai.

Readers have been complaining about a visa scam where travellers are told that if they don't prepurchase their Laos visa (at an inflated price), they'll find themselves stuck in Chiang Kong for two days. This is in fact not true, and regardless of the scare stories you may hear, it is possible to get a visa at the border.

For information on entering Thailand from Laos at this crossing, see p390.

Muze Bar (Th Sanambin; ☎ 4pm-midnight, closed Tue)

Located about 1km from town down the old airport road, this is one of Chiang Rai city's better dance clubs. DJ Skin (Pi Job) and Pi Num are the resident spinners here.

The day market, off Th Uதாகიტ, is a real maze; explore the eats on offer to put together a cheap lunch. Near the bus station, the night market is a must for dining thanks to a huge local crowd and more stalls than a Bangkok food court. Older Thais and foreigners are drawn to the food and beer garden for northern Thai dance performances, while younger Thais prefer the acoustic guitar stage. That's entertainment and it's free.

Getting There & Away

Chiang Rai Airport (☎ 0 5379 3555; Superhighway 110), about 10km north of town, fields daily flights from Bangkok and Chiang Mai.

Air Asia (☎ 0 5379 3545; www.airasia.com), **Air Andaman** (☎ 0 5379 3726) and **Thai Airways International** (☎ 0 5477 1179; www.thaiair.com) all offer daily flights between Bangkok and Chiang Rai.

Chiang Rai is also accessible by a popular boat journey from Tha Ton (see p742 for details). For boats heading upriver, go to the pier in the north corner of town at Tha Nam Mae Kok. Boats embark daily at 10.30am. You can charter a boat to Tha Ton for 1600B. Call **Chiang Rai Boat Tour** (☎ 0 5375 0009) for further information.

Chiang Rai's **bus station** (Th Prasopsuk) is in the heart of town. Bus services connect Chiang Rai with Bangkok (air-con 370B to 452B, VIP 700B, 10 hours), Chiang Mai (ordinary/air-con 77/139B, four hours, hourly 6am to 5pm), Chiang Khong (ordinary 42B, three hours, hourly 7am to 5pm), Chiang Saen (ordinary 25B, 1½ hours, every 15 minutes 6am to 6pm)

and Mae Sai (ordinary/air-con 25/37B, one hour, every 15 minutes 6am to 6pm).

GOLDEN TRIANGLE & AROUND

The three-country border between Thailand, Myanmar and Laos forms the legendary Golden Triangle, a mountainous frontier where the opium poppy was once an easy cash crop for the region's ethnic minorities. As early as the 1600s, opium joined the Asian trade route along with spices and natural resources. The world soon had an opium addiction, but the drug and its derivatives, morphine and heroin, weren't outlawed in the West until the early 20th century. While Myanmar and Laos are still big players in worldwide opium production, Thailand has successfully stamped out its cultivation through crop-substitution programmes and aggressive law enforcement. Today the region's sordid past is marketed as a tourist attraction, and curious onlookers soon find that souvenirs of opium pipes and Golden Triangle T-shirts are the main success story of the substitution programme.

Chiang Khong

pop 9000

Chiang Khong is an important market town for local hill tribes and for trade with northern Laos. It is quite a lively little community and a lot of travellers pass this way between Thailand and Laos. Nearby are several villages inhabited by Mien and White Hmong.

Si Ayuthaya, Kasikornbank and Siam Commercial Bank all have branches in town with ATMs and foreign-exchange services.

Bamboo Riverside Guest House (☎ 0 5379 1621/9; sweepatts@hotmail.com; 71 Mu 1 Hua Wiang; dm 70B, r 150-250B) is a great introduction to Thailand or

somewhere to leave for Laos on a high. It has bamboo-thatched dorm rooms as well as private rooms, all with fan and attached hot shower. The owner ensures a bohemian atmosphere and the restaurant has views of Laos and good food.

Buses depart hourly for Chiang Rai (42B, three hours, 4am to 5pm) and Chiang Saen (50B, two hours). Daily buses to Bangkok (ordinary/air-con/VIP 382/491/573B, nine hours) leave in the evening.

Boats taking up to 10 passengers can be chartered up the Mekong River from Chiang Khong to Chiang Saen for 1800B. Boat crews can be contacted near the customs pier behind Wat Luang, or further north at the pier for ferries to Laos.

Chiang Saen

pop 55,000

Since it isn't in the officially marketed 'Golden Triangle', Chiang Saen is still a sedate little town on the Mekong River. You can while away a day exploring ruins of the long-extinct Chiang Saen kingdom, visiting the small national museum or watching the boat traffic.

Gin's Guest House (☎ 0 5365 1023; 71 Mu 8; bungalows 200-250B, r 300-700B), on the north side of town (about 1.5km north of the bus terminal), is a friendly and secluded place with solid rooms. The upper terrace is a good place to watch the Mekong flow by. Mountain-bike and motorcycle rentals are available.

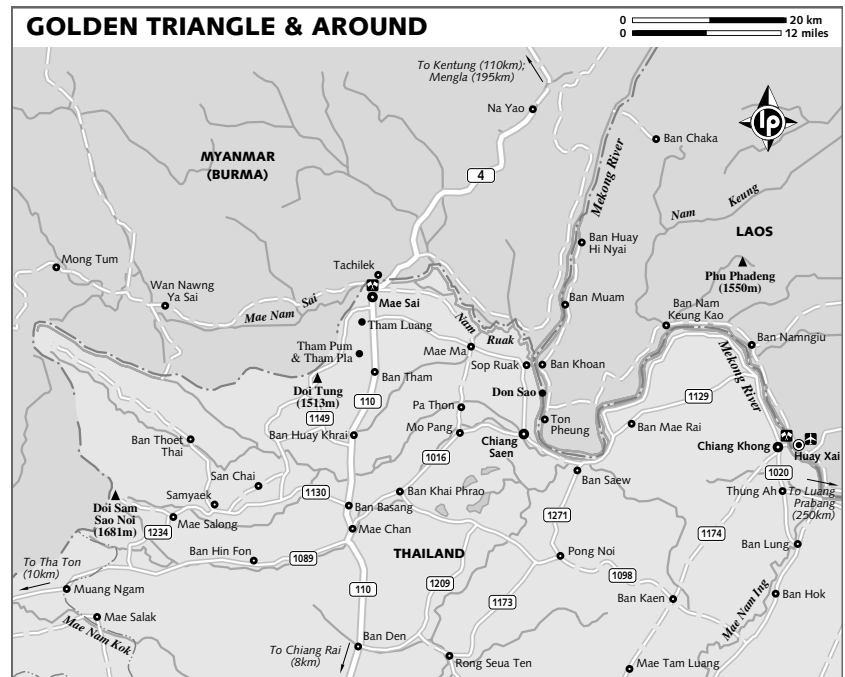
Cheap noodle and rice dishes are available at food stalls in and near the market on the river road, and along the main road through town from the highway, near the bus stop. A small night market sets up each evening at the latter location and stays open until around midnight.

Chiang Saen is most easily reached via Chiang Rai (ordinary 25B, 1½ hours, frequent departures). Sawngthāw go to Mae Sai (30B, one hour) and Chiang Khong (50B, two hours).

Six-passenger speedboats go to Sop Ruak (one way/return 400/700B, 30 minutes) or Chiang Khong (one way 1500B, 1½ hours), but be ready to bargain.

Sop Ruak

Busloads of package tourists converge on Sop Ruak's 'Welcome to the Golden Triangle' sign



to pose proudly for photos. It is an all-out tourist trap, lacking the romance people might hope to find in such an infamous place.

House of Opium (admission 30B; ☎ 7am-7pm), in the centre of town, is worth a peek. It's a small museum telling the story of opium culture, and is the cheaper alternative to the **Opium Exhibition Hall** (☎ 0 5378 4444; www.goldentrianglepark.com; admission 300B), an ultraflash exhibition hall on the history and production of opium, as well as the debilitating effects of the drug. It is located about 1km beyond Sop Ruak on the road to Mae Sai.

Sop Ruak is 9km from Chiang Saen, and săwngthăew and share taxis cost around 10B; these leave every 20 minutes. It's an easy bicycle ride from Chiang Saen to Sop Ruak; guesthouses in Chiang Saen can arrange rentals.

Mae Sai

pop 25,800
Thailand's northernmost town, Mae Sai, is a handy launching pad for exploring the Golden Triangle and Mae Salong. The frontier town is a busy trading post for gems, jewellery, cashews and lacquerware, and also forms a legal border crossing into Myanmar. Many travellers make the trek here to extend their Thai visa or to tick Myanmar off as a destination on their global travel map.

Most guesthouses line the street along the Mae Nam Sai to the left of the border checkpoint. **Mae Sai Guest House** (☎ 0 5373 2021; 688 Th Wiengpangkam; s 100-150B, d 200-500B) is a bungalow village that includes riverfront berths with porches over the water. It is overseen by friendly, enthusiastic staff. Its riverside restaurant serves tasty Thai and Western dishes

and you can keep one eye on Myanmar while you dine. It's about 150m beyond what seems like the end of Th Sailomjoi.

Northern Guest House (☎ 0 5373 1537; 402 Th Tham Pha Jum; r 120-350B; 🍽️) is on the banks of the Nam Ruak – the sign has about a dozen names for this popular guesthouse set in spacious gardens. Choose from rustic huts to modern air-con rooms in a two-storey building by the river.

Mae Sai has a **night market** (Th Phahonyothin) with an enticing mix of Thai, Burmese, Chinese and Indian dishes.

The **bus station** (☎ 0 5364 6437), off Th Phahonyothin, is 3km from the border or 1km from the immigration office. For information on crossing into Myanmar, see below.

Buses connect Mae Sai with Bangkok (air-con 374B to 481B, VIP 685B, 12 hours, regular departures). Other services include Chiang Mai (ordinary/air-con 95/171B, four to five hours, regular departures) and Chiang Rai (ordinary/air-con 25/37B, one hour, frequent departures). The bus to Tha Ton (36B) and Fang (45B) leaves at 7am and takes two hours.

The Chiang Rai-bound bus makes stops along the way where you can pick up săwngthăew to Mae Salong or Sop Ruak. Tell the attendant your final destination and they will let you know where to get off.

Mae Salong

pop 10,000
Built along the spine of a mountain, Mae Salong was originally settled by the 93rd Regiment of the Kuomintang Nationalist Party (KMT), which fled from China after the 1949 Chinese revolution. Crossing into northern

Thailand with their pony caravans, the ex-soldiers and their families re-created a society that was much like the one they had left behind in Yunnan. Chinese rather than Thai is more frequently spoken here, and the land's severe inclines boast tidy terraces of tea and coffee plantations.

An interesting **morning market** (☎ 5-7am) convenes at the T-junction near Shin Sane Guest House. The market attracts town residents and many tribespeople from the surrounding districts. Most of the guesthouses in town can arrange **horseback treks** around the area.

Shin Sane Guest House (Sin Sae; ☎ 0 5376 5026; r 50-300B) is Mae Salong's original guesthouse, and the cheapies are as cell-like as you'd expect for such few baht. It has reliable information on trekking and a small restaurant. Next door to Shin Sane, **Akha Mae Salong Guest House** (☎ 0 5376 5103; Th Mae Salong; dm/s/d 50/100/150B) is run by a friendly Akha family. Handicrafts are made and sold in the reception area.

To get to Mae Salong, take a Chiang Rai-Mae Sai bus and get off at Ban Basang (ordinary 15B, 1½ hours). From there, săwngthăew climb the mountain to Mae Salong (50B per person, one hour). Yellow săwngthăew follow the scenic road west of the village to Tha Ton (50B).

NAN

pop 24,300
Nan was a semiautonomous kingdom until 1931 and it still retains something of its former isolation and individuality. Surveying the town's distinctive **temples** and visiting the **National Museum** (☎ 0 5477 2777, 0 5471 0561; Th Pha Kong; admission 30B; 🕒 9am-4pm Mon-Sat) help to pass an unhurried day. Many visitors stop in Nan only long enough to arrange a trek into mountainous **Doi Phu Kha National Park** and the adjacent hill-tribe villages of the Thai Lü, Htin, Khamu and Mien people.

Information

There are several banks with ATMs on Th Sumonthewarat. Internet services are available around town for 40B per hour.

Post office (Th Mahawong) In the centre of town.

Tourist information centre (🕒 8am-5pm) Opposite Wat Phumin.

Activities

Fhu Travel Service (☎ 0 5471 0636, 0 1287 7209; www.fhutravelservice.com; 453/4 Th Sumonthewarat) offers treks to

minority villages. It has been leading tours for almost two decades, and is a professional, honest and reliable organisation. Trekking tours start from 700B for a day. Fhu also offers white-water rafting trips, kayaking trips and elephant tours.

Sleeping

Doi Phukha Guest House (☎ 0 5475 1517; 94/5 Soi 1, Th Aranyawat; s/d 100/150B) This rambling old house in a residential neighbourhood is awkward to get to but offers basic sleep space with clean cold-water bathrooms. To find it, follow Th Mayayot north through town, take a right on Soi Aranyawat and, after passing Wat Aranyawat on your left-hand side, take a left on Soi 1.

Amazing Guest House (☎ 0 5471 0893; 23/7 Th Rat Amnuay; s/d 120/350B; 🍽️) In a tidy, two-storey wooden house on a quiet lane off Th Rat Amnuay, this intimate place is a bit like staying with your long-lost Thai grandparents. All rooms have wooden floors, clean beds and hot shared showers. Bicycles and motorbikes can be rented here, and free pick-up from the bus station is available.

Nan Guest House (☎ 0 5477 1849; www.nan-guesthouse.com; 57/16 Th Mahaphrom; r 230-350B; 🍽️) This well-maintained place has spotless spacious rooms, most with attached hot-water bathrooms. For a clean, comfortable place to sleep, it's an excellent choice.

Eating

You can buy Nan's famous golden-skinned oranges from the **day market** (nr Th Khao Luang & Th Jettabut), as well as takeaway food such as *sôm-tam* (papaya salad). At night, vendors set up along the banks of the Mae Nam Nan to bring nourishment to the masses.

Yota Vegetarian Restaurant (Th Mahawong; dishes 10-30B; 🕒 breakfast & lunch) This is one of the best deals in town, and *the* best if you're vegetarian. Once the food runs out, it's all over red rover.

Da Dario (☎ 0 5475 0258; 37/4 Th Rat Amnuay; dishes 60-100B; 🕒 dinner Tue-Fri, lunch & dinner Sat & Sun) Next to Amazing Guest House, Da Dario is an Italian-Thai restaurant that makes delicious pizza, minestrone and other treats. Prices are reasonable and the service impressive.

Getting There & Away

Air Andaman (☎ 0 5471 1222) offers services that connect Nan with Chiang Mai (four flights

GETTING TO MYANMAR

In peaceful times, foreigners may cross from Mae Sai into Tachilek, Myanmar. The border is open from 6am to 6pm weekdays and 6am to 9pm weekends, except when fighting erupts between the Burmese central government and Shan minority groups; ask about current conditions before making the trip to Mae Sai.

Head to the immigration office just before the bridge on the Thai side and state how far you'll be going into Myanmar – Tachilek, Kengtung or Mengla. Cross the bridge and enter the Myanmar immigration office, where for a payment of US\$10 or 500B you can enter Myanmar and travel onto Kengtung or Mengla for a period of 14 days. The fee is the same whether you're staying for a few hours or 14 days. At the immigration office your picture is taken for your temporary ID card that has your final destination marked on it. If you're going further afield than Tachilek, this ID card is stamped at every checkpoint along the route. On your return to Thailand, the Thai immigration office will give you a new 30-day visa.

For information on this border crossing in the other direction, see p552.

weekly) or Bangkok (daily). The airline offers free transport between Fahthanin Hotel and the airport. **PB Air** (www.pbair.com) also has flights from Bangkok (four flights weekly).

The government bus station is located roughly 500m southwest of town on the highway to Phrae. Buses travel between Nan and Bangkok (air-con 300B to 387B, VIP 600B, 10 to 12 hours). There are also services available to Chiang Mai (ordinary 128B, air-con 179B to 230B, six to seven hours, four daily), Chiang Rai (air-con 110B, six to seven hours, 9.30am) and Phrae (ordinary/air-con 44/62B, 2½ hours, frequent departures).

NORTHEASTERN THAILAND

Kiss goodbye to the tourist trail, as the northeast is a trip back in time to old Thailand. Rice fields stretch as far as the eye can see in every direction, haphazardly divided by earthen paths and punctuated by tired, sun-beaten trees and lonely water buffaloes submerged in muddy ponds. During the wet season the land is so vivid with tender rice shoots that your eyes ache, but in the dry season the land withers to the texture of a desert. Traditional culture is the rich lifeblood of the Lao, Thai and Khmer people, coursing as deliberately as the mighty Mekong River.

Also referred to as Isan, the northeast is Thailand's least-visited region, as it lacks a well-developed tourist infrastructure. Few towns boast a backpacker scene and fewer have mastered English as a second language. On the wide arc of the Mekong River between the Laos gateways of Nong Khai and Mukdahan there's an inviting array of small towns, best visited during a local festival when music, dancing and food are out in force. Elsewhere, the ancient Angkor kings left behind magnificent temples on their far-flung frontier, part of a holy road connecting Angkor Wat with present-day Thailand.

NAKHON RATCHASIMA (KHORAT)

pop 2 million

Thailand's second-largest city, Nakhon Ratchasima (Map pp750–1), which goes by the nickname 'Khorat', is a slow burner with little evident charm for the whistle-stop visitor. Development has buried much of its history,

but unlike other Thai metropolises, Nakhon Ratchasima has a genuine core. This is the gateway to Isan, and a real city where tourism takes a backseat to real life. It is also a handy base for exploring the nearby Khmer ruins of Phimai or Khao Yai National Park.

Information

There are banks galore in Nakhon Ratchasima, all with ATMs and exchange services.

Post office (Th Jomsurangyat; ☎ 8am–5pm Mon–Fri, to noon Sat)

Ratchasima Hospital (☎ 0 4426 2000; Th Mittaphap)

TAT office (☎ 0 4421 3666; Th Mittaphap; ☎ 8.30am–4.30pm) On the western edge of town, beyond the train station.

T-Net (1st fl, The Mall, Th Mittaphap; per hr 20B;

☎ 10am–10pm) Internet access.

Tourist police (☎ 1155) Opposite bus station No 2, north of the city centre.

Sights

In the city centre is the defiant statue of **Khun Ying Mo** (Thao Suranari Memorial), a local heroine who led the inhabitants against Lao invaders during the reign of Rama III (r 1824–51). A holy shrine, the statue receives visitors offering gifts and prayers or hiring singers to perform Khorat folk songs. The steady activities of the devotees make for a lively cultural display.

For a dose of Khmer and Ayuthaya art, visit **Mahawirawong National Museum** (☎ 0 4424 2958; Th Ratchadamnoen; admission 10B; ☎ 9am–4pm), housed in the grounds of Wat Sutichinda.

Sleeping

Sakol Hotel Korat (☎ 0 4424 1260; Th Atsadang; r 150B; ☎) This hotel shows a little more attention to detail than most of the cheapies. The bright rooms are good value, given they include a bathroom, and you can upgrade to air-con for 400B.

Doctor's House (☎ 0 4425 5846; 78 Soi 4, Th Seup Siri; r with shared bathroom 180B) One of the few cheapies where guests bearing backpacks are the norm, this homestay has three spacious rooms with shared bathroom in an old wooden house. It is not for party animals as the owner locks the gate at 10pm.

Tokyo Hotel Mansion (☎ 0 4424 2873; 331 Th Suranari; r 240–366B; ☎) A lick of paint, a brace of ornamental gold lions and some new signs out the front have revamped this old-school contender. It's a little less fresh on the inside, but the rooms are clean and the price is right.

Eating & Drinking

Nakhon Ratchasima is overflowing with tasty Thai and Chinese restaurants, particularly along Th Ratchadamnoen near the Thao Suranari Memorial and western gate to central Nakhon Ratchasima.

Kai Yang Seup Siri (Th Seup Siri; dishes 30–40B; ☎ lunch) This spartan spot is famous for its grilled chicken, and reportedly has the best *sôm-tam* in town. There's no roman-script sign, but just look for the roasting chickens.

Thai Pochana Restaurant (142 Th Jomsurangyat; dishes 40–120B; ☎ breakfast & lunch; ☎) A slice of old Khorat, this atmospheric wooden house is popular for its mixture of Thai and local specialities, including *mii khoràat* (Khorat-style noodles) and *yam kòp yàng* (roast frog salad). The *kaeng phèt pèt* (duck curry) is a winner.

Kai Yang Wang Fa (Th Ratchadamnoen; whole chickens 75B; ☎ lunch & dinner) Another famed roast chicken spot, this is takeaway only. No roman-script sign.

Hua Rot Fai Market (Th Mukkhamontri; ☎ 6–10pm), located near the Nakhon Ratchasima train station, is a lively place to head after dark. Slower paced are the **night food stalls** (Th Phokklang) that set up beside the Chinese temple and offer a good range of Thai and Isan cuisine.

Try your hand at street surfing along the open-air bars that are dotted about the **night bazaar** (Th Manat). Local drinkers are pretty friendly here and you might end up on a pub crawl you didn't expect.

Shopping

Light up your life with a wander through the Th Manat night bazaar, which is so well lit you'll need shades. Anything and everything is available on this strip and you don't have to

bargain as hard as in Bangkok. Several Khorat-style **silk shops** (Th Ratchadamnoen) can be found close to the Thao Suranari Memorial.

Getting There & Away

Nakhon Ratchasima has two bus stations: **No 1** (Th Burin) serves Bangkok's Northern & Northeastern Bus Terminal and provincial destinations; **No 2** (Th Chang Pheuk) serves all other destinations.

Buses travel from Nakhon Ratchasima to Bangkok (ordinary/air-con 96/157B, four to five hours, frequent departures daily), Nong Khai (ordinary/air-con 110/220B, six hours, several departures daily), Phimai (40B, one hour, frequent departures between 5.30am and 10pm) and also to Ubon Ratchathani (ordinary/air-con 149/260B, six hours, regular departures daily).

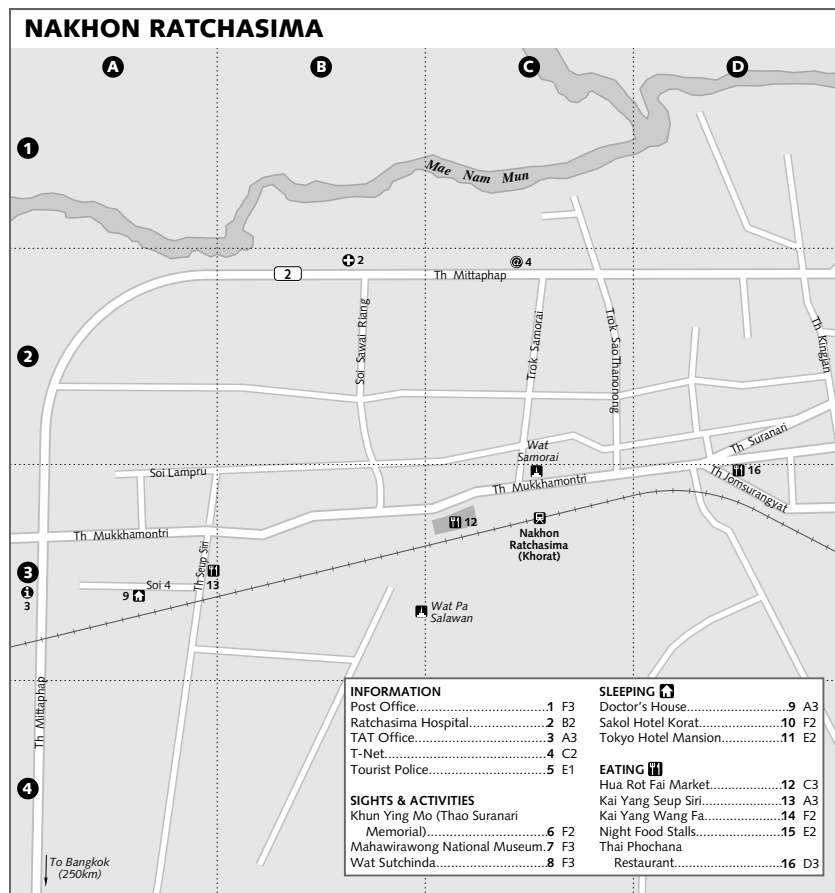
The **train station** (Th Mukkhamontri) is on the western side of the city. Destinations such as Bangkok, Surin and Buriram are all more conveniently reached by train than bus. Up to seven trains a day connect Nakhon Ratchasima with Bangkok's Hualamphong train station (2nd/3rd class 110/50B), plus there are six services on to Ubon Ratchathani (2nd/3rd class 213/138B).

Getting Around

Local buses and *sáwngháew* ply fixed routes through Nakhon Ratchasima. Get onto *sáwngháew* 1 (Th Phokklang–Th Mukkhamontri) or 2 (Th Jomsurangyat–Th Mukkhamontri) to reach the train station or the TAT office from the town centre. Local bus 15 hits both bus stations and can be picked up on Th Ratchadamnoen. *Túk-túk* and motorbike taxis are also available if you feel the need for speed.

ISAN CUISINE

The food of hard-working farmers who have honed their tolerance for peppers as well as their sinewy muscles against exhaustion, Isan cuisine is true grit. The holy trinity of the cuisine – *kài yàng* (grilled chicken), *sôm-tam* (papaya salad) and *khào niaw* (sticky rice) – are integral to the culture and reminisced like lost lovers by displaced Isan taxi drivers in Bangkok. Early in the morning a veritable chicken massacre is laid out on an open grill, sending wafts of smoke into the dry air as free advertising. Beside the grill is a huge earthenware *khrók* (mortar) and wooden *sàak* (pestle) beating out the ancient rhythm of *sôm-tam* preparation: in go grated papaya, sliced limes, peppers, sugar and a host of preferential ingredients. People taste the contents and call out adjustments: more *nám plaa* (fish sauce) or *plaa raa* (fermented fish sauce, which looks like rotten mud). Everything is eaten with the hands, using sticky rice to help offset the chilli burn. Isan food is almost flammable, with a fistful of potent peppers finding their way into every dish, especially *láap*, a super-spicy salad originating from Laos.



PRASAT HIN PHIMAI

When the Khmer empire was at the height of its vast power, present-day northeastern Thailand was an important regional centre for the Khmer rulers. An ancient laterite highway, lined with temples, linked Prasat Hin Phimai with the heart of the empire at Angkor in Cambodia. The Phimai temple, along with the other Khmer monuments in this part of Thailand, predates the Angkor Wat complex.

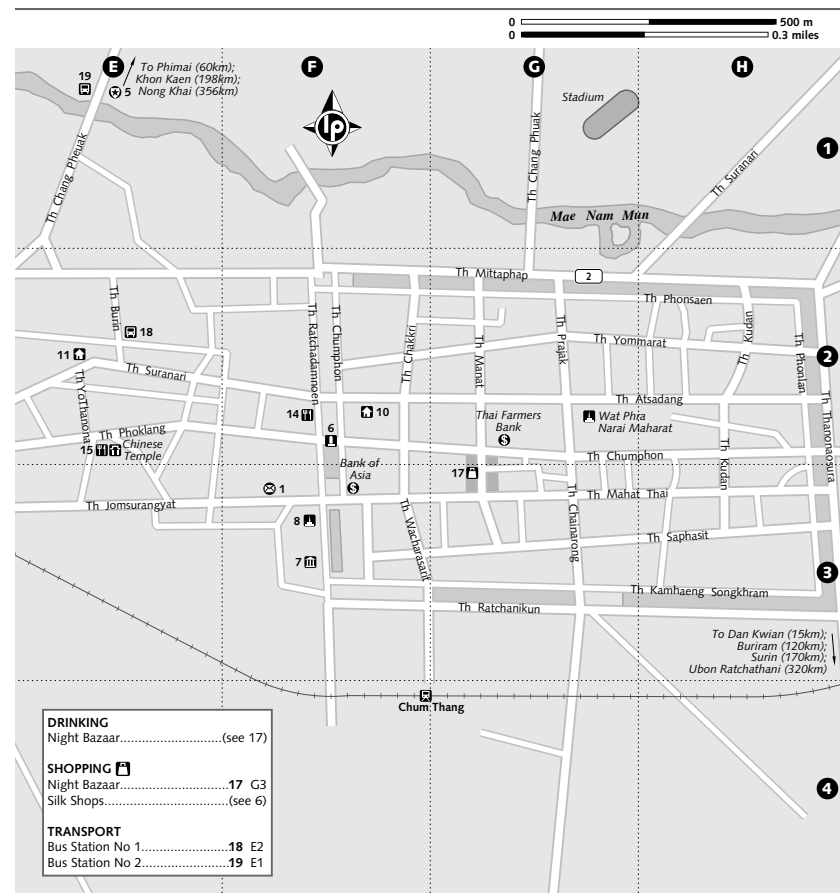
Originally started by Khmer King Jayavarman V in the late 10th century and finished by King Suryavarman I (r 1002–49), **Prasat Hin Phimai** (admission 40B; ☎ 6am–6pm), 60km northeast of Nakhon Ratchasima, projects a majesty that transcends its size.

The 28m-tall main shrine, of cruciform design, is made of white sandstone, while the adjacent shrines are of pink sandstone and laterite. The sculptures over the doorways to the main shrine depict Hindu gods and scenes from the Ramayana. Extensive restoration work is also evident.

Phimai National Museum (admission 30B; ☎ 9am–4pm), outside the main complex, has a fine collection of Khmer sculpture, including a serene bust of Jayavarman VII, Angkor's most powerful king.

Sleeping & Eating

It is easy enough to visit Phimai as a day trip from Nakhon Ratchasima, but some prefer the easy pace of this little town.



Old Phimai Guest House (☎ 0 4447 1918; dm/s/d 80/130/150B; ☎) This homey place down a *soi* is a little scruffy, but the backpacker vibe prevails and there's a welcoming atmosphere.

Baiteiy Restaurant (☎ 0 4447 1725; dishes 30–40B; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Offers a lively little menu of Thai and Chinese food, and also rents out bicycles.

It's cheaper to eat on the street and there are sizzling woks aplenty at the night market, just north of the regular day market.

Getting There & Away

Buses going to Phimai (ordinary 40B, one hour or so, every half-hour) leave from Nakhon Ratchasima's bus station No 1. Catching the 8am bus to Phimai leaves ample time to

explore the ruins; the last bus back to Nakhon Ratchasima is at 6pm.

KHAO YAI NATIONAL PARK

Up there with the world's finest national parks, **Khao Yai** (☎ 0 3731 9002; adult/child 200/100B) includes one of the largest intact monsoon forests in mainland Asia. The park has more than 50km of trekking trails, many of them formed by the movement of wildlife. Elevations range from 100m to 1400m, where the western edge of Cambodia's Dangrek mountain range collides with the southern edge of the Khorat Plateau.

Somewhat inaccurate trail maps are available from the park headquarters. It's easy to get lost on the longer trails, so it's wise to

hire a guide (200B). In nearby Pak Chong, several guesthouses can offer tours starting from 1000B with an overnight stay.

If you do plan to trek, it is a good idea to take boots, as leeches can be a problem – mosquito repellent does help to keep them at bay.

Sleeping & Eating

The cheapest option in the park is **camping** (per person 30B), but you need your own tent and a sleeping bag is a must during the cooler months. There are also some basic **bungalows** (☎ in Bangkok 0 2562 0760; bungalows 800B), although they are not particularly inspiring value for money. There are now five restaurants dotted throughout the park: one at the visitors centre, two at camping grounds and two at popular waterfalls.

There are plenty more options in and around Pak Chong, including **Green Leaf Guest House** (☎ 0 4436 5024; r 200B), which comes highly recommended thanks to friendly service and a homely atmosphere. Located 7.5km out of Pak Chong town, just past the international school on the way to Khao Yai, this place is also popular because of its informative tours.

Located near the main highway intersection in Pak Chong is a buzzing **night market** (☎ 5-11pm) purveying a delicious range of Thai and Chinese food.

Getting There & Away

To reach Khao Yai, you need to connect to Pak Chong. From Bangkok's Northern & Northeastern Bus Terminal, take a Nakhon Ratchasima-bound bus to Pak Chong (ordinary/air-con 90/150B, three hours, frequent departures from 5am to 10pm). From Nakhon Ratchasima take a Bangkok-bound bus and get off in Pak Chong (ordinary/air-con 28/65B, one hour).

From in front of the 7-Eleven store in Pak Chong, you can catch a *sǎwngthǎew* to the park gates for 10B. You may also be able to take a direct bus from Bangkok at certain times of the year – inquire at the Northern & Northeastern Bus Terminal.

You can also easily access Pak Chong by train from Ayuthaya (2nd/3rd class 58/26B, three hours) and Nakhon Ratchasima (2nd/3rd class 50/20B, 1½ hours).

PHANOM RUNG HISTORICAL PARK

Spectacularly located atop an extinct volcano, the elegantly restored temple of **Prasat Hin Khao**

Phanom Rung (☎ 0 4463 1746; admission 40B; ☎ 6am-6pm) is the most impressive of all Angkor monuments in Thailand. Dating from the 10th to 13th centuries, the complex faces east towards the sacred capital of Angkor in Cambodia. It was first built as a Hindu monument and features sculpture relating to the worship of Vishnu and Shiva. Later the Thais converted it into a Buddhist temple.

One of the most striking design features at Phanom Rung is the promenade leading to the main entrance. The avenue is sealed with laterite and sandstone blocks and flanked by sandstone pillars with lotus-bud tops. The avenue ends at the first and largest of three *naga* bridges. These *naga* bridges are the only three that have survived in Thailand. The central *prasat* (tower) has a gallery on each of its four sides, and the entrance to each gallery is itself a smaller incarnation of the main tower. The galleries have curvilinear roofs and windows with false balustrades. Once inside the temple walls, check out the galleries and the *gopura* (entrance pavilion), paying particular attention to the lintels over the doors. The craftsmanship at Phanom Rung represents the pinnacle of Khmer artistic achievement, on a par with the bas-reliefs at Angkor Wat in Cambodia.

The Sanctuary Phanomrung, by Dr Sorajet Woragamvijaya, is an informative booklet on sale near the entrance to the complex. Several English-speaking guides also offer their services at the complex – fees are negotiable. Downhill from the main sanctuary is a visitors centre that houses a scale model of the area, as well as some artefacts from the site.

Sleeping

Phanom Rung can be undertaken as a day trip from Nakhon Ratchasima, Buriram, Nang Rong or Surin. Although Buriram is the closest large base, the selection of accommodation is miserable, making other towns more attractive options. The pick of a poor pack in Buriram is the **Thai Hotel** (☎ 0 4461 1112; 38/1 Th Rombur; r 250-400B; ☎), but that's hardly a glowing endorsement. In the small village of Nang Rong, **Honey Inn** (☎ 0 4462 2825; 8/1 Soi Ri Kun; s/d 200/250B) is a homestay run by a local school teacher who speaks English. Bathrooms are shared and motorbikes are available for rent, which is handy for Phanom Rung. See p748 and opposite for other options.

Getting There & Away

From Nakhon Ratchasima, take a Surin-bound bus and get off at Ban Ta-Ko (ordinary/air-con 35/60B), which is well marked as the turn-off for Phanom Rung. Likewise, from Surin take a Nakhon Ratchasima-bound bus to Ban Ta-Ko.

Once in Ban Ta-Ko, it is time for multiple choice. At the Ban Ta-Ko intersection you can wait for a *sǎwngthǎew* that's going as far as the foot of Phanom Rung (20B), 12km away, or one that's headed south to Lahan Sai. If you take a Lahan Sai truck, get off at the Ban Ta Pek intersection (10B). From Ban Ta Pek, take a motorcycle taxi (50B) the rest of the way or book a return trip with waiting time for about 150B.

It's easier from Buriram. From here, Chanthaburi-bound buses stop at Ban Ta Pek (ordinary 30B, one hour); you can then continue by motorcycle taxi as suggested.

From Nang Rong, catch a *sǎwngthǎew* to Ban Ta-Ko and continue from there. Or for more freedom, rent a motorcycle from the Honey Inn for 250B.

SURIN

pop 41,200

Sleepy Surin goes wild in November during its annual **Elephant Roundup**, drawing huge numbers of foreign visitors. Elephant races, tug-of-war and a spot of soccer – these tuskers sure have a diverse repertoire.

Culturally, the town of Surin is a melting pot of Lao, Khmer and Suay (a minority elephant-herding tribe) cultures, resulting in an interesting mix of dialects and customs. Surin silk is renowned; it's worn by the college-educated professional and the illiterate vegetable-seller alike.

Sights

Surin is best enjoyed as a base for day trips to nearby attractions. To see Surin's elephants during the low season, visit **Ban Tha Klang** (☎ 0 1966 5284) in Tha Tum District, about 60km north of Surin. Many of the performers at the annual festival are trained here and there are two-hour shows (admission 200B) every Saturday at 9am. Silk weaving can be observed at local villages including **Khwaosinarin** and **Ban Janrom**. You can also visit **Phanom Rung**, and other minor Angkor temples.

As an evening reward, Surin's main attraction is a pedestrian-only **night market** (Th

Krung Si Nai) that delivers healthy doses of eating and people-watching.

Sleeping & Eating

During the elephant roundup, accommodation vacancies shrink and rates triple; book well in advance.

Pirom's House (☎ 0 4451 5140; 242 Th Krung Si Nai; s/d 100/150B) At Surin's one and only guesthouse, host Pirom offers a warm welcome at his atmospheric (read: basic, with shared bathrooms) teak home. Pirom is a mine of information on the surrounding area. The guesthouse may move during the lifetime of this book – call Pirom's mobile (☎ 08 9355 4140) to check.

New Hotel (☎ 0 4451 1341; 6-8 Th Thanasan; r 200B; ☎) Just across from the train station, this pad has clean rooms of varying sizes and shapes. Air-con rooms are 350B a pop.

Petmanee 1 (dishes 50-80B; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Down a small *soi* across from Wat Salaloi, Th Thesaban 4, this famous *sôm-tam* shop has won national competitions for its local variation of the papaya salad, using a native herb. Don't speak Thai? No problem, tick the 14th item on the menu.

Also recommended are the **municipal market** (Th Krung Si Nai), near Pirom's House, for *khào phât* (fried rice) and the **night market** (Th Krung Si Nai) for *khanôm jîn* (curry noodles served with a huge tray of veggies) and *hǎwy thǎw* (batter-fried mussels).

Getting There & Away

The **bus terminal** (Th Chit Bam Rung) is one block from the train station. Destinations include Bangkok (air-con/VIP 250/385B, eight hours,

GETTING TO CAMBODIA

Foreigners are able to cross the border from Chong Jom in Thailand to O Smach in Cambodia. Several *sǎwngthǎew* (small pick-up trucks with two benches in the back; 40B, 3½ hours) and minibuses (60B, two hours) run daily from Surin to Chong Jom. Once on the Cambodian side, there are shared taxis to Siem Reap. This is not the easiest border crossing to access, but because so few foreigners cross here it's relatively hassle free.

See p89 for information on doing the trip in the opposite direction.

regular departures), Ubon (air-con 188B, four hours, frequent departures) and Nakhon Ratchasima (air-con 115B, four hours, frequent departures).

These destinations, however, are more convenient by train (Bangkok 2nd/3rd class 210/80B). The train station is centrally located at the intersection of Th Nong Toom and Th Thawasan.

UBON RATCHATHANI

pop 115,300

Although it is one of the bigger cities in the region, Ubon still retains a small-town feel and is easily traversed by foot. Through something as simple as workday attire, Ubon stays true to its values, with middle-class professionals donning traditional silks from local weavers rather than the latest foreign imports.

With the Thai-Lao border crossing at nearby Chong Mek open to foreigners, Ubon (not to be confused with Udon Thani) has been receiving many more travellers who are finding it a good place to decompress after the relatively rustic conditions of southern Laos.

Information

Bangkok Bank (Th Suriyat) One of many banks in town.
MD.Com (221 Th Kheuan Thani; ☎ 11am-10pm)
Internet access near the post office.

Post office (Th Si Narong)

Saphasit Prasang hospital (☎ 0 4526 3043; Th Saphasit)

TAT office (☎ 0 4524 3770; 264/1 Th Kheuan Thani; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm) Helpful place opposite Sri Kamol Hotel; provides maps and advice on outlying attractions.

Tourist police (☎ 0 4524 5505, emergency 1155; Th Suriyat) Behind the police station.

Sights

Housed in a former palace of the Rama VI era, west of the TAT office, **Ubon National Museum** (☎ 0 4525 5071; Th Kheuan Thani; admission 30B; ☎ 9am-4pm Wed-Sun) is a good place to delve into Ubon's history and culture before exploring the city or province.

Across the Mae Nam Mun in the Warin Chamrap District is **Wat Pa Nanachat Bung Wai** (Ban Bung Wai, Amphoe Warin, Ubon Ratchathani 34310), which is directed by an Australian abbot and populated by European, American and Japanese monks. Write in advance for information about overnight stays and meditation classes.

Pastel-coloured silks displaying Lao influences are unpacked like contraband along

the streets near Ubon's hotel districts; the making of these and other handicrafts can be observed in the nearby villages of **Ban Khawn Sai**, **Ban Pa-Ao** and **Khong Jiam**.

Festivals & Events

Ubon's **Candle Festival**, usually held in July, is a grand parade of gigantic, elaborately carved wax sculptures that are a celebration of Khao Phansa, a Buddhist holiday marking the start of the monks' retreat during the wet season.

Sleeping

Rates shoot up and availability goes down during the Candle Festival.

River Moon Guesthouse (☎ 0 4528 6093; Th Si Saket; s/d 120/150B) Travellers arriving from Laos will appreciate the calm and tranquillity at River Moon, a flashback to island life in Si Phan Don. The rustic bungalows have more function than flair, and bathrooms are shared, but the atmosphere is laid-back. Find it across the river from central Ubon in the Warin Chamrap District, near the train station.

New Nakornluang Hotel (☎ 0 4525 4768; 84-88 Th Yutthaphan; r 150-200B) The heart of old Ubon is blessed with some attractive Indo-Chinese architecture that the French left behind from Hanoi to Phnom Penh. The New Nakornluang is not that new, but it's a comfortable option near some classic buildings.

Tokyo Hotel (☎ 0 4524 1739; 178 Th Uparat; old bldg r 250B, new bldg d 500B; ☎) The best of the budget deals in the centre of town, the Tokyo has some old cheapies that are starting to show their age. Flash the cash and opt for the shew newer rooms with TV and textbook trim.

Eating & Drinking

It's worth sniffing out Ubon's two night markets: one by the river near the main bridge, and the other near the bus station on Th Chayangkun.

Kai Yang Wat Jaeng (☎ 0 1709 9393; Th Suriyat; dishes 20-50B; ☎) breakfast, lunch & dinner) Spit and sawdust Thai-style. It may be a simple shack, but it is considered by those in the know to do the best *kai yang* (grilled Lao-style chicken). The chicken is sold from 9am to 2pm only, after which it's carries only. Seek it out one block north of Wat Jaeng.

Chiokee (☎ 0 4525 4017; Th Kheuan Thani; dishes 20-60B; ☎) breakfast, lunch & dinner) East meets West at this popular spot, with Chinese-Thai décor and bright white tablecloths. Professional

GETTING TO CAMBODIA & LAOS

Getting to Cambodia

A remote crossing links Choam Srawngam with Choam, in the former Khmer Rouge stronghold of Anlong Veng, but access is tough on both sides of the border.

From Ubon Ratchathani you can catch a bus (ordinary/air-con 40/59B, 1½ hours) or a train (2nd/3rd class from 139/13B, one hour) to the town of Si Saket, from where you can get a taxi to the border. It is also possible to travel from Surin to Si Saket by bus (ordinary/air-con 50/80B, 2½ hours).

See p101 for details on travelling from Cambodia to Thailand.

Getting to Laos

Chong Mek is the only place in Thailand where you don't have to cross the Mekong to get into Laos. The southern Lao city of Pakse is about 45 minutes away by road from Vang Tao, the village on the Lao side of the border, where you can now buy a 30-day visa on the spot. Buses crossing here wait for passengers to complete the paperwork. The border is open from 6am until 6pm, but Lao border officials charge a 40B 'overtime' levy if you arrive before 8am or after 4pm, or any time on a weekend. They also try to extract a 50B 'stamping fee', no matter what the hour.

Air-con buses leave Ubon for Pakse (200B, three hours) four times daily; they wait for passengers to get their visas. Otherwise, you can catch a Phibun bus (25B, 1½ hours) from Ubon's bus terminal and change to a säwngthäew bound for Chong Mek (35B, one hour, every 20 minutes). To get to Pakse, catch a bus (50B) on the Lao side.

For information on crossing this border in the opposite direction, see p398.

breakfasts, including Thai, Chinese and Western, plus coffee with a kick to start the day.

Indochine (☎ 0 4524 5584; Th Saphasit; dishes 50-150B; ☎) lunch & dinner) Near Wat Jaeng, this old teak house has been swallowed by vines and creepers. Downstairs you'll find excellent Vietnamese food until 6pm when the action moves upstairs to the Intro Pub until midnight. Live music joins the nightshift.

U-Bar (☎ 0 4526 5141; 97/8-10 Th Pichit Rangsan; ☎) 6pm-2am) This is as hip as it gets in Isan, a full-on bar-club to see and be seen in, for young Thais at least. Upstairs is a slow-paced terrace balcony, where there is often live music; it heaves at the hinges from 10pm most nights.

Getting There & Away

Thai Airways International (☎ 0 4531 3340-4; www.thaiair.com; 364 Th Chayangkun) has three daily flights from Bangkok to Ubon. **Air Asia** (☎ 0 2515 9999; www.airasia.com) has a cheaper daily flight between Ubon and Bangkok.

Ubon's **bus terminal** (☎ 0 4531 2773; Th Chayangkun) is located at the far northern end of town, 3km from the centre. Local buses 2 and 3 can drop you off near the TAT office (20B). Chartered transport is more like 100B into town.

Buses link Ubon with Bangkok's Northern & Northeastern Bus Terminal (ordinary/air-

con 200/300B, nine hours, hourly from 6am to midnight), and with Buriram (65/150B, four to five hours), Nakhon Ratchasima (149/260B, six hours), Mukdahan (80/144B, 3½ hours) and Surin (75/88B, three hours).

The **train station** (☎ 0 4532 1004; Th Sathani) is located in Warin Chamrap, south of central Ubon. Use local bus 2 to cross the Mae Nam Mun into Ubon (5B). There are a couple of night trains in either direction connecting Ubon and Bangkok (express 2nd/3rd class 301/175B, express 2nd-class sleeper 401B). Express trains also stop in Surin and Nakhon Ratchasima, but not necessarily at convenient times!

MUKDAHAN

pop 34,300

Looking across to the Lao city of Savannakhet, Mukdahan is a well-oiled revolving door between the two countries. A popular Thai-Lao market, nicknamed **Talat Indojin** (Indochina Market), sets up along the river near the border checkpoint. The town experienced something of a sea change in late 2006, when construction on the second Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge was finally completed. As a small but pivotal link in the massive Trans-Asia Highway project, the bridge has not only connected Thai traders with the Vietnamese port town of Danang,

GETTING TO LAOS

With the second Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge now linking Mukdahan and Savannakhet, travellers no longer have to cross the Mekong by ferry, although that option is still available. Crossing by bus seems to be the more popular choice, and there are now 12 daily buses making the journey between Mukdahan and Savannakhet (45B, 40 minutes) between 7am and 5.30pm. Should you choose a ferry crossing (50B, 20 to 30 minutes), your departure point will be the pier in the heart of town. At our last visit, boat departures were six times daily between 9.10am and 4pm on weekdays, less often on weekends. Lao immigration is very efficient, making solo border crossings a relatively simple matter.

Travellers can apply for a 30-day Lao visa on arrival at the Savannakhet checkpoint, but will need two passport-sized photos and US\$30.

For information on crossing from Laos into Thailand, see p394.

it has also delivered much needed economic relief to the surrounding region.

There are a few cheap if cheerless sleeping options near the pier. **Mukdahan Hotel** (☎ 04261 1619; 8 Th Samut Sakdarak; r 150-250B; 🏠) is home to the cheapest digs in town; rooms are pleasantly large, although the staff speak almost no English. **Huanam Hotel** (☎ 04261 1137; 36 Th Samut Sakdarak; r 150-320B; 🏠) has been to self-immprovement classes in recent years and offers good-value rooms, which are nonetheless not quite as slick as the lobby. Mountain-bike rentals are 100B per day. **Hong Kong Hotel** (☎ 04261 1143; 161/1-2 Th Phitak Santirat; d 200B) remains lower in the pecking order, as the large rooms are sagging at the seams and could stand for a scrubbing.

Wine Wild Why? (☎ 04263 3122; 11 Th Samron Chaikhongthi; mains 40-130B; 🍷 lunch & dinner) is an atmospheric eatery housed in a wooden building right on the river. It's a rather romantic little spot serving delicious Thai food, though the wine list is history.

Mukdahan's main bus terminal is on Rte 212, north of town. Take a yellow sawngthæw (8B) from the fountain near the 7-Eleven on Th Samut Sakdarak for a cheap connection to the centre.

There are frequent buses to Nakhon Phanom (ordinary/air-con 52/93B, two hours) via That Phanom (ordinary/air-con 28/50B, one hour); Khon Kaen (air-con 155B, 4½ hours); Ubon Ratchathani (ordinary/air-con 80/144B, 3½ hours) and Bangkok's Northern & Northeastern Terminal (air-con/VIP 364/760B, 11 hours).

THAT PHANOM

This place might have been forgotten to the world were it not for the looming spire of

Wat Phra That Phanom (🕒 5am-8pm). It's a badge of Isan identity and an icon in the region. A lively Lao market gathers by the river from 8.30am to noon on Monday and Thursday.

The original backpacker pad, **Niyana Guest House** (☎ 04254 0880; 65/14 Soi 33; r with shared bathroom 140B), northeast of the Lao Arch of Victory, is a tad chaotic, but smiles and advice flow freely from the friendly owner. A bit further north, **Kritsada Rimkhong Resort** (☎ 04254 0088; www.kritsadaresort.com; 90-93 Th Rimkhong; r 400-600B; 🏠) isn't fancy – but it's as fancy as it gets in That Phanom.

There is a small **night market** (🕒 3-9pm) and a clutch of **riverside eateries** (Th Rimkhong).

Buses depart from the south side of town regularly for Nakhon Phanom (ordinary/air-con 27/49B, one hour, five daily), and for Ubon Ratchathani (ordinary/air-con 102/178B, 4½ hours) via Mukdahan (ordinary/air-con 28/50B, one hour). There are also sawngthæw to Nakhon Phanom (36B, 1½ hours, every 10 minutes).

NAKHON PHANOM

pop 31,700

In Sanskrit-Khmer, Nakhon Phanom means 'City of Hills', but they're talking about the ones across the Mekong River in Laos. The fabulous views across the Mekong adorn this somnolent town, as does a scattering of graceful French colonial buildings. The **TAT** (☎ 4251 3490; Th Sunthon Wijit; 🕒 8.30am-4.30pm) office has a map pointing out several of them.

Ho Chi Minh lived and planned his resistance movement here in 1928–29, and **Ude Ho's House** (donations appreciated; 🕒 daylight) and the **Friendship Village** (donations appreciated; 🕒 8am-5pm) community centre have displays about his time here. They are about 4km west of town in Ban Na Chok.

GETTING TO LAOS

Foreigners are permitted to cross by ferry from Nakhon Phanom to Tha Khaek, a two-hour bus ride from Savannakhet; Mukdahan (see opposite), however, is a more convenient border crossing for Savannakhet. If you do want to make the crossing at Nakhon Phanom, stop by the **immigration office** (☎ 04251 1235; Th Sunthon Wijit; 🕒 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri), across the street from the Indochine souvenir market, for an exit stamp before boarding the ferry (60B) across the river. Once in Laos, you'll need to pay an entry tax of 50B. The border is open from 9am to 4pm.

See p394 for information on doing the trip in the reverse direction.

Sleeping & Eating

Rarely is a 'Grand' hotel that grand in provincial Thailand, and Nakhon Phanom's **Grand Hotel** (☎ 04251 1526; 210 Th Si Thep; d 190-390B) is no exception – but it's better than average for the price. The view at **Mae Nam Khong Grand View Hotel** (☎ 04251 3564; www.mgshotel.com; 527 Sunthon Wijit; r 700-2600B; 🏠), on the other hand, lives up to its name.

There are restaurants along the river, but most of the better eateries are back in the centre of town. **O-Hi-O** (☎ 4252 1300; 24 Th Fuang Nakhon; mains 30-220B; 🍷 dinner) is an airy bar-eatery with the usual Thai, Isan and Chinese menu, plus movies on the big screen. The outdoor terrace at the **Indochina Market** (Th Sunthon Wijit; 🍳 breakfast, lunch & dinner) food court has choice seats that frame the mountain views.

Getting There & Away

PB Air (code 90; ☎ 02261 0222; www.pbair.com) flies daily from Bangkok (2905B).

The **bus terminal** (Th Fuang Nakhon) is east of the town centre. From here, buses head to Nong Khai (ordinary/air-con 160/205B, five hours, nine daily until 11.30am), Sakon Nakhon (ordinary/air-con 47/85B, 1½ hours) and Mukdahan (ordinary/air-con 52/94B, two hours) via That Phanom (27/49B, one hour). VIP buses to Bangkok (13 hours) cost 664B to 820B.

NONG KHAI

pop 61,500

Time ticks past slowly in charming Nong Khai and many travellers find themselves staying

here longer than expected. Nestled on the banks of the Mekong River, Nong Khai is the perfect preparation for understanding the unhurried pace of Laos, the town's neighbour and cultural parent. The soaring Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge connects Nong Khai with the Lao capital, Vientiane, creating one of the busiest border points between the two countries and ensuring the town is a hot stop on the travellers' map of Thailand.

Information

There is no shortage of banks with ATMs in town, while cash machines remain a rarity in Laos. For a wealth of information on Nong Khai and the surrounding area, visit www.mutmee.net.

Hornbill Bookshop (☎ 04246 0272; Th Kaew Worawut; 🕒 10am-7pm) On the *soi* leading to Mut Mee Guest House, it has new and used English-language books, plus internet access.

Nong Khai Hospital (☎ 1669; Th Meechai) For medical emergencies.

Post office (Th Meechai)

TAT office (☎ 04246 7164; 🕒 8.30am-4.30pm) In a row of shops next to the Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge checkpoint.

Tourist police (☎ 04224 0616, emergency 1155; Th Meechai)

Sights

Sala Kaewkoo (admission 10B; 🕒 7.30am-5.30pm) is a surreal spiritual and sculptural journey into the mind of a mystic Shaman of Lao descent. This park offers a potpourri of the Hindu and Buddhist pantheon of deities, and the immense statues offer some freaky photo opportunities. While the motivations for its 20-year construction were undoubtedly spiritual, the end result is a masterpiece of mysterious modern art for the casual browser. The gardens are in the grounds of Wat Khaek, 5km southeast of town. It is easily reached by bicycle from Nong Khai; Mut Mee Guest House distributes handy maps.

Talat Tha Sadet (Th Rimkhong) follows the river, obscuring the view with stalls selling crusty French baguettes, silks, souvenirs, kitchen utensils and, if you look really hard, possibly the kitchen sink.

In an effort to preserve an ancient art and stem the migration of young women to the bright lights of the big city, **Village Weaver Handicrafts** (☎ 04242 2651; Soi Jittapunya, Th Prajak), a nonprofit organisation, established a village weaving cooperative. It sells high-quality

fabrics and ready-made clothes. The *mát-mii* (cloth made of tie-dyed silk or cotton thread) is particularly fine here. Visitors are welcome to watch the weaving process.

Sleeping

Mut Mee Guest House (☎ 0 4246 0717; www.mutmee.net; 111/4 Th Kaew Worawut; dm 90B, r 120-600B; 🍴) Overlooking the mighty Mekong, the Mut Mee is one of those rare guesthouses that has become a destination in itself. The dorms are bare bones, but the rooms are good value (especially those with shared bathrooms for 120B to 280B) and there is even one air-con indulgence in the owner's house. Retreat here for some reflection before or after an adventure in Laos. The pedestrian *soi* verges on a traveller ghetto, with bookshops, internet access and yoga available. Mut Mee is a reliable spot for traveller info.

Chongkohn Guesthouse (☎ 0 4246 0548; 649 Th Rimkhong; s/d 100/160B) The sleepy riverfront road is lined with small guesthouses, among them the go-slow Chongkohn, a converted home with 2nd-floor rooms and shared bathrooms. Try to bag a room at the back for views of Laos.

Sawasdee Guest House (☎ 0 4241 2502; Th Meeihai; s/d from 100/140B; 🍴) A little slice of history, the Sawasdee is housed in a classic Indochine-era shophouse. The rooms don't quite match the romantic exterior, but fan rooms with shared bathroom are keenly priced at 100/140B for singles/doubles, and the air-con room is a steal at 300B.

Eating

The riverside restaurants are the most atmospheric in town and there is a whole cluster of

them on Th Rimkhong. For a bargain bite, check out the evening vendors on Th Prajak, who stoke up their woks each night between Soi Cheunjit and Th Hai Sok.

Daeng Namnuang (☎ 0 4241 1961; Th Banthoengjit; mains 30-60B; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner; 🍷) The house speciality at this little eatery is *nám neuang* – spicy pork sausages that are rolled up in rice wrappers with lettuce leaves, star fruit and veggies, and then dipped in various condiments. A hive of buzzing activity, the air-con sure helps on a hot day. It closes at 7pm.

Udom Rod Restaurant (☎ 0 4241 3555; Th Rimkhong; mains 30-80B; 🍴 lunch & dinner) An authentic eatery on the popular riverfront strip, Udom Rod draws a crowd around sundown to soak up the views. It's a rambling, creaky old place, but the food is temptingly priced.

Nong Naen Pla Phao (Th Rimkhong; dishes 50-150B; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) This lively little Lao-style restaurant turns out delicious salt-baked *plaa chawn* (river fish) stuffed with herbs, plus *kài yàng*, *kaeng lao* (Lao-style bamboo-shoot soup), grilled sausages and grilled prawns. The dining area includes free river views.

Also recommended:

Mut Mee Guest House (dishes 40-100B; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Best guesthouse food in town, including a healthy vegetarian selection and lots of company.

Thai Thai (cnr Th Prajak & Soi Vietnam; dishes 50-150B; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Thai and Chinese standards, but at least it's open all night.

Drinking

Crawling along Th Rimkhong, the riverfront road, there is no shortage of *faràng*-style pubs with cocktail specials. For something a little

more Thai, follow the road past Talat Tha Sadet (keep going, don't give up) until it delivers full views of the Mekong River. This is the domain of neon-lit restaurant-bars churning out dinner and drinks to a Thai crowd of all ages.

Mittraphaap Bar (Th Kaew Worawut) Welcome to the Wild East. This is a good introduction to Thai country bars if you have just arrived from Laos. Thais can't get enough of the cowboy thang and this bar offers live music, hard drinking and occasional wobbly dancing. On a full tank, you could wander over to the Thai-Lao Riverside Hotel disco to cut some moves on the dance floor.

Getting There & Away

Nong Khai's main **bus terminal** (☎ 0 4241 1612) is just off Th Prajak, by the Pho Chai market, about 1km from the riverfront guesthouses. Services link Nong Khai to Bangkok (air-con/VIP/Super VIP 273/351/545B, 11 hours, eight daily); Udon Thani's No 2 bus terminal (40B, one hour, hourly), a transfer point to other destinations; Khon Kaen (140B, four hours, regular departures); Si Chiangmai (22B, 1½ hours); and Loei (84B, six hours, frequent departures).

The **train station** (☎ 0 4246 4513; Hwy 212) is 1.5km from town, near the bus stop for transport to Laos. Nong Khai is at the end of the railway line that runs from Bangkok through Nakhon Ratchasima, Khon Kaen and Udon Thani. When making the long trip to or from Bangkok, most people opt for a sleeper train. There are two night trains out of Bangkok and one departing Nong Khai daily. Fares range from 318/183B for a 2nd-/3rd-class seat to 1117B for a 1st-class sleeper cabin.

NONG KHAI TO LOEI

You've hit all the highlights, now it is time to enjoy the easy life. Cradled by the meandering Mekong River, little villages slumber in the shade of Laos' voluptuous hills. With a visit to **Si Chiangmai, Sangkhom, Pak Chom** or **Chiang Khan**, the day's most pressing business is to stroll the riverside road with no particular destination in mind. The crowds usually hurry on to more famous spots, leaving the family guesthouses quiet, friendly and cheap (around 100B).

LOEI & AROUND

Loei is little more than a brief base to prepare your adventures into the more remote

pockets of the country beyond. **Phu Kradung National Park** (☎ 0 4287 1333; reserve@dnpp.go.th; admission 200B; 🕒 8.30am-4.30pm Oct-Jun), about 75km to the south, encloses a bell-shaped mountain blessed with unhindered sunrise and sunset views. The climb to the summit takes about four hours if you're in shape. Being the north-east's version of a 'spring break' destination, the park fills up with guitar-toting college students during school holidays and weekends.

Dan Sai's three-day **Spirit Festival**, usually in June, is a curious cross between the drunken revelry of Carnival and the spooky imagery of Halloween. On the second day of the festival, villagers don elaborate masks to transform themselves into ghosts, and down shots of *lào khào* (rice whisky) to get themselves drunk. The colourful and rowdy group then parades through town to the local temple for more processing until they stagger home to sleep it off. Dan Sai is 80km west of Loei.

Sleeping & Eating

LOEI

Friendship Guest House (☎ 0 4283 2408; Th Charoenrat; d 150B) The only real guesthouse in town, Friendship has the cheapest digs around, but the rooms are basic with a capital 'B' and bathrooms are shared.

Sun Palace Hotel (☎ 0 4281 5714; Th Charoenrat; d 330-400B; 🍴) It is worth shelling out some shekels for the Sun Palace, which offers meticulously clean rooms, hot water and satellite TV. Near the main post office, the hotel is midway between town and the bus station.

Charcoal Restaurant (☎ 0 4281 5675; Th Nok Kaew; mains 30-90B; 🍴 lunch & dinner) Locals flock here in droves after dark and the beers go down well amid a whirlwind of eager servers. The spicy Thai dishes come in generous portions and there's a limited English-language menu.

Also worth seeking out are the **night market** (cnr Th Ruamjai & Th Charoenrat), for cheap eats and local specialities such as *khài ping* (toasted eggs), and the morning vendors, selling *khanôm pang miu* (mini-baguette pork sandwiches).

PHU KRADUNG NATIONAL PARK

A **visitors centre** (☎ 0 2562 0760; 🕒 7am-3pm) at the base of the mountain distributes detailed maps and rents tents (100B) and A-frame huts (200B). Amazing but true, after walking for hours you will find a friendly vendor at the top of the mountain eager to flog you food;

GETTING TO LAOS

Nong Khai is the most popular land border crossing between Thailand and Laos. Take a *túk-túk* to the border crossing, where you get stamped out of Thailand. From there, regular minibuses ferry passengers across the bridge (15B) to the Lao checkpoint between 6am and 9.30pm. It's then 22km to Vientiane – there will be plenty of buses, *túk-túk* and taxis waiting for you. If you already have a visa for Laos, there are also six direct buses a day to Vientiane from Nong Khai's bus terminal (55B, one hour).

Despite what travel agents in Bangkok might tell you, the Lao government issues 30-day tourist visas on arrival at Nong Khai's Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge and the other border crossings open to those who are not Thai or Lao citizens. Most *faràng* pay either US\$30 or US\$35, though Canadians get socked with a US\$42 fee. You are also allowed to pay in baht, but the price works out much higher. Besides the fee, you'll need a passport photo and the name of a hotel you will be staying at in Laos.

For information on making this crossing in the opposite direction, see p362.

life at the top is pricey, but it beats hauling it up the mountain yourself.

DAN SAI

Few people stop in Dan Sai outside the festival season, so the accommodation options available are extremely limited within the town itself. The **information centre** (☎ 0 4289 1094; Th Kaew Asa; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri) can arrange basic homestay accommodation from 100B per person.

Getting There & Around

Loei **bus station** (Hwy 201) is roughly 500m west of the town centre; hired transport to get you into town costs about 5B per person or 30B for a charter. Routes include Bangkok's Northern & Northeastern Bus Terminal (air-con 250B to 350B, 10 hours), Udon Thani (ordinary/air-con 60/110B, four hours, five daily) and Nong Khai (ordinary 84B, six hours, four daily).

To get yourself to Phu Krading National Park from the Loei bus station, take a Khon Kaen-bound bus (35B, 1½ hours, every half-hour from 6am to 6.30pm) to the town of Phu Krading. From there, hop on a sawngthæw (10B) to the visitors centre at the base of the mountain, 7km away. There is no admission after 3pm. The last bus back to Loei leaves around 6pm.

Buses between Loei and Dan Sai (45B, two hours) depart almost hourly during the day.

UDON THANI & AROUND

pop 227,200

Udon Thani is never going to draw visitors in big numbers, with the charms of Nong Khai to the north and the student-driven sophistication of Khon Kaen to the south. Sprawling Udon Thani is too big to be charming and too conservative to be cultured. It boomed on the back of the Vietnam War, exploding into life as US air bases opened nearby. These days, with the bases closed, it feels a little like the city is still searching for something to fill the vacuum.

Why make the trip? For skeletons of the past. Fifty kilometres east, **Ban Chiang** is one of the earliest prehistoric cultures known in Southeast Asia, and the site's **excavation pit** (admission 30B; ☎ 8.30am-5pm) at Wat Pho Si Nai displays 52 human skeletons, in whole or in part. More artefacts can be viewed at Ban Chiang's **national museum** (admission 30B; ☎ 9am-4.30pm).

Information

Banks are spread liberally across town.

Aek Udon International Hospital (☎ 0 4234 2555; www.aekudon.com; 555/5 Th Pho Si)

Post office (Th Wattananuwong)

T & A Net Corner (☎ 0 4232 9123; 124/8-9 Th Sri Suk; ☎ 11am-10pm) Internet access.

TAT office (☎ 0 4232 5406; Th Thesa; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm)

Tourist police (☎ 0 4224 0616, emergency 1155; Th Thesa) Next to the TAT office.

Sleeping & Eating

Accommodation in Udon Thani is entirely in high-rise hotels of varying quality. The best of the bunch includes **Chai Porn** (☎ 0 4222 1913; 209-211 Th Mak Khaeng; d 180-250B; ☎), a friendly spot with spartan rooms, and **King's Hotel** (☎ 0 4222 1634; Th Pho Si; 190-200B), a Vietnam War-era hangover that offers cheap fan rooms.

Clinging to the banks of the Nong Prajak reservoir, **Rabiang Phatchani** (Th Suphakit Janya; mains 30-80B; ☎ lunch & dinner) whips up a selection of local dishes in simple surrounds. Head here for showdown when the views look best.

The big draw at **Steve's Bar** (☎ 0 4224 4523; www.stevesbarudon.com; 234/25 Th Prajak Silpakorn; ☎ lunch & dinner) is the big Sunday roast, best served in front of English premiership football shown on a very impressive 50-inch screen.

Getting There & Away

Thai Airways International (www.thaiair.com) and **Nok Air** (www.nokair.co.th) have several daily flights to Bangkok. **Air Asia** (☎ 0 2515 9999; www.airasia.com) connects Udon twice daily with Bangkok.

Udon has two bus stations. Bus Terminal No 1, near the Charoen Hotel in the southeastern part of town, serves Bangkok (air-con/VIP 251/500B, 10 hours, hourly), Khon Kaen (air-con 110B, 2½ hours, hourly) and Nakhon Ratchasima (air-con 142B, 4½ hours).

Bus Terminal No 2 is on the northwestern outskirts of the city next to the highway and serves Loei (ordinary/air-con 60/110B, four hours, five daily) and Nong Khai (40B, one hour, hourly).

To reach Ban Chiang, take a sawngthæw from the morning market on Th Pho Si to Ban Chiang (25B, 40 minutes); they run from late morning until around 3.45pm. Returning to Udon Thani from Ban Chiang, sawngthæw stop running at 10.30am! Instead, take a tük-tük (50B) to the highway at Ban Pulu, and flag a bus on the Sakhon Nakhon-Udon Thani route.

Trains from Udon Thani's train station, at the east end of Th Prajak Silpakorn, travel to Bangkok (1st/2nd/3rd class 459/220/95B, plus applicable sleeper chargers), taking nine or so hours. Take a sleeper for this long trip. Nong Khai (3rd class 11B, one hour) is also accessible by train.

KHON KAEN

pop 145,300

It's not the big cities that draw visitors to Isan, but Khon Kaen might just be the exception thanks to a vibrant energy that is shifting the skyline and diversifying the dining scene. Home to the northeast's largest university, the city is youthful, educated and on the move. It also makes a sensible base for exploring nearby silk-weaving villages and scattered Khmer ruins, and is a gateway to the northeast from Phitsanulok and Sukhothai.

The town's only tourist attraction is the well-curated **Khon Kaen National Museum** (☎ 0 4324 2129; Th Lang Sunratchakan; admission 30B; ☎ 9am-noon & 1-5pm Wed-Sun), which features ancient art and artefacts.

Information

It's hard to walk around Khon Kaen without bumping into an ATM or bank.

Internet (Th Si Chan; per hr 15B; ☎ 10am-midnight) Near the Sofitel Hotel.

Khon Kaen Ram Hospital (☎ 0 4333 3900; Th Si Chan)

Post office (cnr Th Si Chan & Th Klang Meuang)

TAT office (☎ 0 4324 4498; 15/5 Th Prachasamoson; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm)

Tourist police (☎ 0 4323 6937, emergency 1155; Th Prachasamoson) Next door to TAT.

STRING-TYING CEREMONY

To occupy yourself on those long, boring bus rides, do a survey of Thais wearing thin yellow or white strings round their wrists. In rural villages in Isan, elders and family members assemble to tie *bai sii* (sacred thread) as a bon voyage measure. The strings act as leashes for important guardian spirits and ensure safety during a trip. Some people believe that the strings must fall off naturally rather than be cut off, but this can take weeks, turning sacred thread into stinky thread.

Festivals & Events

Khon Kaen's biggest annual event is the **silk and phiuk siaw festival**, which runs over a period of 12 days and nights from late November to early December. Centred on Ratchadanuson Park and the Provincial Hall, the festival celebrates the planting of the mulberry tree, which is an essential step in the production of silk. Also considered particularly important is *phiuk siaw* (friend-bonding), a reference to the *bai sii* ceremony in which sacred threads are tied round one's wrists to give spiritual protection; see boxed text, left. Music, folk dancing and food, and all things Isan, are major highlights.

Sleeping & Eating

Si Monkon (☎ 0 4323 7939; 61-67 Th Klang Meuang; r 120-200B; ☎) This wooden pad has some ramshackle charm, but the walls are thin for light sleepers. Air-con is available for 300B.

Saen Samran Hotel (☎ 0 4323 9611; 55-59 Th Klang Meuang; s/d 150/200B; ☎) Reputedly Khon Kaen's oldest hotel (not always a good claim to fame), Saen Samran is an ageing wooden building with a certain charm and character. Fan rooms are clean and air-con kicks in at 350B.

First Choice (☎ 0 4333 3352; 18/8 Th Phimphaseut; r 150-200B; ☎) On its way to becoming the town's first backpacker hostel, the rooms here are spartan but certainly cheap. Downstairs is a traveller-friendly eatery, serving the usual selection of shakes and snacks.

Em Oht (Th Klang Meuang; dishes 30-50B; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Em Oht is a popular place to sample some Isan fare, including the signature breakfast *khài kàthá* (eggs served in a pan with local sausages), with a cup of real coffee to wash it down.

Heuan Lao (☎ 0 4324 7202; 39 Th Phimphaseut; mains 40-140B; ☎ lunch & dinner; ☎) Housed in an elegant old wooden villa, this restaurant is piled with antique bric-a-brac and serves mouthwatering Thai and Isan dishes. There's a verdant garden for alfresco dining or a dose of air-con to hide away in. It's open till midnight. No roman-script sign.

Well worth a visit is Khon Kaen's lively **night market** (Th Reun Rom), the heart and soul of budget dining in town. Find it next to the air-con bus station, between Th Klang Meuang and Th Na Meuang.

Shopping

Khon Kaen is a good place to buy handcrafted goods such as *mát-mii* and silk, silverwork

and basketry. **PK Prathamakhan Local Goods Center** (☎ 0 4322 4080; 79/2-3 Th Reun Rom), just west of Th Na Meuang, is a local handicraft centre with a small museum. Also good are **Rin Mai Thai** (☎ 0 4322 1042; 412 Th Na Meuang) and **Klum Phrae Phan** (☎ 0 4333 7216; 131/193 Th Chatapadung), the latter run by the Handicraft Centre for Northeastern Women's Development.

Getting There & Away

The **airport** (☎ 0 4323 6523/8835) is a few kilometres west of the city centre. **Thai Airways International** (code TG; ☎ 0 4322 7701; www.thaiair.com) flies three times daily between Bangkok and Khon Kaen. **Air Asia** (code AK; ☎ 0 2515 9999; www.airasia.com) flies daily to and from Bangkok.

Khon Kaen has two bus stations: the **ordinary bus terminal** (Th Prachasamoson) is a five-minute walk northwest of Th Klang Meuang, while the **air-con bus terminal** (Th Klang Meuang) is in the town centre near the night market.

Buses travel to and from Bangkok (air-con 259B, seven hours, every half-hour from 7am to 11pm), Chiang Mai (air-con 394B, 12 hours, 8pm and 9pm), Nakhon Ratchasima (ordinary 70B, three hours) and Nong Khai (air-con 140B, four hours, six daily).

Khon Kaen is on the Bangkok–Nakhon Ratchasima–Udon Thani railway line, but buses are much faster along this section. Track down information from Khon Kaen **railway station** (☎ 0 4322 1112).

EASTERN GULF COAST

The ideal jaunt from jostling Bangkok, Thailand's east coast is a popular and increasingly upmarket stretch favoured for its convenience to the capital. For pure escapism, the more stunning and affordable southern destinations win out, but the east coast's charms (candlelit beach dining, healthy strips of sand and smooth transfers) mean it's always busy.

RAYONG

pop 49,000

For the traveller, the dusty strip of banks, markets and motorcycle dealerships that makes up Rayong holds few surprises. You're most likely to be here taking advantage of its location as a major transport interchange, but if you do arrive too late to secure an onward connection for a boat to Ko Samet, there are a couple of OK hotels.

Information

Krung Thai Bank (144/53-55 Th Sukhumvit) One of several banks along Rayong's main drag, Th Sukhumvit, with exchange services and ATMs.

Rayong President Hotel (☎ 0 3861 1307; Th Sukhumvit; per 10 min 5B) For internet access.

TAT office (☎ 0 3865 5420; tatyong@tat.or.th; 153/4 Th Sukhumvit; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm) Located 7km east of Rayong on Hwy 3; a worthwhile stop if you have your own transport.

Sleeping & Eating

Rayong President Hotel (☎ 0 3861 1307; Th Sukhumvit; r incl breakfast 700B; 📶 📺 📺) There's not much English spoken here, but the welcome is friendly and it's quiet at night. From the bus station, cross to the other side of Th Sukhumvit, turn right and after about 500m you'll see a sign pointing down a side street.

Star Hotel Rayong (☎ 0 3861 4901; www.starhotel.th.com; 109 Th Rayong Trade Center; r incl breakfast 1500B; 📶 📺 📺) Rayong's ritziest spot is a favourite with business and government honchos who demand swanky four-star hotels. The rooms are huge and there is a bowling alley and two swimming pools. From the bus station, walk away from Th Sukhumvit, turn left at the top of the square and the hotel is on your right.

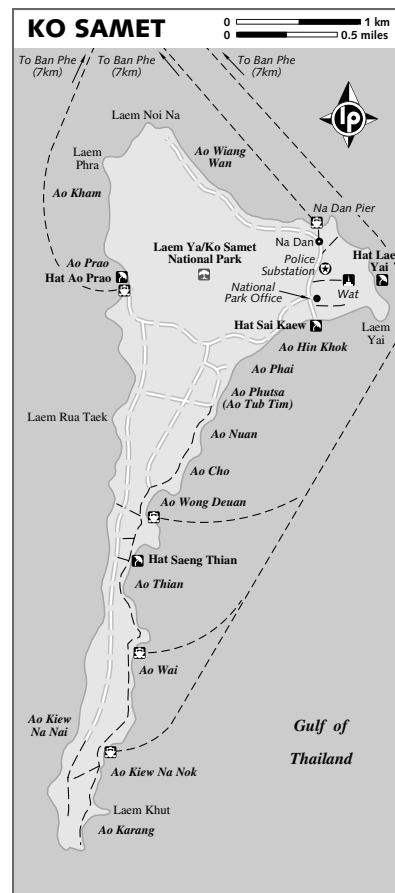
For cheap food, check out the market near the Thetsabanteung cinema, or the string of restaurants and noodle shops along Th Taksin Maharat, just south of Wat Lum Mahachai-chumphon. There are food stalls around the bus station.

Getting There & Away

See p764 for information on getting to Ko Samet.

KO SAMET

Every thriving metropolis should have a Ko Samet nearby – somewhere close enough for a quick escape, yet worlds enough away for the urbanite to hang loose. A favourite weekend getaway for young Thais, Ko Samet is equally popular with travellers getting their last sun and sand before being whisked home. While there's no comparison with its southern counterparts, or even nearby Ko Chang, low-key Ko Samet is perfect for a couple of days of cheery abandonment, and enjoys better weather during the wet season than many islands. It's been a **national park** (admission 400B) since 1981, and there are walking trails all the way to the southern tip of the island, as well



as a few cross-island trails, but it does have problems with litter and overcrowding.

Information

Internet access is relatively plentiful considering the island's small size. Naga Bungalows has fast connections (per minute 2B) and powerful air-con.

Ko Samet Health Centre (☎ 0 3864 4123; 2/2 Moo 4, Phe Mang Rayong; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm) For minor medical problems.

Siam City Bank (Th Nadaan) There are no banks on Ko Samet, but this ATM is located at the 7-Eleven near the national park entrance. There's another ATM at the 7-Eleven near the ferry.

Tourist information (☎ 0 3864 4240; ☎ 7am-midnight) Conveniently located near the pier.

Sleeping & Eating NORTHEASTERN BEACHES

In the northeast part of the island, Ao Hin Khok and Ao Phai (*ao* means 'bay') are the main places for seafood-eating, novel-reading and email-sending. The further south you go, the more Thai and isolated it becomes.

Our pick **Naga Bungalows** (Ao Hin Khok; d 300-700B; 📶) A sprawling combo of bamboo and concrete bungalow climbs the hill here, and the common area, complete with billiards table and internet café, is a good place to meet travellers. Ask about *muay thai* lessons, which take place across the dirt path.

Jep's Bungalows (☎ 0 3864 4112; www.jepbungalow.com; Ao Hin Khok; r 300-1200B; 📶) One of the cleanest and smartest bungalow operations on this stretch of sand. The waterfront restaurant is quite popular – look for the star paper lanterns.

Tub Tim Resort (☎ 0 3864 4025; www.tubtimresort.com; 13/15 Moo 4, Tumbol Phe, Ao Phutsa; d from 500B; 📶) Just over the rocks from Ao Phai, Tub Tim may only be a five-minute walk from the action, but it's a world away when it comes to peace and quiet.

Nuan Bungalows (Ao Nuan; d from 500B) The only occupant of private Nuan beach, this place has creatively built bungalows, some with little wrap-around balconies.

AO WIANG WAN

Get away from the tourist ghetto and consider quiet and pretty Ao Wiang Wan in the island's north as a base.

Baan Pragu Kaew (☎ 0 9603 2609; s 300B, d 400-500B) Located right next door to Lung Ritt Bungalow, this much nicer German-owned guesthouse is on stilts over the water. Stay in a clean waterfront room, or choose one of the bungalows that sit across the street.

Lung Ritt Bungalow (☎ 0 3864 4032; d 1000B) Walk to the right (as you face the island) from Na Dan Pier past some derelict buildings and you'll find this place on your right. The only real amenity is the nearby water, which you can almost reach out and touch.

Most bungalows have restaurants offering mixed menus of Thai and traveller food. Eat locally at the cheap noodle bars and seafood joints or pick up supplies such as water and snacks in Na Dan, the small village next to the pier. For alcohol and camaraderie, try Papa Roger's, a homey little Finnish pub in Na Dan.

Getting There & Around

Ko Samet is reached by boat from the mainland town of Ban Phe (one way/return 50/100B, 45 minutes, departures 6am to 6pm). Ban Phe has a small bus station beyond the boat piers. Regular direct buses go to Bangkok's Eastern (Ekamai) Bus Terminal (140B, three hours, hourly from 5am to 8.30pm). Blue *sǎwngthǎew* to Rayong (15B, 45 minutes) ply the main road near the pier. For a few extra baht (200B, depending on the number of people) private boat charters can drop you elsewhere on the island.

Sǎwngthǎew on the island cost from 10B to 100B per person, depending on how far you're going and the number of passengers. From the pier, reaching some locations furthest south can cost 300B to 500B if there are only one to two people travelling.

CHANTHABURI & TRAT

There's an earthiness about these two provincial towns, which are enveloped by palm trees and plantations. While travellers use them mostly for swift connections to Ko Chang or the Cambodian border, if you stop to catch your breath in sleepy Trat, you'll get a feel for small-town living. East of Trat, as Thailand merges with Cambodia, a number of little-known beaches, including **Hat Sai Si Ngoen**, **Hat Sai Kaew**, **Hat Thap Thim** and **Hat Ban Cheun**, are worth a look.

Information

Tie & Tin Internet (☎ 0 3952 4567; 35 Th Sukhumvit, Trat; per hr 30B; ☎ 10am-10pm) Your Facebook-checking headquarters.

Tratosphere Bookshop (23 Rimklong Soi, Trat; ☎ 8am-10pm) Run by a friendly Frenchman, this is a handy place to pick up your next read (books 50B to 200B) or get travel tips on the area.

Sleeping & Eating

TRAT

Windy Guesthouse (69 Th Thana Charoen; s 100B, d 120-140B) This tiny wooden house sits on stilts right in the river. There's no air-con, only six rooms and it's all shared bathrooms, but this is one of Trat's most intimate and uncommon spots to stay.

Ban Jaidee Guesthouse (☎ 0 3952 0678; 67-69 Th Chaimongkol; d 120-150B) A traditional Thai place, this is the best pad in town with glossy polished floors, a lounge area, clean shared bathrooms with hot water, and welcoming staff. Breakfast is available.

Pop Guest House (☎ 0 3951 2392; 1/1 Th Thana Charoen; d 250-400B; ☎) Do not fear when aggressive touts from Pop's approach you at the bus station – they actually run the place. The guesthouse is a surprise, too. The main structure is a nice open-air building with rooms of varying sizes. A small garden-fringed bungalow village sits across the street.

Our pick Pier 112 Restaurant & Bar (☎ 0 3952 5577; 274/1 Th Thana Charoen; dishes 35-70B; ☎) breakfast, lunch & dinner) At Trat's hippest outdoor garden café, the front yard is filled with tables, seating pavilions and antique rickshaws. Western breakfasts, Thai standards, vegetarian dishes and a long cocktail list are on offer. Across the street from Residang Guest House.

Trat's municipal market is in the centre of town and will satisfy your nutritional needs cheaply. On the Trat river, northeast of town, is a smaller night market that sells seafood.

CHANTHABURI

River Guest House (☎ 0 3932 8211; 3/5-8 Th Si Chan; r 150-350B; ☎) This relaxed place beside the river is run by a friendly team. The air-con rooms at the front are a bit noisy, so if you're happy with a fan ask for a room at the back. Downstairs is a good restaurant that does it best to overcome its proximity to the town's busiest bridge.

Muang Chan Hotel (☎ 0 3932 1073; fax 0 3932 7244; 257-259 Th Si Chan; r 230-600B; ☎) Grey and labyrinthine from the outside, but relatively clean and quiet inside, this is an OK backup if River Guest House is full.

Getting There & Away

Bangkok Airways (☎ in Bangkok 0 2265 5555; www.bangkokair.com) has two daily flights to Trat (around 1800B, 50 minutes). The airport is 40km from town and a taxi to or from the airport will cost around 300B (depending on how many people are catching a ride).

Chanthaburi has the larger **bus station** (Th Saritidet), with connections to Nakhon Ratchasima (air-con 260B, seven hours), Aranya Prathet (air-con 200B, eight hours) and east coast towns. Buses going to Bangkok's Eastern (Ekamai) Bus Terminal stop in Chanthaburi en route to Trat (ordinary/air-con 250/331B, five to six hours, six departures daily from 6.30am to 5.30pm). Between Chanthaburi and Trat, ordinary buses (60B, 1½ hours) and share taxis (100B) are also happy to have you.

GETTING TO CAMBODIA

To Krong Koh Kong

To get to the border at Hat Lek-Krong Koh Kong, take an air-con minibus from Trat to Hat Lek (110B, one hour, departures every 45 minutes from 6am to 6pm); these leave from Trat's Th Sukhumvit in front of the municipal market. An alternative way to reach the border is to take a *sǎwngthǎew* (small pick-up with two benches in the back; 50B), which also leave from Trat's municipal market. Motorcycles and taxis are available from Hat Lek across the border to Krong Koh Kong (50B to 80B). From Krong Koh Kong, there is only one boat per day to Sihanoukville (600B, four to five hours, departing at 8am). If you want to get from Trat to Sihanoukville in one day, you should be on the 6am minibus from Trat to Hat Lek and at the border with passport in hand as soon as it opens at 7am. This border crossing closes at 5pm.

Cambodian tourist visas (1200B) are available at the border (bring a passport photo), but you should check with the Cambodian embassy in Bangkok before heading out there. Although Cambodian tourist visas cost US\$20 at other borders, payment is only accepted in baht here. If you want to debate the issue, be prepared for a frustrating time.

For information on making this crossing in the other direction, see p113.

To Psar Pruhm

Foreigners can cross the border from Ban Pakard in Thailand to Psar Pruhm in Cambodia, and then on to Pailin. To travel this way independently, first take a minibus from Chanthaburi to Ban Pakard (100B, one to two hours). Cross the border to Psar Pruhm and then arrange a share taxi into Pailin (100B). From Pailin it is possible to connect with Battambang (200B, four hours) by share taxi on a real joker of a road.

See p101 for information on crossing in the other direction.

To get to Ko Chang from Trat, take a *sǎwngthǎew* (30B) to the pier in the village of Laem Ngop (10 to 20 minutes). Scores of *sǎwngthǎew* line Trat's main road, fishing for customers; keep shopping if you're quoted 'charter' prices (150B).

See above for info on crossing over the border into Cambodia.

KO CHANG

Just a few years back, Ko Chang was an outpost near 'war-torn' Cambodia where hippies revelled in some of Southeast Asia's best untamed forests and isolated coast. Then the world caught up.

Ko Chang has lost its virginity – its virgin forest, that is. This **national park** was once undeveloped and lacking modern amenities such as 24-hour electricity, souvenir stands and ATMs. Under the government's new plan for the island, backpackers are *out* and luxury tourists are *in*. Spiffy air-con set-ups are swiftly replacing cheap bungalows, although Hat Tha Nam (Lonely Beach) has managed to retain its backpacker street cred. And if you fancy spending your time in Ko Chang trekking to mountainous waterfalls or catching dazzling views while whizzing by on a mo-

torbike, don't despair: this sprawling island still fits the bill.

Information

Internet cafés are plentiful on the island and access charges average 2B per minute.

Ko Chang Hospital (☎ 0 3958 6131; Ban Dan Mai) Near the police headquarters.

Police (☎ 0 3958 6191; Ban Dan Mai) There are also police based near KC Grande Resort.

Post office (☎ 9am-4.30pm Mon-Fri) Near the ferry terminal at Ban Khlong Son.

Siam Commercial Bank (Hat Sai Khao; ☎ 8.30am-3.30pm) Also has an exchange window that stays open until 8pm.

Sleeping & Eating

Tree House Lodge (www.treehouse-kohchang.de; Hat Tha Nam; d 150-250B) If you're after a lazy, village-like atmosphere, the Tree House Lodge will please with its seclusion and simple stilt bungalows. There's a fantastic, rambling deck area with a sea view where you can feast on Indian dhal – meals here cost from 45B to 70B – or kick back with a book. It's often full.

KC Grande Resort (☎ 0 3955 1199; www.kckohchang.com; Hat Sai Khao; d 300-500B) At the northern end

of the island at pretty Hat Sai Khao (White Sand Beach), KC is one of the island's originals. Affordable beachfront bungalows can still be had, although KC seems to be following Ko Chang's general lead with its 'superior' rooms and overpriced restaurants.

our pick **Magic Garden** (☎ 0 3955 8135; www.magicgarden-thailand.com; Hat Tha Nam; d incl breakfast 500-1000B; ☑) With an architectural design based on an owner's experience at Burning Man Festival, it's no surprise this place resembles a cross between a Rainbow Gathering and an Ewok village. DJ parties happen a few times weekly, cosy chill-out areas are scattered about and fire shows take place in a cement-filled pit dubbed 'The Volcano'. Even better, the bungalows are clean and tastefully decorated, and all come with hot showers and a free breakfast. There's free wireless access here as well.

Menus at all the bungalows on Ko Chang are pretty similar. There are several small eateries (dishes 40B) along the eastern side of the main road in Hat Sai Khao.

Also worth trying out are the seafood restaurants located on the pier at Ban Bang Bao, including **The Bay Bar & Restaurant** (☎ 0 3955 8079; seafood priced by weight; ☑ lunch & dinner). Get ice cream at **Little Havana** (☎ 0 6842 8568; dishes 30-120B), a groovy little thatched-roof hut turning out tapas, burritos, pasta and cocktails. The nearby **Bangbao Delight Bakery Café** (☎ 0 3955 8073; takeaways 15-25B; ☑ breakfast, lunch & dinner) puts together a mean pastry treat and also serves breakfast. Try a doughnut while you wait.

Getting There & Around

From the pier in Laem Ngop, boats go to Ko Chang (100B return, one hour, departures hourly) from 7am to 5pm. The schedule is reduced to about every two hours in the low season.

From Ko Chang's pier (either Tha Dan Kao or Ao Sapparot), sawngthæw will be waiting to take you to any of the various beaches along the west coast (30B to 80B).

SOUTHERN GULF COAST

Beach lovers unite! Any fully fledged itinerary through Southeast Asia will surely feature the dreamy beaches, renowned islands and world-class dive sites of Thailand's southern Gulf Coast. On this legendary stretch of the Asian

trail, you're not a Londoner or Swede but that universal species: a sunworshipper.

Although the varied geography of the southern Gulf allows for a wide variety of travel experiences, the truth is that most visitors to the region arrive for three reasons only: Ko Tao, Ko Pha-Ngan and Ko Samui. And while each island has successfully managed to maintain its own unique attitude and energy, the similarities are such that no matter which bungalow or which stretch of sand you end up with, certain consistencies remain. A reassuring sense of calm, for instance. A significantly reduced blood pressure. And the possibly life-altering knowledge that after a few months of hard work back home, an eternity of beachfront Thai massage could be yours.

Need even more good news? The best time to visit Thailand's southern reaches is from March to May, when the rest of the country is practically melting from the angry sun. If the earth is burning in the city, in other words, it might be time to sample the many surprises of the Gulf.

Deeper south the geography is flanked by glossy palm trees and rubber plantations. It's pure cultural exchange here: Thai-ness fuses with Malay, Indian and Chinese influences in an intoxicating stir-fry of colour, culture and tradition. Southern Thais speak a dialect that confounds even visitors from other Thai regions. Diction is short and fast and the clipped tones fly into the outer regions of intelligibility.

Beware: you're dealing with a potential life-long addiction once you delve into the south.

CHA-AM

pop 48,600

A low-key seaside town located 40km south of Phetburi, Cha-am specialises in good old-fashioned Thai fun: jet-skis pull banana boats with teams of laughing Thai students behind, shop vendors sport tropical shirts, fully clothed locals float on inner tubes, and families scoot around on tricycles. Whereas Hua Hin, 26km further south, could be described as a pseudo-sophisticated elder sibling, Cha-am is more like the coy teenager.

Sleeping & Eating

Cha-am is a big weekend destination, so from Friday to Sunday expect a 20% to 50% increase on most prices listed here. Accommodation

on Th Ruamjit is opposite the casuarina-lined waterfront promenade. There are no grass huts in sight.

Nirundorn Resort (☎ 0 3247 1038; 247/7 Th Ruamjit; d 250-300B; ☑) Housed in a modern building, the clean monotone rooms here have cable TV and fridge, while cheaper rooms (200B) share bathrooms. Breakfast is served downstairs (70B); caffeine addicts will be chuffed to find cappuccino.

Memory House (☎ 0 3247 2100; cha_am_memory@yahoo.com; 200 Th Ruamjit; d from 300B; ☑) In the same vein as Nirundorn, this guesthouse has comfortable rooms with hot water, cable TV and fridge. Free maps of the town are available here.

Poom Restaurant (☎ 0 3247 1036; 274/1 Th Ruamjit; dishes 40-350B) Poom has a large outdoor patio and specialises in seafood; it's very popular among visiting Thais.

Getting There & Away

Most ordinary and air-con buses stop in the town centre on Phetkasem Hwy. Some private air-con buses to and from Bangkok conveniently go all the way to the beach, stopping at a small bus station a few hundred metres south of the Th Narathip intersection.

The frequent bus services going to and from Cha-am include Bangkok (ordinary/air-con 95/113B, three hours), Phetburi (ordinary 25B, 40 minutes) and Hua Hin (ordinary 20B, 30 minutes).

The **train station** (Th Narathip) is inland, west of Phetkasem Hwy and a 20B motorcycle ride from the beach. There are daily services to Cha-am from three stations in Bangkok: Hualamphong (3.50pm), Sam Sen (9.27am) and Thonburi (7.15am, 1.30pm and 7.05pm). Tickets cost from 80B to 193B.

SOUTHERN CUISINE

The dishes of southern Thailand are as flamboyant and seductive as its award-winning beaches. Blessed by the bounty of the sea and the region's abundant rainfall, southern cuisine is effortlessly delicious and morbidly spicy. Dishes such as *khào mòk kài* (chicken biryani) and other standard curries are a brilliant yellow colour (thanks to the liberal use of turmeric), and represent a geographic map of the region's Chinese, Malay and Indian influences. Of Chinese-Malay heritage, *khanôm jiiin nám yaa* is a dish of thin rice noodles doused in a fish curry sauce. A large tray of green vegetables to accompany the dish is prominently displayed at the communal table – a helpful signal to the illiterate traveller.

Malay-style *rotii kaeng* is a fluffy flat bread served with a curry dip; order another if you like to watch the hooded Muslim women slap the dough into a gossamer circle, then toss it into a spitting wok.

Cha-am isn't listed on the English-language train schedule.

HUA HIN

pop 48,700

A sanitised version of Thailand for the masses, and the longtime retreat of Thai royalty, it seems as though Hua Hin, 230km from Bangkok, is on constant alert for the King himself. Chock-a-block with modern restaurants, tailors, masseurs and souvenir shops, it's probably the easiest and safest southern Thai coastal retreat, favoured by families and oldies who frequent the colossal beachfront resorts hogging the nicest stretches of sand. Nonetheless, this quiet spot possesses steady weather and a certain finesse – just like Thai cuisine minus the spice.

Sleeping

Accommodation in Hua Hin tends to be a bit on the expensive side due to its proximity to Bangkok.

All Nations Guest House (☎ 0 3251 2747; www.geocities.com/allnationsguesthouse; 10-10/1 Th Dechanudith; d from 150/450B; ☑) Owned by a friendly Canadian-Thai couple, this place is often packed with backpackers. The small open-air café has a billiards table and a bar. Climb to the top floor and exit onto the roof for a great city view.

our pick **Pattana Guest House** (☎ 0 3251 3393; www.observergroup.net/pattana.htm; 52 Th Naresdamri; d 200-525B; ☑) This is the absolute picture of peace and serenity – just walking into the plant-filled lobby causes your stress level to drop three points. Rooms have loads of character, and quiet is the name of the game here; when we visited, everyone was silently reading.

Fulay (☎ 0 3251 3145; www.fulay-huahin.com; 110/1 Th Naresdamri; s/d from 350/450B; 🍴) With the walls and floors covered in linoleum, the cheapest rooms here feel a bit, well, cheap. But no matter – the real reason to check in is the sprawling pier that reaches out over the beach. If you're looking to splurge, get a load of the private suite (1750B) facing the ocean.

Eating & Drinking

Hua Hin is noted for seafood, especially *plaa mèuk* (squid), *puu* (crab) and *hàwy* (clams). In the centre of town, the colourful **Chatchai Market** (Th Phetkasem & Th Dechanuchit) feeds hordes of hungry visitors night and day. At the **night market** (nr Th Dechanuchit & Th Phetkasem), there's a smorgasbord of food stalls equipped with well-seasoned woks and display cases packed with fruits of the sea. It's barely possible to break 100B for a bellyful of feasting.

El Murphy's Mexican Restaurant (☎ 0 3251 1525; 25 Soi Selakam; dishes 70-400B; 🍴 lunch & dinner) At this Tex-Mex place run by an Irish expat, prices aren't exactly budget, but you get what you pay for: massive burritos, huge nacho plates, even chicken fajitas! Cricket and footy fans gather here to watch matches projected onto an outdoor wall.

For more serious drinkers, check out the gaudy bars on Soi Bintaban, off Th Naresdamri.

Getting There & Around

Buses to Bangkok (air-con 171B, three hours, departures hourly) leave from next to the Siripetchkasem Hotel.

All other buses leave from Hua Hin's regular **bus station** (Th Liap Thang Rot Fai), located 400m from the train station. Buses travel to/from Prachuap Khiri Khan (ordinary 80B, two hours, frequent departures daily between 6.30am and 4pm), Chumphon (air-con 160B, four hours, hourly from 7am to 2am), Surat Thani (air-con 270B, seven hours, 13 daily between 8am and 1.30am) and Phuket (air-con 378B, 11½ hours, 12 daily between 9am and 1.30am).

The impressive train station, at the end of Th Damnoen Kasem, services Bangkok (2nd class 292B to 383B, 3rd class 104B).

Sāamlāw from the train station to the beach cost 50B to 70B; from the bus station to Th Naresdamri, 50B to 70B; and from Chatchai Market to the fishing pier, 20B.

PRACHUAP KHIRI KHAN

pop 27,700

Roughly 80km south of Hua Hin, this small town retains an unhurried pace. Consider mellow Prachuap (pra-juap) if you're looking for somewhere to break up the long trip to the island beaches or are desperate to escape your Khao San compatriots.

The bus dumps you off in the centre of town – not a pushy motorcycle taxi or foreigner in sight. If you arrive in the heat of the day, it might even feel like a ghost town. At the base of Prachuap is a sparkling blue bay sprinkled with brightly coloured fishing boats. To the north is **Khao Chong Krajok** (Mirror Tunnel Mountain), topped by a wat with spectacular views; the hill is claimed by a clan of monkeys who supposedly hitched a ride into town on a bus from Bangkok to pick up some mangoes. There isn't much else to do except walk along the waterfront promenade or explore nearby **Ao Manao** (Lime Bay) and **Ao Noi** (Little Bay).

Sleeping & Eating

Yuttichai Hotel (☎ 0 3261 1055; 115 Th Kong Kiat; d from 160B) Run by a smiley family, this place is close to the bus station and night market. There's some beautiful timber flooring throughout, and old-style rooms are big enough to stretch your legs.

Suk Sant Hotel (☎ 0 3261 1145; 11 Th Suseuk; s/d from 300/350B; 🍴) You'll have to forsake all architectural taste at this monstrosity pink building near the waterfront promenade (Th Chai Thaleh), but you'll be rewarded with lovely views (in the fan rooms only). Very basic but clean rooms.

Vegetarian café (☎ 0 3261 1672; dishes around 23B) Noncarnivores might want to shuffle on down to this blink-and-you'll-miss-it café on the same street as Suk Sant Hotel (no roman-script sign). There's no menu but the friendly women running the kitchen will happily wok up something.

Pan Phochana Restaurant (☎ 0 3261 1195; 40 Th Chai Thaleh; dishes 40-120B; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Near Suk Sant Hotel, this place is famous for its *hàw mòk hàwy* (ground fish curry steamed in mussels on the half-shell).

At the foot of Th Thetsaban Bamrung is a small **night market** (Th Chai Thaleh) that's good for seafood.

Getting There & Away

Buses to and from Bangkok, Hua Hin, Chiam and Phetburi stop on Th Phitak Chat, near

Yuttichai Hotel. Regular buses stop a block away near Inthira Hotel.

Services run to Bangkok (air-con 230B, five hours), Hua Hin (ordinary 65B, two hours, frequent departures between 6.30am and 4pm) and Chumphon (ordinary 160B, four hours), the transfer point for Surat Thani buses and boats to the Samui islands.

The train station is at the end of Th Kong Kiat, a block from Th Phitak Chat. There are several afternoon departures to Bangkok (2nd class 220B to 357B, 3rd class 128B), Hua Hin (19B to 79B) and also to Chumphon (2nd-class air-con 34B to 278B).

CHUMPHON

pop 480,000

Roughly 500km from Bangkok, Chumphon marks out where southern Thailand really begins in terms of dialect and religion. Chumphon is a revolving door for travellers going to or coming from Ko Tao. The transition from arriving in Chumphon to getting a boat ticket to Ko Tao is painless. Travel agencies are within spitting distance of the bus station and provide all sorts of free amenities (such as luggage storage, shower and toilet).

Suda Guest House (☎ 0 7750 4366; 8 Soi Bangkok Bank; s/d 180/400B; 🍴) is currently clobbering its competitor Farang Bar in the popularity department, and that's probably because prices are low, management is helpful (with Ko Tao travel arrangements and more) and most everything in sight is perfectly clean.

You can stock up on food supplies for the slow boat at the small **night market** (Th Krom Luang Chumphon).

There are three daily boats to Ko Tao from Chumphon pier. Speed and express boats (400B, 1½ to two hours) leave in the morning around 7am (leave Chumphon town at 6am) to Ko Tao, catamarans (500B to 550B, 1½ hours) leave at 1pm and the ferry (300B, six hours) departs at 11pm. Transport to the pier, 14km from Chumphon, is included in the fare.

Buses arrive at and depart from Chumphon's **bus station** (Th Paramin-mankar). Destinations include Bangkok (air-con 211B to 320B, seven hours, nine daily), Ranong (air-con 90B, three hours, hourly) and Surat Thani (air-con 130B, three hours, hourly).

The **train station** (Th Krom Luang Chumphon) is within walking distance of the centre of town. Destinations include Bangkok (2nd class 310B to 390B, 3rd class 202B to 252B,

7½ to nine hours, 11 daily), Surat Thani (35B, two to 3½ hours, 11 daily) and Hat Yai (80B, six to 8½ hours, five daily). Northern- and southern-bound trains have several afternoon departures.

SURAT THANI

pop 125,500

This busy port is of interest to most travellers only as a jumping-off point for the islands off the coast. If you arrive in Surat by train or bus in the morning you'll have no problem making a connection with one of the day express boats.

Sleeping & Eating

If you need a place to stay, check out **Ban Don Hotel** (☎ 0 7727 2167; 268/2 Th Na Meuang; d from 200B; 🍴), the best budget value in Surat, with small yet extremely clean rooms. The entrance is through a Chinese restaurant – quite good for inexpensive rice and noodle dishes. **Thai Tani** (☎ 0 7727 2977; Th Talat Mai; s/d 240/300B) is across the street from the local bus station. If you get stuck at the train station, which is in nearby Phun Phin, try **Queen** (☎ 0 7731 1003; 916/10-13 Th Mahasawat; s/d 180/260B; 🍴). It is round the corner from the train station on the road to Surat Thani. Look at a couple of rooms as quality varies.

The market near the bus station has cheap provisions. Stalls near the bus station specialise in hearty *khào kài òp* (marinated baked chicken on rice). The **night market** (Th Ton Pho) is the place for fried, steamed, grilled or sautéed delicacies.

Getting There & Away

Be wary of dirt-cheap combo tickets to the islands sold on Th Khao San in Bangkok – they often have extra surcharges, invalid legs or dubious security. For the Bangkok–Surat Thani trip, it is recommended that you use buses departing from government bus stations or ask an island survivor to advise of a reliable travel agent.

AIR

There is a twice-daily service to Bangkok on **Thai Airways International** (☎ 0 7727 2610; www.thaiair.com; 3/27-28 Th Karunarat).

BOAT

There are three piers located in and around Surat Thani: Ban Don, in the centre of town,

MEDITATION WITH THE MONKS

About 60km north of Surat Thani, Chaiya is one of the oldest cities in Thailand, dating back to the Srivijaya empire, and home to Wat Suanmuk (Wat Suan Mokkphalararam), a forest wat founded by Ajahn Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, arguably Thailand's most famous monk. At the affiliated International Dharma Hermitage (IDH), across the highway 1.5km from Wat Suanmuk, resident monks hold English-language guided meditation retreats in the first 10 days of every month. Anyone is welcome to participate; the cost is 1500B (150B per day for 10 days; non-refundable), which includes meals. Advance registration is not possible; simply arrive in time to register on the morning of the final day of the month preceding the retreat. Be prepared for deep, meditative silence that lasts for 10 days.

To get to Wat Suanmuk from Surat, catch one of the frequent 3rd-class trains from Phun Phin (10B, one hour) or take a *săwngthăew* (small pick-up with two benches in the back; 50B, 45 minutes) from Talat Kaset bus station to Chaiya. Until late afternoon *săwngthăew* from Chaiya's train station travel the 7km to Wat Suanmuk for 15B per passenger; if these aren't running you can hire a motorcycle taxi for 50B from anywhere along the main street.

receives the night ferries; Tha Pak Nam (Tha Thong pier), 5km from Surat Thani, receives **Songserm's** (☎ 0 7728 6340) express boats; and Don Sak, 60km from central Surat Thani, receives the car-passenger ferries and **Seatran** (☎ 0 7727 5060; www.seatranferry.com; 136 Th Na Meuang) express boats.

For travellers heading to Ko Samui, there are various options. Seatran offers bus-ferry combinations (150B, 3½ hours, departures every hour between 5.30am and 5.30pm) leaving from the bus station in Surat Thani and boarding a car ferry at Don Sak pier. Seatran's bus-express boat combinations (250B) also leave from the bus station in Surat Thani and board at Don Sak pier at 8.30am and 2.30pm. **Raja Ferry** (☎ 0 7747 1151) also leaves from Don Sak (84B, 1½ hours, departures every hour between 6am and 6pm). A night ferry (150B, six hours, departing at 11pm) leaves from Ban Don pier.

To Ko Pha-Ngan, **Raja Ferry** (160B, 2½ hours, four departures daily) leaves from Don Sak. **Songserm's** express boat (250B, 3½ hours, departing once daily at 8am) leaves from Tha Pak Nam. The night ferries (200B, seven hours, departing at 11pm) leave from Ban Don pier. **Pha-Ngan Tour** (☎ 0 7720 5799) does a bus-ferry combination for this service (240B).

To Ko Tao, night ferries (500B, seven to eight hours, departing at 11pm) and express boats (500B, five hours, one morning departure) leave from Ban Don pier.

BUS & MINIVAN

There are three bus stations in Surat Thani: Talat Kaset 1, off Th Talat Mai and Th Na

Meuang, for local and provincial destinations, including Chumphon and the Surat Thani train station; **Talat Kaset 2** (btwn Th Talat Mai & Th That Thong) for air-con minivans and towns outside the province; and a station outside town for Bangkok-bound buses. The travel agencies also run cramped minivan services to popular tourist destinations; these are usually faster, but have unreliable departure times and tickets tend to cost 50B to 100B more.

Buses travel to and from Bangkok (air-con 350B to 590B, 10 to 11 hours), Chumphon (ordinary 80B, three hours), Hat Yai (air-con 295B, four to five hours), Krabi (ordinary 80B, three to four hours, hourly) and Phuket (ordinary/air-con 200/240B, seven hours). Minivans also run to Hat Yai (210B) and Krabi (170B).

TRAIN

The train station is in Phun Phin, 14km from Surat Thani. Destinations include Bangkok (2nd-class sleeper 498B to 748B, 2nd class 368B to 478B, 3rd class 227B to 297B, 12 hours), and there are several afternoon and evening departures for northern-bound trains. For destinations south of Surat Thani, there are several early morning departures, but seats tend to sell quickly.

Getting Around

Orange buses (10B, departures every 15 minutes) depart from Talat Kaset 1 local bus station, which is within walking distance of the Ban Don pier, for the train station. Orange *săwngthăew* (30B, departures every 15 minutes) leave from Talat Kaset 1 to Don Sak pier, but most island tickets include transport to

the pier. Taxis from the train station in Phun Phin to town cost about 100B.

KO TAO

pop 5000

Mountainous Ko Tao perches on a ledge of coral reefs like a sunbathing turtle (*tao* means 'turtle'). The island is famous as a diving and snorkelling mecca thanks to the water's high visibility, abundant coral and diverse marine life. The absence of traditional package tourists keeps prices low, but in the popularity contest with the other Gulf Coast islands, Ko Tao is catching up.

Whether you're an aspiring diver on a cheap certification mission, a new-age spa junkie or just an all-round sun lover, everyone finds a little of what they want on Ko Tao.

Orientation & Information

Only 21 sq km in area, Ko Tao lies 45km north of Ko Pha-Ngan. Boats dock at the Mae Hat pier, on the west coast. Mae Hat has a small collection of travel services, internet cafés and post and money-exchange facilities, but no presence of a Thai community unaffiliated with the tourist trade. North of Mae Hat is the diver headquarters of Hat Sai Ri. The nondiving crowd generally scatters to the other beaches and coves on the south and east coasts. These are reached along treacherous unsealed roads that cut through the interior of the island. Hat Sai Ri also has traveller facilities and services.

Activities

Ko Tao's best **diving and snorkelling** sites are offshore islands or pinnacles, including White Rock, Shark Island, Chumphon Pinnacle, Green Rock, Sail Rock and Southwest Pinnacles. About 40 dive operators eagerly offer their services to travellers. The larger dive operators aren't necessarily better than the smaller ones, and will often take out bigger groups of divers. These operators usually have more than one office around the island (such as at Mae Hat and Hat Sai Ri).

Rates are similar everywhere, and typically cost 800B per dive to 5400B for a 10-dive package. An all-inclusive introductory dive lesson costs 1600B, while a four-day, open-water PADI certificate course costs around 8000B – these rates include gear, boat, instructor, food and beverages. Any bungalow or dive shop can arrange snorkelling day trips around the island for 400B. If you just want to rent a

snorkel, mask and fins it will cost you about 100B for the day.

Sleeping & Eating

Food can be expensive on Ko Tao as there are no community markets or non-tourist-related vendors. Except for Hat Sai Ri, which has an assortment of restaurants, you are captive to the guesthouse kitchens. If you're not on the mango-shake-and-banana-pancake train, now is the time to get on board or go hungry.

HAT SAI RI

This is the island's longest stretch of beach, and the most populated, with a string of busy cafés, restaurants and simple (largely overpriced) accommodation. Some guesthouses are affiliated with a dive company and don't accept customers who aren't enrolled in a course.

Mr J's (☎ 0 7745 6066; r from 250B) Rooms here are plain but the owner is a wildly eccentric Ko Tao legend. Free chocolate, Pepsi, beer or banana, depending on how long you stay. Seriously.

Sai Ree Cottages (☎ 0 7745 6374; nitsairee@hotmail.com; d 250-700B; ☺) You'll find roomy and modern concrete cottages in the front here, less exciting options further back and postcard-perfect bamboo huts right on the beach.

In-Touch Bungalow (☎ 0 7745 6514; d 300-500B) A 15-minute walk from the pier, this place is popular with divers and nondivers alike. The round hobbitlike huts near the main path have huge bathrooms, but even the bungalows at the back are fairly large. And you could easily spend a day doing nothing in the ultra-chilled-out restaurant and bar, which is one of this beach's most consistently crowded.

Simple Life Villa (☎ 0 7745 6142; r 400-600B, d 600B) Simple Life is right – this is a small village of low-slung concrete bungalows shaded by massive coconut trees. It's popular with divers, as Simple Life runs a nearby dive school and the students stay here.

CHALOK BAAN KAO BAY

A crowded but good-looking bay favoured by the young and carefree, this might just be your version of paradise.

Freedom Beach (☎ 0 7745 6539; bungalows 100-250B) On its own secluded beach at the eastern end of Ao Chalok, these little huts are as basic as they come – wooden boxes with mattresses on the floor. However, if you crave solitude with great views for your pennies, then Freedom could be for you. The bungalows are

a 10-minute walk from the action on the main beach.

HAT TAA TOH

The Thai-run **Freedom Beach** (☎ 07745 6596; Haad Taa Toh Klaang; d 300B) is a little slice of heaven. There's a small selection of old-school bungalows positioned on a ridge. The casual restaurant has stellar views (dishes from 45B to 60B). Pale-skinned travellers will delight in the shady protection offered by small trees on the tiny beach below, not to mention the translucent water.

AO LAEM THIAN & AO TANOT

Through the dense jungle canopy along roads better suited for water drainage, you reach the northeast cape of Laem Thian and its small rocky cove. Further south, Ao Tanot is a pretty cove surrounded by huge limestone rock formations and a sandy beach. Here you have a handful of guesthouses making an amenable compromise between isolation and socialisation.

Bamboo Hut (☎ 07745 6531; Ao Tanot; bungalows 150-500B) Surrounded by trees, there are 20 decked bungalows here, but the older they are, the smaller they are. The restaurant is very laid-back and the kitchen specialises in spicy southern Thai-style food.

Laem Thian Bungalows (☎ 07745 6477; pingpong_laemthian@hotmail.com; Laem Thian; d 350-1000B) Having done a trekking trip before you try negotiating the steep steps here will serve you well. The lone occupier of this cove has ultrabasic huts and dim shared bathrooms. The reception/dining area is crying out for a makeover, but you'll probably spend your days snorkelling and hardly notice. Ring ahead for pick-up from Ban Mae Hat pier.

Diamond Beach (☎ 07745 6591/2; Ao Tanot; bungalows 400-500B) These bungalows are relatively new, modern and comfortable. They have interesting designs with windows placed on the huts' corners. It's a good spot, with upbeat music playing and an appealing restaurant near the beach.

Black Tip Dive Resort (☎ 07745 6488; www.blacktip-kohtao.com; Ao Tanot; bungalows 800-1700B; 🏊) Part of a dive shop and water-sports centre, Black Tip has a handful of lovely bungalows. If you fun dive with them you get 25% off the room rates and if you do a course it's 50% off. The dive centre has a wacky, white adobe design with strange geometrical configurations.

HAT SAI DAENG

New Heaven Nature Huts (d 400-500B) Run by a quirky crew, this rustic ensemble blends nicely into the hilltop. Dishes in the restaurant average 50B to 110B.

Coral View Resort (☎ 07745 6482; www.coralview.net; d 500-900B) On the southern coast in stunning Hat Sai Daeng, Coral View has comfortable 'grown-up' bungalows, plus original bamboo ones, sea views and one of the best two-tier restaurants on the island. Coral View is run by a friendly Australian-Thai couple, and if you call in advance and make a reservation, they will pick you up at the Ban Mae Hat pier.

Drinking

At night, the action centres on Hat Sai Ri's bars, a mix of diving and sunbathing afterglow. The crowds bulk up during some of the weekly parties, advertised on fliers posted throughout the village. Because travel between beaches is difficult, people staying on the east or south coast tend to hang out in their guesthouses recounting the day's adventures.

Getting There & Away

There is only one pier in Ko Tao. To reach Surat Thani, take an express boat (500B, five hours, one morning departure) or night ferry (500B, seven to eight hours, one departure nightly). An additional express boat service does the island jump to Thong Sala on Ko Pha-Ngan (180B to 250B, one to two hours, six departures daily from 9.30am to 3.30pm) and on to Na Thon on Ko Samui (280B to 550B).

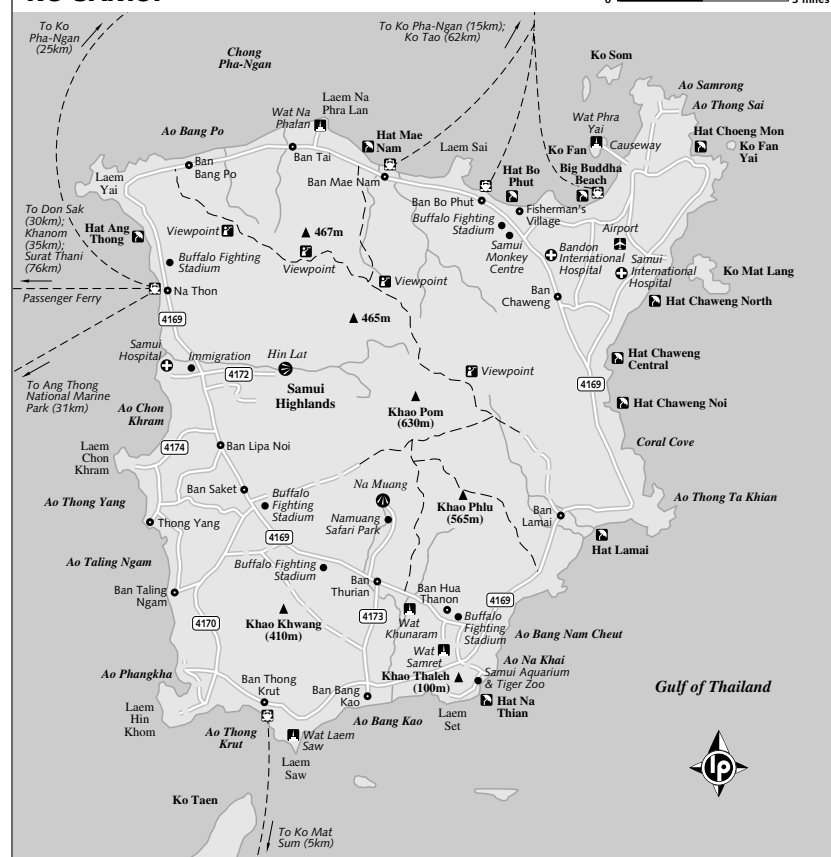
Chumphon is another mainland option, reached by express boats (400B, 1½ to two hours, departing from 10.30am to 3pm) and a slow boat (250B, six hours, departing at 10am).

KO SAMUI

pop 39,000

Possibly no island in all of Thailand provokes such a wide range of differing opinions as does Ko Samui. Because of the heavy Western influence and its chain restaurants, holier-than-thou backpackers have been turning up their noses at the mere mention of the place for years. But families, honeymooners and vacationing romantics see the island differently: as a place where the conveniences of home are just a stone's throw away from tropical beach paradise.

KO SAMUI



Probably the best way to approach an island this beautiful and this complex, however, is without preconceived notions. If you've come to eat and drink with the crowds, you'll soon find yourself in the heart of glittery Hat Chaweng. But don't forget – Samui is still a very large island. If you'd like to escape the crowds, it shouldn't be too tough to make that happen.

Information

Bank of Ayudha (☎ 07742 0176; Na Thon; 🕒 8.30am-3.30pm) Head about 200m from the ferry towards the police station and then 50m left. Also has branches at Hat Chaweng and Hat Mae Nam.
Post office (Th Chenwithee, Na Thon; 🕒 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat, Sun & public holidays) Go

on, mail those postcards! Overseas calls can be made here (from 8am to 8pm).

Samui International Hospital (Chaweng Hospital; ☎ 07742 2272) For medical or dental needs.

Tourist information (☎ 07420 7202; tatsamui@tat.or.th; Th Malitra Vanitchoen, Na Thon; 🕒 8.30am-noon & 1-4.30pm)

Tourist police (☎ 07742 1281, 24hr emergencies 1155)

Sights & Activities

The beaches are beautiful and, naturally, the main attraction. If you tire of the same pitch of land outside your guesthouse, be sure to set your sights a bit further afield and explore some other stretches of sand. **Chaweng** is famous for a reason – the water is crystal clear and the beach is 6km long; it is also

one of the few spots on the island with surf. Receiving second place in the popularity contest, **Lamai's** waters are calmer thanks to an offshore coral reef. **Bo Phut** arguably has the best sunset view, easily enjoyed at one of the beachfront restaurants in Fisherman's Village. A little further west is the low-key village of **Mae Nam**. The southern end of the island turns into a rocky landscape of small coves and bays that are good environments for snorkelling; you'll need to rent a motorcycle to explore this end.

Ko Samui also has scenic waterfalls in the centre of the island – **Hin Lat**, 3km southeast of Na Thon, and **Na Muang**, 14km southeast of Na Thon.

Near Ban Bang Kao in the south, there's an interesting old *chedi* at **Wat Laem Saw**, while **Wat Phra Yai** (Big Buddha Temple), with its 12m-high Buddha image, is located at the north-eastern end of the island, on a small rocky islet joined to the main island by a causeway. The monks are pleased to have visitors, but proper attire (no shorts or sleeveless tops) should be worn on the temple premises.

Several guide companies on Chaweng and Lamai beaches offer kayak trips to **Ang Thong National Marine Park**.

Sleeping & Eating

NA THON

The only reason to stay in Na Thon is for an early morning boat departure or to capitalise on the island's best-value digs (minus the beach). Several restaurants face Na Thon's harbour and offer a combination of Western food and Thai seafood.

Wang Bua Home Guesthouse (☎ 0 7742 0317; 212/7 Th Chonwithi; d from 350B; 🍽️) Opposite the Thai Farmers Bank, this place is popular with Thais and astute travellers.

Nathon Residence (☎ 0 7723 6058; Th Thawi Ratchaphakdi; r 500B; 🍽️) Most places in this town are on the drab side, but this is your best bet. There are big, sparkling tiled rooms here as well as a downstairs café and great staff. The rooms all come with satellite TV.

About Art & Craft (☎ 0 6789 1190; 90/3 Th Chonwithi; dishes 40-240B) This is actually a café serving a healthy line-up: try the pumpkin and tofu salad (100B).

Coffee Island (dishes 50-180B; 🕒 6.30am-10pm) Opposite the new pier, Coffee Island has a good selection of its namesake as well as bakery goodies.

Many travellers fill up on *küaytiaw* and beer at the **night market** (Th Chonwithi), near the pier, before catching the slow boat back to the mainland. The **day market** (Th Thaweeratpakdee), two blocks back from the ferry terminal, is brimming with fresh fruit.

HAT CHAWENG

With its rocking discos and deluxe hotels, crowded Chaweng offers more amusement than relaxation and people come a long way from anywhere to get to this famous beach strip. Fittingly, the accommodation scene in Chaweng is boom or bust. The real cheaps (around 200B) are so decrepit that they should pay you to stay there. Bumping up to the next level, the 400B places offer more creature comforts than an average backpacker needs, but there is very little in between. The northern part of the beach, where the sand begins to taper off, becomes quieter and better value than other parts.

Wave Samui (☎ 0 7723 0803; www.thewavesamui.com; 11/5 Moo 2; r 350-850B; 🍽️ 📺) Following the unfortunate closure of Charlie's Hut, the Wave is now ground zero for Chaweng-bound backpackers. Accommodation here offers some of the best deals on the beach, but it's the downstairs café that's the real draw. Here you'll find a wonderfully edited library and a flat-screen TV, and the restaurant that turns out fantastic shakes and Western breakfasts. The two charismatic British owners have managed to make their guesthouse feel like home – not an easy feat in a foreign place.

Matlang Resort (☎ 0 7723 0468; www.matlangresort.com; 154/1 Moo 2; d/tw from 400/600B; 🍽️ 📺) As far as picture-perfect beauty goes, this place can't be beaten. Dozens of bungalows are dotted along a winding red-brick path in a lush garden setting, and the entire operation is smack bang on the prettiest stretch of the beach.

Baan Chaweng Guest House (☎ 0 7422 2153; 45/10 Moo 3; d 400-600B; 🍽️) This semihidden guesthouse couldn't possibly have less character. But for pure value, it may be this beach's top draw. Rooms are spacious and each one comes with satellite TV and freezing cold air-con – even the 400B rooms. Unfortunately, it's all shared bathrooms, but the water is hot and the tiles are scrubbed clean daily.

Green Guest House (☎ 0 7742 2611; 156/7 Moo 2; d 450-1000B) On the same *soi* as Lucky Mother (which is across the street from Khun Chaweng Shopping Center), this tidy place has

a small row of rooms tucked into a pleasant garden setting. Everything here is clean and comfortable, so it's a smart choice if the ruggedness of bungalow life has you beaten. It's just seconds from the beach.

Also recommended:

Chaweng Pearl Cabana (☎ 0 7741 3109; d 350B)

This collection of tin-roofed bungalows is popular with the fresh-faced set.

Deep Drop Hut Bungalow (☎ 0 7723 0551; 14/1 Moo 2; d 400B) Wooden bungalows in a little sliver of forest.

At night, restaurants set up romantic candlelit tables on the beach. You pick your meal from the iced tray of seafood, which is priced by the kilo, and then it hits the barbecue grill. Salty folklore says to pick a fish with unclouded eyes (a sign of freshness) and a fairly small body (a sign of tenderness).

There is also a series of cheap food stalls near the nightclub *soi*, just off the main drag in central Chaweng. As daylight disappears, *kathoey* fuel up here for a night of female impersonation.

HAT LAMAI

Samui's second-most popular beach is just as busy as Chaweng – yes, McDonald's has arrived – but the crowd is younger and less well groomed. Behind the beach, a shopping, eating and low-key girly-bar strip caters to all your needs. A shoestring could rent a spot right in the midst of the party, but for quieter times head to the northern end of the beach.

Jah Peace (www.jahpeace.com; s/d 150/200B) Formerly a much-loved beach tavern known as the Chill Out Bar, Jah Peace is a series of 12 A-frame backpacker bungalows with nary a mod con in sight; it's fan rooms and shared bathrooms for everyone. But as the owner proudly proclaims, 'this is the cheapest place on Lamai'. It's also a great place to hunker down and stay awhile – DVDs screen often in the common area, and beach parties here are said to be good. Fair warning: the shared bathrooms are a thing of pure terror.

Sea Breeze Bungalows (☎ 0 7742 4258; seabreeze_bungalow@yahoo.com; 124/3 Moo 3, Th Maret; d 250-400B; 🍽️) At the busy southern end, Sea Breeze has fan-cooled wooden bungalows in shady grounds.

Beer's House Beach Bungalows (☎ 0 7723 0467; 0 1958 4494; 161/4 Moo 4, Th Maret; d 450-500B) Run by a pleasant Thai couple, the chunky bungalows here are small but clean and cosy. Best feature? They all come complete with rather

large front decks, perfect for daydreaming while the waves crash just a stone's throw away, or maybe for entertaining your next-door neighbour as the sun sets. Air-con and TV rooms on the other side of the road (and thus further from the beach) are 700B.

Utopia Bungalow (☎ 0 7723 3113; www.utopia-samui.com; 124/105 Moo 3, Th Maret; d incl breakfast from 500B; 🍽️ 📺) Beautiful grounds with dozens and dozens of bungalows – some of them rugged and some quite luxurious – and a large beachfront restaurant (dishes 60B to 140B).

Spa Samui Resort (☎ 0 7723 0855; www.spasamui.com; r 500-1000B; 🍽️ 📺) This American-owned spa is considered to be one of Asia's finer health resorts. And assuming you're up for an internal adventure, you won't be bored – the menu includes seven-day fasts, colonics, meditation, yoga, massage, raw food classes and more. (Prior to your visit, check the website to see what's on.) The basic bungalows are perfectly well manicured and the vegetarian food (dishes from 30B to 280B) is said to be of the highest quality.

HAT BO PHUT & BIG BUDDHA BEACH

Many visitors to Ko Samui are prepared to sacrifice the picture-perfect contours of crowded Hat Chaweng for the slower pace of bohemian Bo Phut. It's particularly popular with European sun-seekers who don't seem to mind the shallow waters that sometimes verge on the muddy side.

You're better off looking in the 500B range in and around compact Fisherman's Village, at Bo Phut, which has several charming restaurants serving Thai and Western food.

Big Buddha Beach is the preferred spot for many independent travellers.

Rasta Baby II (☎ 0 1082 0339; 0 9475 7656; 176 Moo 1, Bo Phut; d from 200B) If you're adamant about hunting down a bargain, try your luck here. If this place was a hairstyle, it would be a set of dreadlocks. Get comfortable in unpretentious bungalows. Dishes in the restaurant average 40B to 120B.

Chalee Bungalows (☎ 0 7724 5035; freddy_raymond@hotmail.com; 58/1 Moo 4, Big Buddha Beach; d 800B; 🍽️) This is a lovely nook with well-maintained bungalows boasting personable interiors. The attached Shabash Restaurant & Bar dishes out Indonesian, Indian and Middle Eastern fare.

HAT MAE NAM

If you find yourself lying on the beach wondering what country you're in, it is time to

pack up and move to Mae Nam. Although the beach isn't jaw-droppingly beautiful, the surrounding village is a much-needed dose of Thailand. The foreign crowd tends to be calmer, complementing the laid-back Thai community. Finding a Thai meal in Mae Nam is much easier than at other beaches. Grab an iced Thai coffee at the morning market, or a bowl of *khànm jiiin* (thin wheat noodles) at the food stalls in the village of Mae Nam.

Mae Nam Village Bungalows (☎ 07742 5151; 129/2 Moo 1, Th Maenam; d 300-400B; 📶) This end of Mae Nam is a good starting point for budget digs. You'll find basic white concrete bungalows here; the ones around 350B to 400B are the best bet.

Café Talay Bar Restaurant (dishes 100B; 🍴 lunch & dinner) Savour spicy meals at this bohemian spot, positioned near where the beach meets Th Maenam. It's a fitting place to soak up the low-key beachside mood; try the zesty and light *yam kung* (spicy shrimp salad).

Drinking

Ko Samui's nightlife can be summed up with one word: Chaweng. Back behind the main drag, opposite the ocean, is a maze of *soi* lined with open-air bars with competing stereo systems and gyrating Thai women. An odd mix of depravity and innocence imbues these alleyways. Lonely hearts and content crowds of friends play dominoes with the young garland sellers, while the female bartenders do raunchy pole dances. Although the scene is probably better appreciated by men, women shouldn't feel uncomfortable.

Green Mango (☎ 0 7742 2148; Soi Green Mango; admission free; 🍴 from 10pm) This huge open-air meat-market dance club has been throbbing on Samui for 20 years straight. Considering it's on the same small *soi* as a group of girlie bars with names such as Club 69 and Snatch, you can probably deduce it's located in one of Samui's many red-light districts. Hard house on the hi-fi gets the place popping around midnight.

Reggae Pub (☎ 0 7742 2331; 3/3 Moo 2; 🍴 6pm-2am) You'll have to brave a small *soi* filled with aggressive bar girls to reach this open-air warehouse, where Asian reggae groups crank out Bob Marley covers by the dozen. This is also a great spot for dancing – everyone's doing it! To find the place, just look for the big neon Rasta guys on the opposite side of the lake.

Getting There & Away

Be cautious when booking mainland train and bus tickets with agents; the bookings don't always get made or are not for the class you paid for.

Bangkok Airways (code PG; 🛩 in Chaweng 0 7742 2512-9) flies about 20 times daily between Ko Samui and Bangkok (one way 2400B to 3800B). Other destinations include Phuket and Singapore (about twice a day). The **Samui airport** (☎ 0 7742 2512; btw Hat Chaweng & Hat Bang Rak) departure tax is 400B for domestic flights and 500B for international flights.

Na Thon is Ko Samui's main pier for passenger and car ferries to Surat Thani; at other areas such as Hat Bang Rak (Big Buddha Beach), Hat Bo Phut and Hat Mae Nam, there is a seasonal service to Ko Pha-Ngan and Ko Tao. Ferry schedules are subject to change and services decrease during the low season.

Songserm (☎ 0 7742 0157; Na Thon pier) runs an express boat (150B, 2½ hours, one daily) to Surat Thani's Tha Thong pier (Tha Pak Nam). **Seatran** (☎ 0 7742 6000) runs an express boat (250B, two hours, two departures daily) to Surat Thani's Don Sak pier and a car ferry (150B, 2½ hours, hourly from 5.30am to 6pm) also to Surat Thani's Don Sak pier, and then a bus to central Surat Thani. The night ferry (150B, six hours, departing at 9pm) arrives at the Ban Don pier in Surat Thani.

To get to Ko Pha-Ngan (Thong Sala) there are regular departures from Na Thon pier (four daily), Hat Mae Nam pier (three daily) and Phra Yai pier (four daily); see p781 for more information.

To reach Ko Tao, take Songserm's speedboat (550B, 1½ hours, two departures daily) from Hat Bo Phut and Hat Mae Nam piers. A slower ferry (380B, 3½ hours, one morning departure) leaves from Hat Mae Nam pier.

For more information contact the **Thai Ferry Centre** (☎ 0 7747 1151/2) in Surat Thani.

Getting Around

The island's roads are well sealed, making transportation easy and affordable. Sawngthæw can be flagged down on the island's main road or at the Na Thon pier as the drivers do their loops round the island; from Na Thon to the beaches expect to pay 30B to 50B. It's always a good idea to establish the price beforehand so that you aren't socked with a surprise 'charter'.

You can rent motorcycles on Ko Samui for about 150B to 200B a day; there are numerous outlets. Take it easy on the bikes; every year several *faràng* die or are seriously injured in motorcycle accidents on Samui, and a helmet law is enforced. To deter snatch thieves, don't put valuables in the bike's basket.

KO PHA-NGAN

pop 10,300

Wedged between Ko Tao and Ko Samui, Ko Pha-Ngan is part of backpacking folklore, a place custom-made for hammock swinging and navel gazing. Swaying coconut trees, brooding mountains, ribbons of turquoise water – Ko Pha-Ngan is everything a tropical island paradise should be. While the island is devoid of an airport and the roads remain unruly, it will be spared from full-throttle development; however, the days of 100B beachfront bungalows are rarer with each passing year.

Every sunburnt face you meet in Khao San's bars will tell you of the best beach to head to, and the truth is you're spoiled for choice here and it ain't such a bad idea to move from one beach to the next depending on how much time you have up your cheesecloth sleeve.

Orientation

The island of Ko Pha-Ngan is 100km from Surat Thani and 15km north of Ko Samui. Most boats arrive in the southwestern corner of the island at Thong Sala, a dusty port town of shops and tourist services. In the far southeastern corner is the famed party beach quarter of Hat Rin, divided into Hat Rin Nai (to the west) and Hat Rin Nok (to the east). On the west coast are the quieter outposts of Hat Yao (Long Beach) and Ao Mae Hat. On the northern side is Ao Chalok Lam and its thriving fishing village, as well as Hat Khuat (Bottle Beach), reachable only by boat. Transport around the island is expensive because of rugged terrain and unsealed roads.

Information

Ko Pha-Ngan Hospital (☎ 0 7737 7034) Around

2.5km north of Thong Sala; 24-hour emergency service.

PJ Home (☎ 0 7737 5403; 95/15 Moo 6, Hat Rin; per min

28) Internet access at this travel agency near Hat Rin's pier.

Police (☎ 0 7737 7114, emergency 191)

Siam City Bank (☎ 0 7737 5476; 9/60 Moo 6, Hat Rin;

🕒 8.30am-3.30pm Mon-Fri) ATM and currency exchange bureau. There are also several banks in Thong Sala.

Sights & Activities

In the eastern part of the island, **Nam Tok Than Sadet** (Than Sadet Falls) has attracted three generations of Thai kings as well as countless *faràng*. Take a longtail boat from Hat Rin to Hat Sadet and walk into the island along the river for 2.5km. The east coast, especially **Hat Thian** and **Ao Thong Nai Pan**, is lauded as having the best snorkelling and swimming.

At **Wat Khao Tham**, on a hilltop on the south-western side of the island, 10-day Buddhist meditation retreats are conducted by an American-Australian couple during the latter half of most months. The cost is 4000B. Contact the **wat** (www.watkwattham.org; PO Box 18, Ko Pha-Ngan, Surat Thani 84280) for information, or pre-register in person from 1pm to 2pm the day before the retreat is due to begin. A different preregistration process exists for people under 26; check the website for more details.

Sleeping

As you get off the ferry in Ko Pha-Ngan, consider this question: do you want to party like a rock star or sleep like a baby? If your answer is the former, head straight to Hat Rin; if it's the latter, pick any beach *except* Hat Rin.

HAT RIN & AROUND

Ground zero for the monthly full moon parties, Hat Rin is a thriving offspring of Bangkok's Th Khao San. The village is a rabbit warren of shops to keep your baht rolling over, movies on constant rotation, scruffy dogs nipping flees and second-hand bookstores to peruse. This long cape is divided into two beaches: Hat Rin Nok (Sunrise Beach), along the eastern shore, and Hat Rin Nai (Sunset Beach), along the western shore. Hat Rin Nok is a touch Rio de Janeiro, with everyone comparing tans. Hat Rin Nai is a little quieter. Accommodation tends to be both expensive (jumping by around 200B a night when everyone is full-mooning) and average, because there's a long queue of backpackers drooling to get in.

Sea View Haad Rin Resort (☎ 0 7737 5160; Hat Rin Nok; d 300-800B; 📶) Located within stumbling distance of the cliffside Mellow Mountain Bar, bungalows here range wildly in quality. The wooden beachfront digs are sublime, but be prepared to pay!

Paradise Bungalows (☎ 0 7737 5242; Hat Rin Nok; d & tw from 350B; 📶) One of the oldest guesthouses on the beach, Paradise started the full moon

and quiet **Mae Hat Bay Resort** (☎ 0 7737 4171; Ao Mae Hat; d/tw from 350/400B; 📶) or **Island View Cabana** (☎ 0 7737 4172; Ao Mae Hat; d 200-300B), which has lots of older-style white bungalows and a busy restaurant (dishes from 45B to 120B). Apart from the sound of wind ruffling the palm trees you'll have few nightly disturbances around here. The **Village Green** (81/7 Moo 8, Hat (Chaophao)) is a favourite among shoe-stringers for its tasty Euro-Asian food and Pirate Bar.

NORTHERN KO PHA-NGAN

Travelling the winding road towards Ao Chalok Lam you descend into a verdant valley below mountains the colour of bruised storm clouds. Camped out by the water is the small fishing village of Ban Chalok Lam, where residents have seen their island change like a growing child. The road officially stops at Ban Chalok Lam, and to continue on to beautiful and remote Hat Khuat (Bottle Beach) – the current darling of the self-respecting backpacker posse – you have to catch a longtail boat (50B, dawn to dusk). The thick sandy beach and its glassy water are the main attractions at Bottle Beach – you'll never want to leave, unless you're chasing a cranking nightlife.

Fanta Bungalows (☎ 0 7737 4132; fantaphan@yaho.com; Ao Chalok Lam; d from 150B; 📶 📺) Sleeping quarters here are nothing special, although they are solidly built and each balcony sports its own hammocks. Fanta's restaurant serves dishes from 35B to 100B.

Sai Thong Resort (☎ 0 7737 4115; Ao Chalok Lam; tw & d 300-600B; 📶 📺) Bungalows here are a bit rough around the edges but they are likeable nonetheless. The real drawcard is the restaurant's views over the sea and its estuary.

Smile Bungalows (☎ 0 1780 2881; Hat Khuat; d 350-500B) You'll find this supremely orderly set-up at the end of the beach. Expect 28 very clean and neighbourly bungalows and a garden straight out of a Disney film.

Bottle Beach Three (☎ 0 7744 5154; Hat Khuat; s/d 350/550B, 2-storey bungalows 850B) Thai pop draws from the spic-and-span restaurant (dishes from 40B to 210B), and timber bungalows on the beach strike a good-looking pose. Rendered *Truman Show*-style 'homes' are found at the back of the property. Opting for one of the spiffy two-storey pads is a good choice if there are two couples together (two double beds; one in the attic).

Also recommended:

Bottle Beach Two (☎ 0 7744 5156; Hat Khuat; d 300-350B) About 22 blue crash pads have prime beach frontage. There's a shady eating space – shell chimes mix it with a set of imposing speakers. Run by distracted young staff. Dishes in the restaurant cost from 40B to 180B.

Bottle Beach One (☎ 0 7744 5125; Hat Khuat; d 300-850B; 📺) Bottle Beach's original cluster of bungalows to suit low, high and in-between budgets. Spotless restaurant: chip sandwich anyone (60B)? Other dishes range from 40B to 220B.

EASTERN KO PHA-NGAN

In the northeastern corner, Ao Thong Nai Pan Yai and Ao Thong Nai Pan Noi have well-regarded swimming beaches. The two bays are separated by a steep 20-minute walk over a headland, or a longtail boat ride.

Sanctuary (☎ 0 1271 3614; www.thesanctuary-kpg.com; Hat Thian; dm 100B, d 450-1200B) At Hat Thian, way down the east coast near Hat Rin, health and nature are emphasised with a great community feeling at Sanctuary. Also on offer: daily yoga, meditation and full spa treatments (including colonic cleansing). Assuming you've got a big enough group (usually eight people), boats from Hat Rin cost 50B; alternatively it's a one-hour walk along a rough trail.

Ta Pong (☎ 0 7744 5079; Ao Thong Nai Pan Noi; d from 150B) Rustic, unshaven-looking bungalows with wooden balconies overlook the beach (number eight has stellar views) and tend to attract an alternative crowd. There's a great bar-cum-meeting-place – the spot to head for sundowners. Restaurant dishes cost from 40B to 80B.

Star Hut Bungalow (☎ 0 7744 5085; star_hut@hotmail.com; Ao Thong Nai Pan Noi; d from 220B; 📶) Choose from basic thatched huts with zero creature comforts or more upscale digs with wonderfully designed decks. There's a decent restaurant offering some traveller services.

Baan Panburi (☎ 0 7723 8599; www.baanpanburi.bigstep.com; Ao Thong Nai Pan Noi; d from 370B; 📶) If you can afford to stay here, do it! Oodles of character and friendly staff. Bamboo bungalows, set among tropical gardens, average around 570B per night. The restaurant is a classy affair – relish nightly barbecues under romantic fairy lights.

White Sand (☎ 0 7744 5123; Ao Thong Nai Pan Yai; d/tw 500/700B) At the east end of Thong Nai Pan Yai, it has neat bungalows with wooden floors.

Eating & Drinking

For all its strong points, Ko Pha-Ngan isn't known for fabulous cuisine. Virtually all beach accommodation has a simple café with typical *faràng* versions of Thai food, plus the usual muesli/yogurt/banana pancake concoctions. Some safe Thai dishes to order are *khào phât* and *kài phât kà-phrao* (chicken stir-fried with basil). In Thong Sala, you can find *küaytiaw* vendors and food stalls. Waiting for a ferry? The **Yellow Cafe** (dishes 60-90B), opposite the pier, feeds the hungry and idle with baked potatoes, sandwiches and teas.

As the moon begins to wane, Hat Rin's beachside bars are cocktail-in-a-bucket heaven for ragers. Hat Rin's **Backyard** (📺 from 11am) is a popular day club following the full-moon assault. **Outback Bar** (94/25 Moo 6, Hat Rin Village; dishes 40-200B; 📺 8am-midnight) is a typical pub with boppy tunes and no fewer than 10 TVs. Get your Sunday roast fix here (199B).

After 10pm taxi prices explode, making it cheaper for solos or couples to find a room in Hat Rin for the night rather than make the return trip to a distant beach.

Getting There & Around

Most ferries arrive and depart from the pier in Thong Sala, but during the high season there are endless combinations of services between Ko Pha-Ngan's Hat Rin and several beaches on Ko Samui's north coast. Schedules and frequency vary according to the season.

To Surat Thani, there are express boats via Ko Samui (250B, four hours, four departures daily) and night ferries (230B, seven hours, departing at 10pm). These boats leave from Thong Sala on Ko Pha-Ngan and arrive in Ban Don, Surat Thani.

There are 10 to 11 daily ferry departures between Ko Pha-Ngan and Ko Samui. These boats leave throughout the day from 7am to 4.30pm, take from 30 minutes to an hour and cost 180B to 250B. All leave from either Thong Sala or Hat Rin on Ko Pha-Ngan and arrive either in Na Thon, Mae Nam, Hat Bo Phut or Hat Bang Rak on Ko Samui. If you have a preference, clearly state it when buying a ticket.

Boats to Ko Tao (180B to 350B, one to three hours, six departures from 8.30am to 12.30pm daily) leave from Thong Sala.

Sǎwngthǎew do daytime routes from Thong Sala to Hat Yao, Ban Chalok Lam or Hat Rin for 50B to 100B; travelling solo you'll pay around 250B to get to most places on the island. On the

northwestern and northeastern coasts, roads are unsealed and the terrain is difficult. Taxis moving around the island are expensive, especially at night, ranging from 500B to 1000B. Longtail boats also service Thong Sala, Hat Yao, Hat Rin and other beaches for 50B to 100B.

NAKHON SI THAMMARAT

pop 122,400

Off the tourist trail, Nakhon Si Thammarat is a quintessential southern town. During early Thai history, it functioned as a major hub for trade within Thailand as well as between the western and eastern hemispheres. Clergy from Hindu, Islamic, Christian and Buddhist denominations established missions here over the centuries, and many of their houses of worship are still active today.

Information

Bovorn Bazaar (Th Ratchadamnoen) A small *faràng*-oriented centre with a few restaurants and internet cafés.

Main post office (Th Ratchadamnoen; 📞 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri)

TAT office (☎ 0 7534 6515; tatnakon@nrt.cscoms.com; Th Ratchadamnoen; 📞 8.30am-4.30pm)

Telephone office (📞 8am-11pm) International service; upstairs in the post office.

Sights

The city boasts the oldest and biggest wat in the south. **Wat Phra Mahathat** (Th Ratchadamnoen), reputed to be over 1500 years old and comparable in size to Wat Pho in Bangkok. The temple is 2km south of town; any *sǎwngthǎew* chugging south will take you there for a bargain 6B.

To atone for all that mindless sunbathing you did on the islands, pay a visit to the **National Museum** (☎ 0 7534 1075, 0 7534 0419; Th Ratchadamnoen; admission 30B; 📞 9am-4pm Wed-Sun), 1km south of Wat Phra Mahathat, for its interesting 'Art of Southern Thailand' exhibition.

Thai *nǎng tǎlung* (shadow theatre) was developed in Nakhon Si Thammarat. The acknowledged master of shadow puppets is Suchart Subsin, and you can view a performance at his **workshop** (☎ 0 7534 6394; Soi 3, 110/18 Th Si Thammasok; admission 50B, minimum 2 people; 📞 shows 8.30am & 5pm). Puppets can also be purchased at reasonable prices.

Sleeping

You're not going to fall in love with the city's budget hotels, but at least you're out of the gutter.

Phetpailin Hotel (☎ 0 7534 1896; 1835/38-39 Th Yommarat; d from 180฿; 🏠) Simply a place to crash, with dim corridors and spaciouly dreary rooms.

Thai Hotel (☎ 0 7534 1509; 1375 Th Rajdamnoen; d from 220฿; 🏠) Convenient to the night market and Bovorn Bazaar eats, this place offers secure old-fashioned rooms with TV.

Nakron Garden Inn (☎ 0 7531 3333; 1/4 Th Pak Nakhon; d 445฿; 🏠) The other choices are rather bleak, so you would be wise to expand your budget and shoot for a tidy room at this hotel.

Eating

At night the entire block running south of Th Neramit is lined with cheap food vendors preparing *rotii klúay* (banana pancakes), *khào mòk kài* (chicken biryani) and *mátàbà* (pancakes stuffed with chicken or vegetables).

Hao Coffee (☎ 0 7534 6563; Bovorn Bazaar; dishes 20-100฿; ☕) breakfast, lunch & dinner) Select one of 18 international or southern Thai-style coffees ('Hao coffee' on the menu) and sit at a table encasing old collectables such as watches and currency.

Getting There & Away

Ordinary, VIP and air-con buses to Bangkok and Phuket depart from the bus station, 1km west of the TAT office. Minivans to Krabi, Phuket and Surat Thani leave from the City Hall area between Th Jamroenwithi and Th Ratchadamnoen, while minivans to Hat Yai depart from the Mae Somjit market area on Th Yommarat.

Buses head to Bangkok (VIP/air-con/ordinary 705/454/350฿, 10 to 12 hours, 8am, 9am and hourly from 5pm to 7pm), Hat Yai (air-con 73฿ to 102฿, three to four hours, hourly), Krabi (air-con/ordinary 120/65฿, three hours), Phuket (air-con/ordinary 200/125฿, eight hours) and Surat Thani (air-con/ordinary 95/55฿, two hours).

HAT YAI

pop 191,200

If you've just crossed into Thailand from Malaysia, welcome to the Land of Smiles. Hat Yai is southern Thailand's commercial centre where the east and west coast roads and the railway line all meet. It is a steaming pot of ethnicities – made up of Chinese, Muslim and Thai faces – with a dash of debauchery for visitors from Thailand's puritanical southern neighbour. The city, perhaps with the high-

est concentration of hairdressers and beauticians this side of Bangkok, is one big shopping spree, with customers eyeing gold jewellery and ladies dressed like orchids encased behind glass doors. Like every good border town, Hat Yai knows how to party, especially during its signature holiday of the Chinese New Year in February.

Information

Bangkok Bank (cnr Th Prachathipat & Th Niphath Uthit 3) Currency exchange between 8.30am and 5pm, plus ATM.

Hat Yai Hospital (☎ 0 7423 0800; Th Rattakan)

Owen Tour (☎ 0 7423 4173; 49 Thamnoonvithi; per hr 40฿; 🕒 8.30am-10pm) Internet access, just round the corner from Cathay Guest House.

TAT office (☎ 0 7424 3747; 1/1 Soi 2, Th Niphath Uthit 3; 🕒 8.30am-4.30pm)

Tourist police (☎ 0 7424 6733, emergency 1155) Near the TAT office.

Sleeping

Hat Yai has dozens of hotels within walking distance of the train station.

Cathay Guest House (☎ 0 7424 3815; 93/1 Th Niphath Uthit 2; dm 100฿, r 250฿) Even though it has seen better days, this has become the travellers' headquarters in Hat Yai because of its good location, helpful staff and plentiful information about onward travel. It's a great place to meet other travellers, leaf through mountains of brochures and catch up on overdue laundry. Inexpensive breakfasts and lunches are served in an on-site café and there's a reliable travel agency downstairs.

Louise Guest House (☎ 0 7422 0966; 21-23 Th Thamnoonvithi; r 300-400฿; 🏠) This place is conveniently located and has more appealing rooms than the Cathay Guest House, but lacks its buzz. With more of an apartment-style layout, the rooms here aren't very big but are well maintained and you have the option of air-con.

Eating & Drinking

You can eat your way through three superb ethnic cuisines in a six-block radius. Many Hat Yai restaurants, particularly the Chinese ones, close in the afternoon between 2pm and 6pm. The extensive **night market** (Th Montri 1), across from the Songkhla bus station, specialises in fresh seafood and *khànmò jiiin*.

Vegetable Food (☎ 0 7423 5369; 138/4 Th Thamnoonvithi; dishes 25฿) Vegetarians on the hunt will be able to feast themselves silly on Chinese-

influenced dishes at this very local haunt, opposite the Prince Hotel. There's a small roman-script sign out the front.

Muslim Ocha (Th Niphath Uthit 1; dishes 25-120฿; 🕒 breakfast, lunch & dinner) *Rotii kaeng* (flat bread with curry dip) every-which-way, plus daytime rice and curry, soups and vegetarian selections. Opposite King's Hotel.

Dao Thiam (☎ 0 7424 3268; 79/3 Th Thamnoonvithi; dishes 40-80฿; 🕒 breakfast, lunch & dinner; 🏠) Opposite Odean Department Store, this diner is something of a local institution serving reliable Thai-Chinese meals (including meat-free options). Currency from around the world adorns the walls, but don't even think about funding the next leg of your trip – it's all framed behind glass.

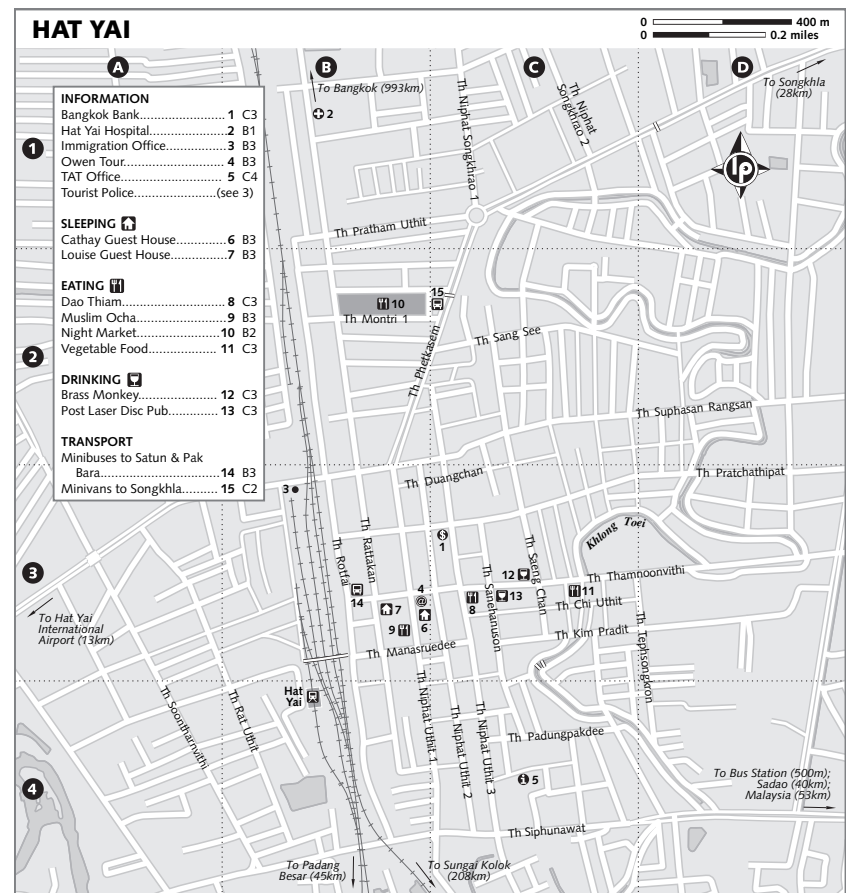
Post Laser Disc Pub (☎ 0 7423 2027; 82-83 Th Thamnoonvithi; dishes 40-120฿; 🕒 lunch & dinner) Whether a farewell or maiden night in Thailand, raise a frothy glass to the house band mungling its way through English tunes, or joining the *kàthoey* headbanging to Guns n' Roses – now that's postmodern.

Brass Monkey (☎ 0 7424 5886; 94 Th Thamnoonvithi) This club/billiards hang-out looks like it's ready to party, even though it was deserted when we called in.

Getting There & Around

For information on travelling to Malaysia from Hat Yai, see p784.

Flights to Bangkok with **Thai Airways International** (☎ 0 7423 3433; www.thaiair.com; 182 Th Niphath



GETTING TO MALAYSIA

Hat Yai is the gatekeeper for passage into Malaysia. To hit targets on Malaysia's west coast, you can plough straight through, with the appropriate border formalities, from Hat Yai to Alor Setar, Butterworth and Kuala Lumpur by either bus or train. A bus to Butterworth costs 250B and takes four hours, while a train costs 180B to 322B and is slower and less frequent.

To Padang Besar

The Malaysian border is about 50km south of Hat Yai at Kanger–Padang Besar, and many travellers pass through town just to extend their Thai visas. Private taxis cost 600B return (one hour), share taxis are 150B (one hour), minivans 80B (1½ hours, hourly) and buses 40B (1½ hours, every 25 minutes). It's also possible to take the train, but this option is not very fast or frequent.

See p453 for information on doing the trip in reverse.

To Bukit Kayu Hitam

The Sadao–Bukit Kayu Hitam border is also accessible via minivan from Hat Yai. Once through the border (open 7am to 7pm), you can take a bus to Alor Setar (RM 4). However, it's much more convenient to take a direct bus from Hat Yai.

See p453 for doing the trip in the reverse direction.

Uthit 1) are available five times daily. There are also daily flights available through THAI from Hat Yai International Airport, 13km west of Hat Yai, to Phuket and Singapore.

The bus station is off Th Siphunawat, roughly 2km east of the town centre. Destinations from Hat Yai include Bangkok (550B, 14 hours), Krabi (200B, five hours), Ko Samui (combined bus-boat 300B, seven hours), Kuala Lumpur (350B to 450B, nine hours), Phuket (250B to 450B, eight hours) and Singapore (450B to 600B, 16 hours). The above prices are all for air-con. There are multiple buses each day to all the destinations.

There are also minibus services across the street from the train station to Satun (65B, 1½ hours) and Pak Bara (70B, two hours). Minivans to Songkhla (20B, one hour) also stop at the clock tower on Th Phetkasem. Share taxis to Padang Besar are well advertised in town.

The **train station** (Th Rotfai) is an easy stroll from the centre of town. Destinations include Bangkok (1st-class air-con/3rd class 1394/269B), Sungai Kolok (ordinary 3rd class 82B to 102B) and Butterworth, Malaysia (180B to 322B).

It costs 20B to get to town from the bus station on the local sawngthaw. Share taxis to the airport are 180B.

SONGKHLA

pop 86,700

Unwind from your bus journeys and border crossings at low-key Songkhla with its

colourful market and its apparently timeless streets (west of Th Ramwithi). This blossoming coastal town, 25km from bustling Hat Yai, is a popular weekend destination. Songkhla's waterfront hosts Malaysian families for the daytime ritual of picnicking in the shade.

Orientation

The minibus from Hat Yai will drop you off on Th Ramwithi in the modern part of town. Just a short walk west along Th Ramwithi, the town does a quick change into a manicured garden of charming colonial architecture and wooded twin hills.

Information

Coffeebucks (25/1 Th Phetchakhiri; per hr 30B; ☎ 8am–8pm) Internet access, tucked within a small shopping centre.

Corner Shop (☎ 0 7431 2577; cnr Th Saiburi & Th Phetchakhiri) English-language books, including Lonely Planet guides, and newspapers.

Kasikorn Bank (☎ 8.30am–3.30pm) There are several banks in town but this is the most convenient; it's near the corner of Th Chana and Th Platha.

Post office (☎ 8.30am–4.30pm Mon–Fri, 9am–noon Sat, Sun & holidays) Near the corner of Th Phetchakhiri and Th Wichianchom

Songkhla Hospital (☎ 0 7432 1072)

Sights

Hat Samila, a municipal beach in the northeast corner of town, is lined with leafy trees and open-air seafood restaurants. At one end of the

beach a sculptured mermaid squeezes water from her hair (similar to the image of Mae Thorani, the Hindu–Buddhist earth goddess). The local people regard the mermaid statue as a shrine, tying the waist with coloured cloth and rubbing the breasts for good luck.

Wander through the breezy halls of polished teak at the **National Museum** (☎ 0 7431 1728; cnr Th Rong Meuang & Th Saiburi; admission 30B; ☎ 9am–4pm Wed–Sun), housed in a 100-year-old Sino-Portuguese palace. Other rambles in town include a climb up **Khao Tang Kuan**, or a stroll through **Wat Matchimawat** (Th Phattalung), southwest of the town centre, which has frescoes, an old marble Buddha image and a small museum.

Sleeping

Amsterdam Guest House (☎ 0 7431 4890; 15/3 Th Rong Meuang; r 150–200B) This homey, quirky Dutch-run place is popular and clean, with plenty of cushions, wandering pet dogs and cats, and a caged macaque that is said to bite the unwary. All rooms share bathrooms.

Guest House Romantic (☎ 0 7430 7170; 10/1–3 Th Platha; r 250–390B; ☎) Substantial, airy abodes here smell fresh and come with TVs. Even the air-con rooms are cheap, and the bamboo

wood beds are impressive for this price range. Overall a good budget choice if you're willing to pay more than 200B.

Green World Palace Hotel (☎ 0 7443 7900–8; 99 Th Samakitsukson; r 750–900B; ☎) Green World Palace is not only the best value in town, it's also classy, boasting chandeliers, a spiralling staircase in the lobby and a 5th-floor swimming pool with views. Rooms are immaculate and filled with enough amenities to keep you comfortable and entertained. The hotel is immensely popular so book ahead. Look for it a few hundred metres south of town.

Rajamangala Pavilion Beach Resort (☎ 0 7448 7222; www.pavilionhotels.com; 1 Th Rajdamnoen Nok; r 1400B; ☎) This miniresort is actually owned by the local university and looks over the road to Songkhla's eastern beach. The enormous lobby is filled with water features and Thai artefacts and the rooms are elementary but stylish. This place is often booked so you may want to call ahead.

Eating & Drinking

For cheap food, try the seafood places on Th Ratchadamnoen. Curried crab claws or fried squid are always a hit. At the tip of Songkhla's

SOUTHERN UNREST

Four of Thailand's southernmost and predominantly Muslim provinces (Songkhla, Yala, Pattani and Narathiwat) go through hot and cold periods that involve the Pattani United Liberation Organization (PULO), a small armed group that, since its formation in 1959, has been dedicated to making a separate Muslim state.

Between 2002 and early 2005 a series of arson attacks, bombings and assaults took place in Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat Provinces. Most attacks were on military posts or police posts; at that time, the PULO had an avowed policy not to target civilians or tourists.

Unfortunately the Thai government's heavy-handed military and police response to the 40-year-old Muslim nationalist movement (including the 2004 massacre of 108 machete-armed youths in a Pattani mosque and the suffocation deaths of 78 in brutal arrests in Narathiwat that same year) seems destined to provoke further trouble. And in 2006–07, trouble exploded into pure terror throughout Yala, Pattani and Narathiwat. (Songkhla has lately avoided the worst violence.)

At the time of research, the former policy of not injuring innocent civilians seemed to have been abandoned, and although PULO has assumed a small degree of responsibility for the violence, and was even rumoured to have had secret talks with the Thai government, no-one is entirely sure which terrorist groups the various insurgents represent.

In January 2007, a group known as the Pattani Fighters beheaded a Buddhist man in Yala; near him was a note declaring 'we will kill all Thai Buddhists'. Since 2004, more than 2000 deaths have occurred in the south, including Muslim and Buddhist schoolchildren and Buddhist monks.

We urge travellers to exercise extreme caution when travelling in Yala, Pattani and Narathiwat. Avoid military or police installations and avoid road travel at night.

As for crossing the Thai–Malaysian border at Sungai Kolok via train, we advise careful monitoring of the situation. Trains are still running and foreign travellers are still making the crossing, but this train station has been bombed in the past and is still considered a target.

GETTING TO MALAYSIA

On the east coast, Sungai Kolok–Rantau Panjang is the handiest border crossing for trips onward to Kota Bharu. The border is open from 5am to 5pm, but on slow days officials may close the border as early as 4.30pm.

The border is about 1km from the centre of Sungai Kolok or the train station. Transport to the border is by motorcycle taxi – the going rate is 20B. The Harmony Bridge connects Sungai Kolok with the Malaysian town of Rantau Panjang. The Malaysian immigration checkpoint is just across the bridge and can be easily reached by walking. Once in Malaysia you can either catch a bus or taxi to Kota Bharu or Pasir Mas, from where you can catch trains to Kuala Lumpur or Singapore.

However, as is the case in all of southern Thailand's Muslim regions, tourism in Sungai Kolok has drastically fallen off over the past few years. In 2005, several bombs exploded here, and Muslim separatists are assumed to be responsible. We suggest exercising extreme caution when travelling through this region, and until the fighting clears up we don't recommend train travel at all.

For information on crossing this border in the opposite direction, see p470.

northern finger are food carts that set out mats in the waterfront park. There's also a seriously good roti vendor on Th Sisuda in the evenings. For relief from the heat, see if you can squeeze in between the tables of teenagers at one of the air-con fast-food restaurants on the corner of Th Sisuda and Th Platha.

Khao Noi Phochana (Th Wichianchom; dishes 30-50B) has a good lunchtime smorgasbord of Thai and Chinese rice dishes on display. No roman-script sign.

A string of bars just east of the Indonesian consulate is jokingly referred to among local expats as 'The Dark Side'. Not as ominous as it sounds, this strip caters mainly to oil company employees and other Westerners living in Songkhla. Near the Pavilion Songkhla Hotel, on Th Platha, are a few other casual bars worth checking out. As the sun begins to set, **Corner Bier** (Th Sisuda) and **Timber Hut** (Th Sisuda) swell with the town's expat Canadian community.

Getting There & Away

The **bus station** (Th Tao It) is 2km from the town centre. For more options or to travel by train, you must connect to Hat Yai. Destinations include Bangkok (air-con 600B, 14 hours, three departures daily), with stops in Nakhon Si Thammarat and Surat Thani.

Hat Yai minibuses (20B, every 30 minutes from 10am to 10pm) can be picked up in town from in front of Wat Jaeng, on Th Ramwithi, or at the bus station.

SUNGAI KOLOK

pop 39,000

Thailand's Wild West border town is a dusty spot that's more than a little rough around

the edges. As the main eastern coastal gateway between Malaysia and Thailand, Sungai Kolok oozes seediness, and the main industries around here revolve around catering to a weekend crowd of Malaysian men looking for sex.

The town's **TAT office** (☎ 0 7361 2126; 18 Th Asia; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm), tourist police and immigration are all at the border. There's another **Thai immigration office** (☎ 9am-4pm Mon-Fri) in town, near the Merlin Hotel.

The town centre is just a 15B säämláw ride from the border or a five-minute walk south of the train station.

When you cross the border from Rantau Panjang in Malaysia, the train station is about 50m straight ahead on the right-hand side, or 20B by motorcycle taxi.

The bus station is another 1km beyond the train station. From here, Bangkok buses (VIP 1090B, air-con 546B to 702B, 17 to 18 hours, three daily) go through Surat Thani (air-con 280B, nine to 10 hours).

Minivans to Hat Yai (150B, three to four hours, hourly from 6am to 5pm) leave from near the train station.

Trains from Sungai Kolok to Bangkok include the 11.55am rapid and 2.05pm special express trains (260B to 1493B). Trains to Hat Yai (82B to 126B, four hours) have two morning departures.

ANDAMAN COAST

Spend enough time hopping from island to island in the tropical dream world of Thailand's south, and you may run the risk of suffering from a nasty case of a classic backpacker's ma-

laise. In some equatorial regions of the world, it's known as beach burnout. The symptoms? Every last piece of paradise begins to look the same. Postcard-perfect sunsets that once caused your jaw to drop are no longer provoking a reaction. But not to worry. In the Land of Smiles, there happens to be a fail-safe cure. Its name? The Andaman Sea coast.

Many come only for Phuket, the country's largest and most visited island, where both amusements and package tourists abound. Yet it's on the beaches and in the forests of the otherworldly Krabi and Phang-Nga Provinces, with their massive limestone cliffs and luscious greenery, that the Andaman truly begins to shine.

But the discoveries don't end there. This is also the place where the majestic Ko Phi Phi exists, where a nomadic sea-gypsy community travels, and where you, intrepid traveller, will likely regain a newfound appreciation of the unique art of world travel.

RANONG

pop 24,500

This small and friendly provincial capital has a bustling fishing port and is separated from Myanmar only by Pak Chan, the estuary of Mae Nam Chan (Chan River). Burmese residents from nearby Kawthoung (Ko Song; also known as Victoria Point) easily hop across the border. The city is also a gateway to Kawthoung and Thahtay Island, and many expats (and a growing number of switched-on travel-

lers) pass through on quick trips across the border to renew their visas.

Information

Most of Ranong's banks are on Th Tha Meuang (the road to the fishing pier), near the intersection with Th Ruangrat. Many have ATMs. The main post office is on Th Chonrau near the intersection of Th Dap Khadi. The CAT telephone office is south on Th Phoem Phon. **Chonakukson Bookstore** (Th Ruangrat) Sells English-language books and Phuket Air tickets to Bangkok.

Sights & Activities

Although there is nothing of great cultural interest in town, Ranong's **hot springs** (Wat Tapotaram; admission free), just outside town, attract Thai and foreign visitors alike.

Because of its close proximity to southern Myanmar, Ranong is a base for **dive trips** to the Burma Banks, within the Mergui (Myeik) Archipelago, as well as the world-class Surin and Similan Islands. Because of the distances involved, dive trips are mostly live-aboard and not cheap. Expect to pay more than US\$200 for a two-day/two-night deal.

A couple of dive shops in Ranong can get you started. Try **Aladdin Dive Cruise** (☎ 0 7781 2967; www.aladdindivecruise.de) or **A-One-Diving** (☎ 0 7783 2984; www.a-one-diving.com; 77 Saphan Pla).

Sleeping & Eating

Kiwi House (☎ 0 7783 2812; www.kiwiorchid.com; d 250B; 🍷) Conveniently located near the bus

GETTING TO MYANMAR

It is now legal to travel from Ranong, Thailand, to Kawthoung, Myanmar, and from there into the interior of Myanmar – eg Dawei or Yangon – by plane and boat. Road travel north of Kawthoung, however, is forbidden. When the Thai-Myanmar border is open, boats to Kawthoung leave the Saphan Pla (Pla Bridge) pier, about 4.5km from the centre of Ranong. Departures are frequent from around 8.30am until 6pm, and cost 60B to 100B per person. To reach the pier, take säängthäew 2 from Ranong (7B) and get off at the **immigration office** (☎ 0 7782 2016; Th Ruangrat; ☎ 8.30am-6pm), 700m north of the pier, to get your passport stamped.

Upon arrival at the Kawthoung jetty, there's a stop at Myanmar immigration. At this point you must inform the authorities if you're a day visitor – in which case you must pay a fee of US\$5 for a day permit, which actually allows a two-night stay. Travel agents in Ranong should be able to arrange 28-day Myanmar visas. Bear in mind when you are returning to Thailand that Myanmar time is half an hour behind Thailand's. Though Thai immigration seems to have changed its hours in order to avoid return hassles, you should double-check when leaving the country.

For an effortless visa run, **Kiwi House** (☎ 0 7783 2812; www.kiwiorchid.com) in Ranong organises a 2½ hour door-to-door service (300B plus your day permit) with departures at 9am, 11am, 1.30pm and 3.30pm daily.

See p546 for making this crossing in the opposite direction.

station is this bright yellow travellers' pad run by a Thai-New Zealand couple. You'll find clean rooms and bed-bug-free beds, although bathrooms are shared. The restaurant serves dishes from 45B to 70B. Pick up a free map of the town here. Information and bookings for trips around Ranong are also available.

Also recommended:

Banggan Bar (☎ 0 9727 4334; Th Ruangrat; d 90B)

Near the 7-Eleven, this kooky place does cheap drinks, trippy wallpaper and old TVs as tables. Rooms have mattresses on lino flooring and bathrooms are shared.

Asia Hotel (☎ 0 7781 1113; 39/9 Th Ruangrat; d from 200B; ♿) An institutional place near the market.

For inexpensive Thai and Burmese breakfasts, try the **morning market** (Th Ruangrat) or nearby traditional Hokkien coffee shops with marble-topped tables.

Getting There & Away

There are daily flights between Ranong and Bangkok with **Phuket Air** (code 9R; ☎ 0 7782 4590; www.phuketairlines.com).

The Ranong bus station is on Hwy 4 towards the south end of town, near Kiwi House, although some buses stop in town before going on to the bus station. You can reach Ranong from Bangkok (VIP 520B, air-con 260B to 330B, 10 hours, 8.30am and 8pm), Chumphon (air-con/ordinary 70/50B, three to five hours, hourly departures) and Phuket (ordinary 130B, five to six hours). From town, blue săwngthăew 2 passes the bus station.

SURIN ISLANDS MARINE NATIONAL PARK (MU KO SURIN NATIONAL PARK)

The five gorgeous islands that make up **Surin Islands Marine National Park** (www.dnp.go.th; admission 400B; 🗓 mid-Nov–mid-May) are situated 60km offshore, just 5km from the Thailand–Myanmar marine border. Healthy rainforest, pockets of white-sand beach in sheltered bays and rocky headlands that jut out into the ocean characterise these granite-outcrop islands. The clearest of water makes for great diving, with underwater visibility often up to 20m. The islands' sheltered waters also attract *chao náam* – sea gypsies – who live in a village onshore during the May to November monsoon season. Here they are known as Moken, from the local word *oken* meaning 'salt water'.

Ko Surin Nuea (north) and Ko Surin Tai (south) are the two largest islands. Park headquarters and all visitor facilities are at Ao Chong Khad on Ko Surin Nuea, near the jetty.

Khuraburi is the jumping-off point for the park. The pier is about 9km north of town, as is the mainland **national park office** (☎ 0 7649 1378; 🗓 8am–5pm) with good information, maps and helpful staff.

Sights & Activities

DIVING & SNORKELLING

Dive sites in the park include **Ko Surin Tai**, and **HQ Channel** between the two main islands. In the vicinity is **Richelieu Rock** (a seamount 14km southeast) where whale sharks are often spotted during March and April. Sixty kilometres northwest of the Surins – but often combined with dive trips to the park – are the famed **Burma Banks**, a system of submerged seamounts. The three major banks, **Silvertip**, **Roe** and **Rainbow**, provide five-star diving experiences, with coral gardens laid over flat plateaus, and large oceanic and smaller reef marine species. There's presently no dive facility in the park itself, so dive trips (four-day live-aboards around 20,000B) must be booked from the mainland; see opposite for more information.

Snorkelling is excellent due to relatively shallow reef depths of 5m to 6m, and most coral survived the tsunami intact. Two two-hour snorkelling trips by boat (per person 70B, gear per day 150B) leave island headquarters daily.

WILDLIFE & WALKS

Around the park headquarters you can explore the forest fringes, looking out for the crab-eating macaques (cheeky monkeys!) and some of the 57 resident bird species, which include the fabulous Nicobar pigeon, endemic to the islands of the Andaman Sea. Along the coast you're likely to see the chestnut Brahminy kite soaring, and reef herons on the rocks. Twelve species of bat live here, most noticeably tree-dwelling fruit bats, also known as flying foxes.

A rough-and-ready **walking trail** – not for the unsteady – winds 2km along the coast and through forest to the beach at **Ao Mai Ngam**, where there's good snorkelling. At low tide it's easy to walk between the bays near the headquarters.

OTHER ACTIVITIES

On Ko Surin Tai, the **Moken village** at Ao Bon welcomes visitors; take a longtail boat from park headquarters (80B). Post-tsunami, Moken have settled in this one sheltered bay where a major ancestral worship ceremony (Loi Reua) takes place in April. Painted *law bong* – protective **totem poles** – stand at the park entrance.

Sleeping & Eating

Accommodation is simple and fine, but – because of the island's short, narrow beaches – it's *very* close together and can feel seriously crowded when full (around 300 people). For park accommodation, book online at www.dnp.go.th or with the mainland national park office in Khuraburi.

Bungalows (incl fan, bathroom & balcony 2000B) and **on-site tents** (1–2-person tents 300/450B) are available at Ao Chong Khad; tents should also now be available at Ao Mai Ngam. You can pitch your own **tent** (per night 80B). There's generator power until about 10pm.

A park **restaurant** (dishes from 60B) serves Thai food.

If you need to stay overnight in Khuraburi, try the new **Country Hut Riverside** (☎ 08 6272 0588; r 300–500B; ♿) or long-standing **Tarin Resort** (☎ 0 7649 1789; r 300–500B; ♿). On either side of the bridge at the north end of town, each has clean, basic, tiny fan/air-con rooms. A more luxurious option, **Kuraburi Greenview Resort** (☎ 0 7640 1400; www.kuraburigreenview.co.th; d from 1900B; ♿ 🚰 🚰) is 15km south of town, set among forest and river, with curious but comfortable wood and slate-and-cobblestone bungalows.

Getting There & Away

A 'big boat' (return 1200B, 2½ hours one way) leaves the Khuraburi pier at 9am daily, returning at 1pm. Tour operators use speed-boats (return 1600B, one hour one way) and will transfer independent travellers on their daily runs.

Several tour operators, all located near the pier, run day/overnight tours (around 2600/3500B) to the park; agencies in Khao Lak and Phuket can make bookings for these and for dive trips. In Khuraburi town, try the affable **Tom & Am Tour** (☎ 08 6272 0588; www.surinlandtour.com) for on-spec bookings. Tour operators include transfers from Khao Lak in their prices.

Buses run three times daily between Phuket and Khuraburi (160B, 3½ hours) and between Khuraburi and Ranong (60B, 1½ hours).

KHAO SOK NATIONAL PARK

When your head starts to sizzle from endless sunbathing, head to the refreshing jungles of Khao Sok National Park. Conveniently wedged between Surat Thani to the east and Phang-Nga to the west, it's littered with clear streams and swimming holes sitting by limestone cliffs. Adding to its credentials, the Khao Sok rainforest is a remnant of a 160-million-year-old forest ecosystem that is believed to be much older and richer than the forests of the Amazon and central Africa – at least according to Thom Henley, author of *Waterfalls and Gibbon Calls*.

The best time of year to visit Khao Sok is in the dry season (December to May), when there are fewer blood-sucking leeches. In January and February, a wild lotus (*Rafflesia kerri meyer*), the largest flower in the world, bursts into bloom emitting a rotten-meat stench that attracts pollinating insects.

The **park headquarters and visitors centre** (☎ 0 7739 5139; www.dnp.go.th; admission per day 200B) are 1.8km off Rte 401, near the 109km marker.

Sleeping & Eating

Near the visitors centre you can pitch your own **tent** (camp site for 2 people 60B, tent & bedding hire 225–405B) or rent **bungalows** (1–4 people 800B, 5–8 people 1000B). At picturesque Chiaw Lan Lake, park-managed substations have **floating raft houses** (☎ 0 7739 5139; 2/4/6 people 400/800/1200B).

Off the main road are several private guest-houses that can organise day and overnight trips in the area.

Morning Mist Resort (☎ 0 9971 8794; www.morningmistresort.com; d 350–700B) Family-run Morning Mist has clean river bungalows and cheaper mountainside ones too. A restaurant filled with hanging lanterns and romantic fairy lights serves terrific food for breakfast, lunch and dinner (dishes 45B to 60B); try the *matsaman* curry or slurp down a sapodilla shake. The cocktails look wickedly good.

Art's River Lodge (☎ 0 7276 3933; d 450–1200B) A peaceful place with a tasteful selection of old- and new-style bungalows. A traditional Thai building perched by the river houses the idyllic restaurant (dishes 55B to 95B); come here around 5pm to feed the monkeys.

Our Jungle House (☎ 0 9909 6814; ourjunglehouse2005@yahoo.de; d 600-800B) Catering for small groups and independent travellers, this place has some super tree-house bungalows by the river and serves good food priced from 50B to 120B, making it deservedly popular.

Also recommended:

Freedom Resort (☎ 0 7739 5157; freedomresort@yahoo.com; 200 Moo 6; tent hire 50B, d 200B; 🍷 🍷) Australian-run with barbecues and a relaxed vibe. For 500B you get air-con. Dishes in the restaurant range from 45B to 70B.

Khao Sok Rainforest Resort (☎ 0 7739 5136; d 400-600B) A tranquil spot with tiled bungalows reminiscent of the cartoon show, *The Flintstones*. You'll pay 45B to 85B for a feed in the restaurant.

Getting There & Away

To get to the national park, take a Takua Pa-Surat Thani bus; tell the driver 'Khao Sok'. Khao Sok (50B, one hour, nine daily) is 40km from Takua Pa (on the west coast) and almost 100km from Surat Thani (on the east coast).

SIMILAN ISLANDS MARINE NATIONAL PARK (MU KO SIMILAN NATIONAL PARK)

Renowned by divers the world over, the beautiful **Similan Islands Marine National Park** (www.dnp.go.th; admission 400B; 🗓 Nov-May) is located 70km offshore. Its smooth granite islands are as impressive above water as below, topped with rainforest, edged with white-sand beaches and fringed with coral reef.

Two of the nine islands, Ko Miang (Island Four) and Ko Similan (Island Eight), have ranger stations and accommodation; park headquarters and most visitor activity centres on Ko Miang. 'Similan' comes from the Malay word *sembilan*, meaning 'nine', and while each island is named they're just as commonly known by their numbers.

Khao Lak is the jumping-off point for the park. The pier is at Thap Lamu, 10km south of town, where you'll find a cluster of tour operators. The **mainland park office** (☎ 0 7659 5045; 🕒 8am-4pm) is about 500m before the pier, but there's no information in English available.

Sights & Activities DIVING & SNORKELLING

The Similans offer exceptional diving for all levels of experience, at depths from 2m to 30m. There are seamounts (at **Fantasy Rocks**), rock reefs (at **Ko Payu**) and dive-throughs (at

Hin Pousar or 'Elephant-head'), with marine life ranging from tiny plume worms and soft corals to schooling fish and whale sharks. There are dive sites at each of the six islands north of Ko Miang; the southern part of the park is off limits to divers. No facilities for divers exist in the national park itself, so you'll need to take a dive tour. Agencies in Khao Lak and Phuket book dive trips (see opposite).

Snorkelling is good at several points around **Ko Miang**, especially in the main channel; you can hire snorkel gear from the park (per day 100B). Day-tour operators usually visit three or four different snorkelling sites. **Poseidon Bungalows** (☎ 0 7644 3258; www.similantour.com) at Khao Lak offers snorkelling-only trips (three-day live-aboard trips around 6500B).

WILDLIFE & WALKS

The forest around the park headquarters on Ko Miang has a couple of walking trails and some great wildlife. The fabulous Nicobar pigeon, with its wild mane of grey-green feathers, is common here; it's one of some 39 bird species in the park. Hairy-legged land crabs and flying foxes (or fruit bats) are relatively easily seen in the forest, as are flying squirrels.

Small Beach Track, with information panels, leads 400m to a tiny, pretty snorkelling bay. Detouring from it, the **Viewpoint Trail** – 500m or so of steep scrambling – has panoramic vistas from the top. A 500m walk to **Sunset Point** takes you through forest to a smooth granite platform facing – obviously – west.

On Ko Similan there's a 2.5km forest hike to a **viewpoint**, and a shorter, steep scramble off the main beach to the top of **Sail Rock**.

Sleeping & Eating

Accommodation in the national park is available for all budgets. Book online at www.dnp.go.th or with the mainland park office at Khao Lak.

On Ko Miang there are sea-view **bungalows** (r2000B; 🍷) with balconies; two dark five-room wood-and-bamboo **longhouses** (r 1000B) with fans; and crowded on-site **tents** (2-person 570B). There's electricity from 6pm to 6am.

On-site tents are also available on Ko Similan. You can pitch your own **tent** (per night 80B) on either island.

A **restaurant** (dishes 100B) near the park headquarters serves simple Thai food.

Getting There & Away

There's no public transport to the park, but independent travellers can book a speedboat transfer (return 1700B, 1½ hours one way) with a day-tour operator. They will collect you from Phuket or Khao Lak, but if you book through the national park (which uses the same tour operators' boats anyway) be aware that you'll have to find your own way to the park office, and then wait for a transfer to the pier.

Agencies in Khao Lak and Phuket book day/overnight tours (from around 2500/3500B) and dive trips (three-day liveaboards from around 11,000B).

Public buses run regularly between Phuket and Khao Lak (60B, 1½ hours), and Khao Lak and Ranong (100B, three hours).

PHANG-NGA

pop 9700

Fringed by limestone cliffs and the luscious Andaman Sea, you'll go gaga over little Phang-Nga, a scenic day trip or overnighter from Phuket. The biggest attraction is a longtail boat tour through **Ao Phang-Nga**, a widely promoted bay of mangrove forests, 120 mountainous islands and caves virtually melting with waxlike stalactites.

Tours usually include a stop at a **Muslim fishing village** and **James Bond Island** (the island rock in *The Man with the Golden Gun*) within Ao Phang-Nga National Marine Park. The tours cost around 950B for two to three hours and can be arranged through tour agencies at the Phang-Nga bus station.

Sleeping & Eating

Thawisuk Hotel (☎ 0 7641 2100; 77-79 Th Phetkasem; r 150-200B) A rambling, pastel-blue building in the middle of town, this place is friendly and offers bright simple rooms. There's a rooftop with good views.

Phang-Nga Guest House (☎ 0 7641 1358; Th Phetkasem; r 220-1000B; 🍷) The best-value budget digs in town, with 12 clean, neat and pleasant rooms that come in a variety of sizes and prices. Sayan Tours takes its clients here.

Phang-Nga Inn (☎ 0 7641 1963; phang-ngainn@png.co.th; 2/2 Soi Lohakit; r 500-1400B; 🍷) The most pleasant hotel in town. A converted family mansion, it has 12 homey quiet rooms. All are comfortably modern and well furnished; there's an eating area in the front. It's on a side street off the main road near the centre of town.

Several food stalls on the main street sell delicious *khànm jiiin* with chicken curry, *nàam yaa* (spicy ground-fish curry) or *nàam phrik* (sweet and spicy peanut sauce).

Phang-Nga Satay (184 Th Phetkasem; dishes 20-60B) A tiny shack that specialises in Malay-style satay – try the shrimp version.

Cha-Leang (☎ 0 7641 3831; dishes 40-90B) This is one of the best and most popular restaurants in town, cooking up well-priced seafood dishes – try the 'clams with basil leaf and chilli' or the 'edible inflorescence of banana plant salad'. There's a simple but pleasant back patio.

Getting There & Away

Frequent Phuket-bound buses (36B to 65B) run until 8pm and take 1½ to 2½ hours depending on who's at the wheel. Buses depart from the **bus station** (Th Phetkasem) in Phang-Nga.

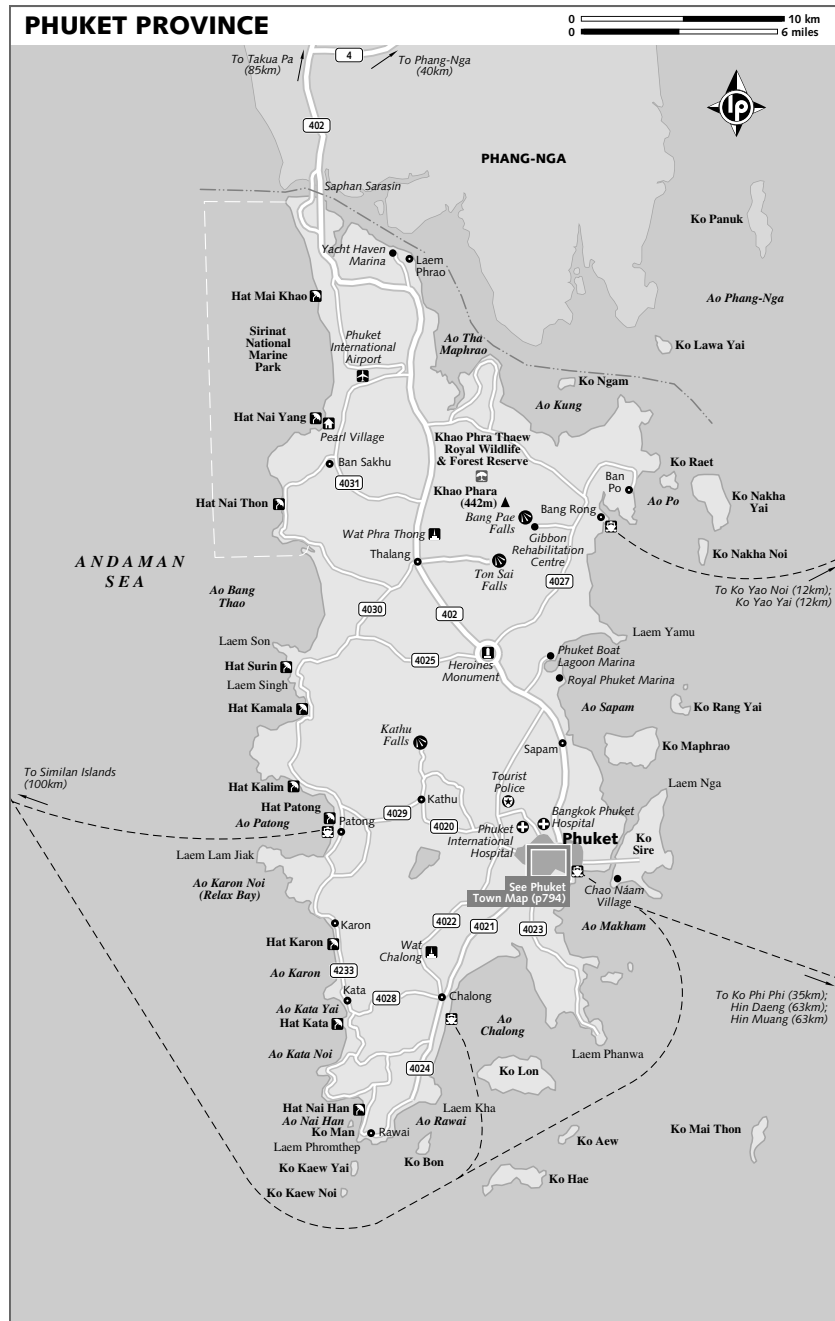
PHUKET

pop 82,800

Phuket (poo-get) reigns supreme as southern Thailand's undisputed tourism king – it's Thailand's rock and roll and it's either your gig or not. And Phuket's popularity isn't just hype. The beaches are wide and luxurious with squeaky-clean sand and jade-coloured water. This large teardrop island is largely the domain of package tourists fortified in minicity resorts that claim huge portions of waterfront property, but backpackers can still enjoy Phuket's vocabulary of seafood, swimming and shopping.

Here is an unorthodox suggestion: don't stay at the beach. Most beach communities are cluttered with lame strip malls and overpriced accommodation. Instead, consider staying in underrated Phuket town, a stylish city of Sino-Portuguese architecture and culinary diversity from the its bygone days as a stop on the India-China trade route. From Phuket town, public transport radiates out to a buffet of silky sand beaches.

Also note that Phuket's beaches are subject to strong seasonal undercurrents. During the monsoon season from May to the end of October, drowning is the leading cause of death for tourists visiting Phuket. Some, but not all, beaches have warning flags (red flag – dangerous for swimming; yellow flag – rough, swim with caution; green flag – stable).



THE PRICE OF PARADISE

Southern Thailand is at a crossroads. In 2006, Thailand received around 13 million visitors, with the majority visiting the south – and this immensely popular area is paying the price for unsustainable levels of development.

Thailand's islands and beaches face myriad environmental woes: uncontrolled developments and laissez-faire building controls; declining forests; irresponsible boating and scuba diving; water pollution; waste dumping by hotels and restaurants; and fresh water shortages.

The current cash-cow mentality ('a company is a country, a country is a company', according to former Thai prime minister, Thaksin Shinawatra) isn't helping. And while Ko Samui has been a pilot for 'green tourism' projects, it is becoming a case of too little, too late.

So, when travelling in southern Thailand, think about how you're impacting on the environment. Try to deposit nonbiodegradable rubbish on the mainland rather than on the islands: on Ko Samui alone, visitors and inhabitants produce more than 50 tonnes of rubbish a day, much of it plastic. Shorten showers. Request glass water bottles and minimise consumption of plastic bottles. If you don't need a bag for a purchase at a shop, say so. Support genuine ecotourism outfits and suss out the credentials of dive operators.

Information

Bank of Asia (Map p794; Th Phuket) ATM and currency exchange from 8.30am to 6pm. There are several other banks near On On Hotel.

Juice Internet Cafe (Map p794; 49 Th Phuket; per hr 50B; ☎ 8am-midnight) Supposedly the fastest connections on the island. A café serves snacks and sandwiches.

Phuket International Hospital (Map p792; ☎ 0 7624 9400, emergency 0 7621 0935; Th Charlem Pra Kiat)

Post office (Map p794; ☎ 0 7621 1020; Th Montri; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat, Sun & public holidays)

South Wind Books (Map p794; ☎ 0 7625 8302; 9 Th Phang-Nga; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Sat) Second-hand reads in seven languages; cheap used magazines too.

TAT office (Map p794; ☎ 0 7621 2213; 73-75 Th Phuket; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm) Distributes a handy guide to local transport fares.

Sights & Activities

BEACHES

Set along the jagged western coast of this 810-sq-km island are the beach communities of **Patong**, **Karon** and **Kata**. All were affected to some extent by the tsunami, but remain majestic sweeps of sand. Their interior villages are a dizzying dose of neon and concrete, good for night-time prowling, but a drag in the noon-time sun. Manicured **Hat Nai Han**, at the southern tip of the island, is strictly beach without the diversions of T-shirt shops and pub grub. Rounding the tip towards the east, **Hat Rawai** is a good place to charter boats to nearby islands. Absurdly beautiful **Laem Singh**, north of Patong on the west coast, may be that elusive piece of paradise. On the northwestern coast, **Hat Mai**

Khao is part of the Sirinat National Marine Park and the nesting grounds for sea turtles from late October to February.

DIVING & SNORKELLING

Although there are many, many places to dive around Thailand, Phuket is to-dive-for; it's indisputably the primary centre for the Thai scuba-diving industry and one of the world's top 10 dive destinations. The island is ringed by good to excellent dive sites, including several small islands to the south. Live-aboard excursions (you'll never be content with a dive day trip again) to the fantastic Surin and Similan Islands, or to the Burma Banks, in the Mergui (Myeik) Archipelago off the southern coast of Myanmar, are also possible from Phuket (though these destinations are far away). Snorkelling is best along Phuket's west coast, particularly at the rocky headlands between beaches. As with scuba diving, you'll find better snorkelling, with greater visibility and variety of marine life, along the shores of small outlying islands such as Ko Hae, Ko Yao Noi and Ko Yao Yai and Ko Raya.

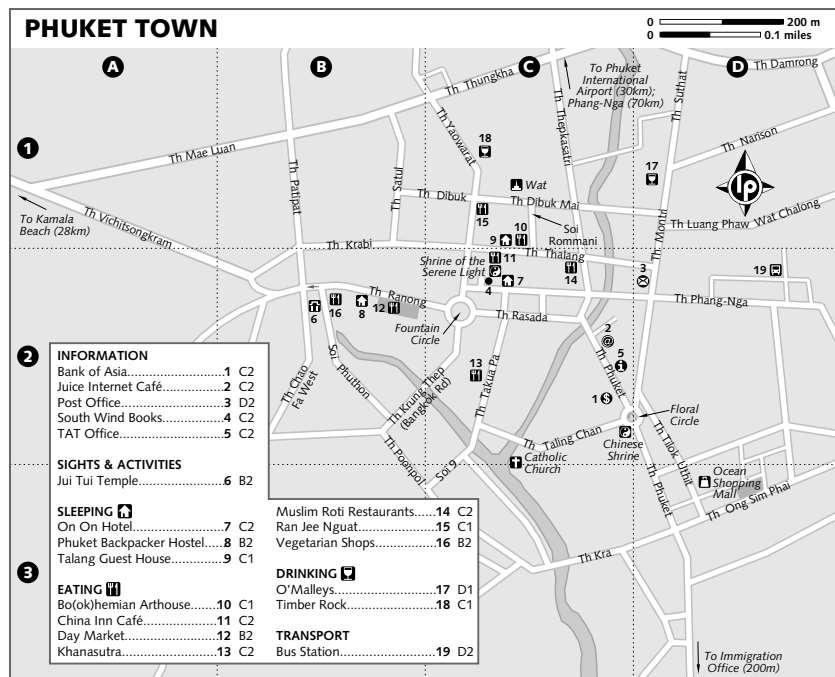
Dive shops with supplies:

Dive Supply (☎ 0 7634 2513; www.divesupply.com; 189 Th Rat Uthit, Patong) Lots of diving equipment and good service in several languages.

Phuket Wetsuits (☎ 0 7638 1818; Th Chao Fa west, Ao Chalong) Offers both custom- and ready-made wet suits. This place is 2km north of Ao Chalong.

Festivals & Events

Phuket's most important festival is the **Vegetarian Festival** (www.phuketvegetarian.com), which is



centred on five Chinese temples, including Jui Tui on Th Ranong in Phuket town, and Bang Niaw and Sui Boon Tong temples. The TAT office in Phuket prints a helpful schedule of events for the Vegetarian Festival each year.

Sleeping & Eating

PHUKET TOWN

Phuket Backpacker Hostel (Map p794; ☎ 0 7625 6680; www.phuketbackpacker.com; 167 Th Ranong; dm 200B, d from 350B; 📶) Quite possibly the newest building in all of Phuket town, this sparkling-clean boutique hostel has brand-new bunk beds, free internet, a great backyard garden and a large-screen TV.

On On Hotel (Map p794; ☎ 0 7621 1154; 19 Th Phang-Nga; s/d from 200/280B; 📶) Phuket's first hotel has a white yesteryear façade. In the common areas are signs of faded glamour, none of which is retained in the rooms that posed as the Khao San flophouse in the filming of *The Beach* (room 38, in fact).

Talang Guest House (Map p794; ☎ 0 7621 4225; 37 Th Thalang; s from 300B, d 350-450B, tr 450-500B, all incl breakfast; 📶) Architecture buffs will fall in love with this crumbling old place. Rooms

have high ceilings and 1960s furniture, and a few rooms open out to breezy balconies; one balcony room overlooks the street below. A continental breakfast of coffee, toast and a token banana is included.

Phuket cuisine is a mix of Thai, Malay and Chinese with some exceptional twists on the country's standard dishes. The **day market** (Th Ranong), just off Fountain Circle, sells fresh fruit. At night the area is just as crammed with vendors selling grilled skewers of meat and seafood. When you pick out your order, hand it to the vendor so it can be heated up; point to the vats of sauce on the counter if you like spicy dipping sauces.

Ran Jee Nguat (Map p794; Th Yaowarat; dishes 20B; 🍽️ breakfast & lunch) Four doors down from the corner of Th Dibuk, this long-running institution serves up Phuket's most famous dish: *khànm jiiin náam yaa phuukèt* (Chinese noodles in a puréed fish and curry sauce). It might be helpful to come armed with your Thai phrasebook and to know that there is no roman-script sign out the front.

Khanasutra (Map p794; ☎ 0 1894 0794; 18-20 Th Taku Pa; dishes 60-120B; 🍽️ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat, dinner Sun)

Enjoy some of the best Indian tucker this side of Delhi. You almost expect Bollywood dancers to shimmy out from the 'tent' area. Spicy? You bet!

China Inn Café (Map p794; ☎ 0 7635 6239; 20 Th Thalang; mains 150-280B; 🍽️ breakfast, lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) This stylish café, fashioned from the pages of an interiors magazine, rolls out delicious Thai, Chinese and Western food in a cute courtyard. The café is located in a building that was renovated by a local artist (it's practically an antique gallery) – it was even designed to feng shui principles.

Bo(ok)hemian Arthouse (Map p794; ☎ 0 9652 4223; 61 Th Thalang; 🍽️ lunch & dinner) Coffee, tea, beer, independent films and cool Thai magazines you wish you could read. Indie films can be screened in the little cinema upstairs; prices are 80B if you're alone, 120B for two people, or 150B for three or more.

A few vegetarian shops (Map p794) line Th Ranong east of the garish Jui Tui Chinese temple. **Muslim roti restaurants** (Map p794; Th Thalang) huddle near Th Thepkasatri.

HAT PATONG

Going cheap in popular Patong is like slumming in Beverly Hills – you're sure to have hotel envy.

Crown Hostel (☎ 0 7634 2297; 169/3-4 Th Rat Uthit; dm 200B, r from 500B; 📶) Friendly and central, this place attracts a hard-partying backpacker crowd. There are air-conditioned single-sex dormitories, plus a communal fridge. Rooms resemble Khao San shoe boxes.

Touch Villa (☎ 0 7634 4011; touchvilla@hotmail.com; 151/4 Th Rat Uthit; d from 350B; 📶) Two small strips

PHUKET GIBBON REHABILITATION CENTRE

Near Nam Tok Bang Pae (Bang Pae Falls) is the **Phuket Gibbon Rehabilitation Centre** (Map p792; ☎ 0 7626 0492; www.warhai.org; admission by donation; 🍽️ 8am-6pm). What's a gibbon you ask? A too-cute monkey with a white-rimmed face that looks like it's covered with shag-carpet. Financed by donations and run by volunteers, the centre cares for gibbons that have been kept in captivity and reintroduces them into the wild. Visitors who wish to help may 'adopt' a gibbon for 1800B, which will pay for one animal's care for a year.

of pastel pink concrete rooms separated by a pretty garden.

C&N Hotel (☎ 0 7634 1892; www.cnhotelpatong.com; 151 Th Rat Uthit; r 800-1500B; 📶) This place is fresh and sparkling clean, with a decidedly modern edge. Some rooms come with balconies, and all come with TVs.

Got a hankering for some seafood but are intimidated by the restaurants packed with platinum-card users? Head on down to Soi Eric, a claustrophobic alley just off Th Bang-La. With barely space to loiter, the cheap **seafood stalls** (dishes 80-100B) feed a rotating crowd of expectant diners, who are rarely disappointed.

HAT KARON & HAT KATA

South of Hat Patong is a string of three beaches: the long golden sweep of Hat Karon; the smaller but equally beautiful Hat Kata Yai (Big Kata); and Kata Noi (Little Kata), where you'll find good snorkelling. If you're beach-bound, Karon and classy Kata are better bets than saturated Patong.

Bazoom Hostel (☎ 0 7639 6913; www.bazoomhostel.com; Karon Plaza, 269/2-3 Th Patak East, Hat Karon; dm 80-120B, d from 240B; 📶) Colourful and happening, with mixed dorms and double rooms with share bathrooms (but you're literally *in* the dorm). Better rooms have funky window seats, cool bed heads and air-con. Dishes in the Bazoom restaurant (open for breakfast, lunch and dinner) will set you back 50B to 120B.

Kata on Sea (☎ 0 7633 0594; 96/6 Th Thai Na, Hat Kata Yai; d from 250B; 📶) This collection of simple bungalows (with fans) provides great views of Phuket's voluptuous hills. Getting to the beach is a bit of a trek, but Th Thai Na is filled with affordable backpacker traps to make the walk entertaining.

Lucky Guest House (☎ 0 7633 0572; 110/44-45 Th Thai Na, Hat Kata Yai; d from 300B; 📶) On the southern side of Th Thai Na, Lucky is well run and spotlessly clean. Bungalows are also available.

Ann Guesthouse (☎ 0 7639 8288; berniesbistrobar@hotmail.com; Hat Karon; d from 450B; 📶) At the northern end of Karon, about 500m from the roundabout, this Australian-owned guesthouse has clean rooms in concrete blocks plopped down in a fairly deserted strip between several major resort complexes. The restaurant serves dishes from 50B to 275B.

HAT MAI KHAO

Phuket Campground (☎ 0 1370 1579; www.phuketcampground.com; Ao Mai Khao; tent 150-300B, d 600B) This

privately operated camping ground rents large, 4-sq-metre tents near the beach, each with rice mats, pillows, blankets and a torch; it also has two-person cabins and a small restaurant. The camping ground is 2km south of the police kiosk in Ban Mai Khao.

Drinking

PHUKET TOWN

The major hotels have discos and/or karaoke clubs.

Timber Rock (Map p794; ☎ 0 7621 1839; Th Yaowarat) A Western-style rock pub with rustic décor, this is one of the most popular live-music venues in town. Arrive after 9pm, although by 10pm it's usually standing room only.

O'Malleys (Map p794; ☎ 0 7622 0170; 2/20-21 Th Montri) This chain Irish pub is good fun and has innovative promotions, such as 'Bring in a Party Photo and Get a Free Beer'. Mexican buffets are sometimes held.

HAT PATONG

Thongs of people graze at watering holes along Th Bang-La, which is a neon-lit zoo after dark. If you think 'Patong' sounds like Bangkok's 'Patpong', you're on to something – it looks like it too. In addition to foamy drinks, the bars serve gyrating girls, gay boys and lady boys.

Molly Malone's (☎ 0 7629 2771; Th Thawiwong) This pub rocks with Irish gigs every night at 9.45pm. There's a good atmosphere, lots of pub food and some great tables out the front from which to admire the ocean and legions of tourist passers-by.

Two Black Sheep (Th Rat Uthit) In the thick of the inland action, next to K Hotel, this place has mostly an intimate bar atmosphere, with good live rock music nightly in a trendy, dark space.

Gonzo Bar (Th Bangla) This large bar attracts hordes of *faràng*, who come in partly for the bar games. Grab a stool and watch others humiliate themselves while sipping cheap drinks, or lose your inhibitions and join in the fun.

Banana Disco (☎ 0 1271 2469; 96 Th Thawiwong, admission 200B) An Aztec-like theme prevails at this club. It's on the main beach strip and the cover charge includes two drinks.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Phuket international airport (Map p792; ☎ 0 7632 7230) is 30km to the north of the city centre,

just off Hwy 402. Thai Airways International, Phuket Air and Air Andaman operate a heap of daily flights from Bangkok. There are also regular flights to Hat Yai, as well as to international destinations such as Penang, Langkawi, Kuala Lumpur, Singapore, Hong Kong, Taipei and Tokyo.

Taxis ask 340B for the trip from the airport to the city, or 500B to 600B to the beaches.

Airlines servicing Phuket:

Air Asia (code AK; ☎ 0 7635 1428; www.airasia.com)

Bangkok Airways (code PG; ☎ 0 7622 5033;

www.bangkokair.com)

Dragonair (code HDA; ☎ 0 7621 5734;

www.dragonair.com)

Malaysia Airlines (code MH; ☎ 0 7621 3749;

www.malaysiaairlines.com)

Phuket Air (code 9R; ☎ in Bangkok 0 2679 8999;

www.phuketairlines.com)

SilkAir (code MI; ☎ 0 7621 3891; www.silkair.com)

Singapore Airlines (code SQ; ☎ 0 7621 3891;

www.singaporeair.com)

Thai Airways International (THAI, code TG; ☎ 0

7621 1195; www.thaiair.com)

BOAT

There are a couple of major boat and ferry operators providing services out of Phuket, including **Phuket Boat Lagoon Marina** (Map p792; ☎ 0 7623 9055; www.phuketboatlagoon.com/marina/marina.php; 22/1 Moo 2, Th Thepkasattri, T Kohkaew A Muang) and **Yacht Haven Marina** (Map p792; ☎ 0 7620 6704-5; www.yacht-haven-phuket.com; 141/2 Moo 2, Tumbol Maikhao Thalang).

BUS

Phuket's **bus station** (Map p794) is off Th Phang-Nga, right in the centre of Phuket town and a comfortable walk to the nearby guest-houses. From Phuket, buses go to Bangkok (VIP 486B to 755B, air-con 378B to 567B, 12 to 15 hours, morning and several evening departures daily), Hat Yai (air-con 210B to 270B, six to eight hours, several morning departures daily), Krabi (air-con/ordinary 117/65B, three to four hours, departures regularly from 7am to 6.30pm), Phang-Nga (ordinary 36B, 2½ hours, five departures from 10am to 4.30pm), Surat Thani (air-con/ordinary 170/105B, five to six hours, several daily) and Trang (air-con/ordinary 189/105B, five to six hours, hourly from 5am to 6.30pm).

Getting Around

When you first arrive in Phuket, beware of the rip-off artists who claim that the tourist office

is 5km away, that the only way to get to the beaches is to take a taxi, or that a *sǎwngthǎew* from the bus station to the town centre will cost you a small fortune.

Sǎwngthǎew depart from Th Ranong, near the market, to different spots on the island between 6am and 6pm. To go around town, the standard fare is 10B, to Hat Patong it's 15B, and to Hat Kata, Hat Karon and Hat Rawai it's 20B. These prices are only for trips originating or terminating in Phuket town; between the beaches you have to haggle.

You can also hire motorcycles almost anywhere for 150B to 200B. Exercise extreme caution as Phuket's roads are winding and accidents claim close to 200 lives every year on Phuket alone.

KO PHI PHI

Despite the tragic tsunami that swept through Ko Phi Phi in December 2004, if there was to be a contest for one of the planet's most jaw-dropping beauties, Ko Phi Phi would be a frontrunner. Stunning limestone cliffs, translucent water, fine white arcs of sand – Ko Phi Phi is so beautiful it will evoke tears. Shed a few more when you realise that you have to share it with every Speedo on the planet.

The crowds and development belie the fact that Ko Phi Phi (officially named Ko Phi Phi Don) is part of a national marine park. Ko Phi

Phi Leh, a satellite island, remains uninhabited thanks in part to a more profitable business than tourism – harvesting nests of swiftlets for medicinal purposes. Visiting the island is expensive, but just to behold it for a day is worthwhile. Ko Phi Phi was hit particularly hard by the tsunami – virtually every standing structure on the twin bays of Ao Ton Sai and Ao Lo Dalam was destroyed, although much has now been rebuilt.

Activities

The **diving** on Ko Phi Phi is world-class and some think it's even better than Ko Tao. The best months for visibility are December to April, though certain other months (such as June and July) see fewer divers and can be less hectic. Where there is diving, there is **snorkelling** too. Shop around for competitive prices and ask for recommendations from other travellers.

Sleeping

Budget accommodation on Ko Phi Phi? Don't kid yourself: there isn't any, although there are a few pockets of relative affordability, especially in the interior of the island. Things get tight during the high season from December to March.

Rock (Ao Ton Sai; dm 300B, d 350-1000B; ☎) An easy walk from Ton Sai village and located right next to Maprao Resort (look for the life-sized

TSUNAMI: SORROW & SURVIVAL IN SOUTHERN THAILAND

tsuna'mi *n.* a series of long, high sea waves caused by disturbance of ocean floor or seismic movement

The wave that shook the world on 26 December 2004 and left more than 220,000 people dead did not spare parts of southern Thailand. Sumatra's monster 9.0-magnitude quake travelled up to 1000km per hour, hitting the shores of the Andaman Sea just 60 minutes later, swallowing resorts around Khao Lak and Phuket and pummelling parts of Ko Phi Phi. But the real cost was human life: 5395 dead, 8457 injured and 2932 missing in Thailand alone.

After this monumental tsunami, which struck 12 countries, it's not surprising that holiday-makers were fearful of returning to the region, causing an enormous drop in tourist numbers and revenue. Thankfully, the picture has improved since then. It's perhaps not surprising that in areas where tourism is the leading income generator, redevelopment efforts kicked into high gear almost as soon as the water receded. If travellers who hadn't heard of the tsunami visited even the most popular Andaman coast beaches today, they'd never know of the tragedy that took place there. There has even been good news from Phuket's Patong Beach, which was among the hardest hit: authorities there were keen to take advantage of the clean slate to curb the number of businesses and vendors operating on the prime beach strip.

By travelling in southern Thailand, you're part of a bigger picture. The killer waves may have struck more than once on that fateful day, but an economic crisis sustained by tourists cancelling or postponing trips would be yet another unfair blow for the locals.

Thanks for coming.

pirate ship), the Rock is home to Phi Phi's only dorm beds; they go for as low as 150B during the slow season. Many longtime Phi Phi expats live here.

Phi Phi Paradise Pearl Resort (☎ 0 7562 2100; www.pparadise.com; Hat Yao; d 500-1500B; 🍴) Choose from plain but clean rooms with bathrooms, or surprisingly large bamboo huts with a simple mattress-on-the-floor setup. Rates soar if you want air-con. The restaurant (dishes 40B to 95B) is open for breakfast, lunch and dinner.

Phi Phi Long Beach (☎ 0 7561 2217; Hat Yao; d 600-1000B) This village of bamboo and concrete bungalows is right on the beach, but is quite rough around the edges. Splash out for your own bathroom if you can afford it – the cold-water-only shared showers are a nightmare.

Eating & Drinking

Most of the hotels and bungalows around the island have their own restaurants. Cheaper and often better food can be found in the restaurants and cafés in Ton Sai village. Some of the most popular eateries are relative newcomers, having been built – along with the rest of the village – after the tsunami. Others are old favourites that were lovingly reconstructed.

Papaya (meals 50-70B; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) The most authentic Thai restaurant on the island, this place has toothsome dishes that are served in almost ridiculously large portions. (Save your leftovers for a *soi* dog.) Papaya is often packed, so prepare for a long wait if you've come for dinner.

Cosmic (pizza & pasta 120B; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Specialising in wood-fired pizza, this place seems to be consistently packed. Can't get a table? Ask for directions to Cosmic 1.

Getting There & Away

Ko Phi Phi is equidistant from Phuket and Krabi, but Krabi is the more economical point of departure. Boats run regularly from November to May, but schedules depend on the weather during the monsoon.

From Ton Sai pier in Ko Phi Phi, boats depart for Krabi (200B, 1½ hours, three daily), Phuket (one way 300B to 500B, return 700B to 900B, 1½ hours, five daily) and Ao Nang (250B to 400B, two hours, three daily).

KRABI

pop 89,980

For many, a stop-off in Krabi is part of a well-balanced diet after a rendezvous on the Gulf

of Thailand coast or vice versa. In fact, the path from Surat Thani on the Gulf coast to Krabi (*gra-bee*) on the Andaman coast is so well oiled that you will find yourself being herded off the ferry into cramped cattle cars for delivery across the peninsula before you can even deliberate.

Krabi Town

Often referred to as if it were a beach destination, Krabi is a jumping-off point for the epically beautiful island of Ko Phi Phi, as well as the popular mainland beaches of Ao Nang, Ton Sai and Rai Leh.

INFORMATION

Almost all of Krabi's budget travel agencies and restaurants offer internet access for 40B to 60B per hour.

Bangkok Bank (Th Utarakit) ATM and money exchange.

Krabi Hospital (☎ 0 7561 1210) One kilometre north of town.

Main post office (Th Utarakit; 🕒 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat & Sun) A telephone office is attached.

SLEEPING & EATING

Good Dream Guesthouse (☎ 0 7562 2993; 83 Th Utarakit; r 100-400B; 🍴 📺) Owned and managed by an American divemaster, Good Dream isn't quite as slick as the nearby Chan-Cha-Lay, but it does have some of the cheapest rooms in Krabi town. There's free wireless in the restaurant, and even nonguests can check email on a free terminal if they purchase food or beer. Add to that a real espresso machine, good videos shown nightly and helpful management, and you've got one of the better guesthouses around.

Chan-Cha-Lay Guesthouse (☎ 0 7562 0952; 0 1817 3387; chanchalay_krabi@hotmail.com; 55 Th Utarakit; r 200-600B; 🍴 📺) Very friendly and with clean, modern rooms, this is an excellent place to stay. If you've been staying in fleabags for a while, you'll be amazed at how clean and comfortable the sheets are. The restaurant is decked out in a great baby blue beach motif, and is open for breakfast and lunch. It's no surprise this place is popular.

K Guesthouse (☎ 0 7562 3166; 15-25 Th Chao Fah; d from 250B) This family-run place with wooden exterior is heavy on the atmosphere. Rooms are fairly plain; ask for one with a balcony overlooking Chao Fah. There's a small café (dishes 40B to 60B).

KR Mansion Hotel (☎ 0 7561 2761; www.kr-mansion.com; 52/1 Th Chao Fah; r 300-600B; 🍴 📺) A reliable old favourite with basic, run-of-the-mill rooms. The café is pleasantly spacious, and the rooftop Moon Bar is the place to unwind with a drink in hand.

Pizzeria Firenze (☎ 0 7562 1453; 10 Th Khong Ka; dishes 100-200B) For those spaghetti napolitano and gelati cravings.

For cheap food, pull up a pew at the waterfront night market. The **morning market** (Th Si Sawat & Th Pruksauthin), near the Vieng Thong Hotel in the centre of town, has delicious takeaway dishes such as *phat thai* (stir-fried noodles), *khào mæk kái* (chicken biryani) and *khào kà-pi* (rice with red shrimp paste).

DRINKING

Old West Bar (Th Chao Fah; 🕒 1pm-2am) Don't expect to find a whole lot of locals in Krabi town's one and only cowboy-themed tavern. But no matter – with its tastefully rustic décor, overpriced draughts and hordes of shamelessly flirting *faràng*, you'll feel right at home.

Beaches

Dramatic karst formations soaring from emerald waters like a surreal dreamscape surround the crescent-shaped coves, creating the illusion of islands rather than a peninsula disconnected from Krabi town by road. These beaches tend to attract a more active crowd of travellers who earn their nightly beers after a day of walking, paddling or other sweaty pursuits. **Rock climbing** has become a major activity on Hat Ton Sai and Hat Rai Leh. In the low season, from May to October, prices are slashed by nearly half. During the high season, arrive early as competition for rooms is fierce.

AO NANG

The furthest western beach, Ao Nang is connected to Krabi town via Hwy 4203, which parades traffic within arm's length of the shore. On the paved inland side of the road, a string of tourist shops is more reminiscent of beach towns back home than castaway tropical paradises. Favoured by families and the well heeled, Ao Nang emits a comfortable air.

KRABI FOR CLIMBERS *Melanie Mills & Scott Welch*

Rock climbers from the world over congregate at this climbing mecca to test their strength and endurance on some of the world's most picturesque climbs. But this place isn't just for hard-core rock jocks – there are hundreds of climbs for all abilities. The local guides are only too happy to rope you up, get the adrenaline pumping and scare you silly. The euphoria of reaching the top is complemented by postcard views of 100m-high cliffs, dense jungle and perfect beaches. An excellent guide for the area is King Climbers' *Route Guide Book*, which you can pick up at most of the climbing shops.

The climbing ranges from steep pocketed walls to muscle-bursting overhanging horrors. The limestone rises directly out of the Andaman Sea and has huge stalactites hanging down, requiring interesting acrobatic moves.

If you're after a climbing guide or want to do a course, head for Railay (officially Laem Phra Nang), south of Ao Nang. There are numerous climbing schools that provide all the necessary equipment, and from what we have seen the guides are very friendly, patient and professional. A half-day climb with guide, equipment and insurance costs around 800B, while one-day/three-day climbs cost 1600/5000B.

If you have your own gear, it's useful to bring a 60m rope and a rope bag to keep the sand off. Krabi is a sport-climbers' paradise, so just bring your quickdraws and follow the bolts. Alternatively, you can rent sport-climbing equipment for two people (half/full day 600/1000B), which includes harnesses, shoes, a rope, 12 quickdraws, a belay device, a locking karabiner, chalk and a guidebook.

Hat Ton Sai, part of the jagged Railay peninsula, is where the more advanced climbers tend to strut their stuff; however, the 'groove tube' climb is a real favourite with beginners and advanced climbers alike.

If you're after a bit of an adventure, pack a torch and head to Tum Choe cave, which you can see at the northern end of Hat Tham Phra Nang. Bats eventually emerge halfway up the huge monolith of Thaiwand Wall. A 25m abseil into the jungle and a 10-minute scramble will bring you to West Hat Rai Leh for a well-deserved Beer Chang.

Melanie Mills and Scott Welch are go-anywhere rock climbers from Melbourne, Australia.

There's a cluster of guesthouses about a block from the beach where Hwy 4203 turns inland.

Just down the *soi* from PK and J Mansions, you'll find **Bream Guesthouse** (Moo 2; r with shared bathroom 200B; 📍) next to the giant pint of Guinness. These seem to be the cheapest rooms in town – all are fan-cooled and share bathrooms. Management seems a bit surly, but when we visited this was the only no-vacancy spot around.

Found next to a popular Irish bar at the end of a laneway, **PK Mansion** (☎ 0 7563 7431; pkmansion@hotmail.com; 247/12-15 Moo 2; d from 300B; 📍) has big, tiled ('hygienic') rooms and feels secure. Dishes in the PK restaurant cost 50B to 80B.

Aside from its fantastic plant-filled lobby, **J Mansion** (☎ 0 7563 7878; 302 Moo 2; d from 400B; 📍) appears to be a virtual reproduction of the neighbouring PK Mansion. The pressure's on, backpacker: which one will you choose?

The waterside **Lavinia Restaurant & Bakery** (☎ 0 7569 5404; dishes 50-440B; 🍳 breakfast, lunch & dinner) claims to be Ao Nang's 'trendsetter'. It offers all manner of homemade pastas, while the meats and the stone oven are both imported from Europe. The bakery is said to be topnotch.

Somkiat Buri Restaurant (☎ 0 7563 7574; dishes 60-250B) cooks up great Thai food, but the best reason to come here is the lush open-sided pavilion where you sit.

Climb up to the Sunset Balcony at **75 Million Years Pub** (☎ 0 7563 7130; regular cocktails 130B), a faux-Flintstones beach bar, and drink among the trees. Can't find the place? It's inside the creatively designed Phra Nang Inn.

HAT TON SAI

Not to be confused with the Hat Ton Sai on Ko Phi Phi, this beach is the type of place rock climbers in distant lands dream about because it's surrounded by climbing cliffs (with bolts) on all sides. It isn't as spectacular as neighbouring Hat Rai Leh, but remains the cheapest and least-developed beach on Krabi's mainland. Its relative isolation and popularity with a cool young crowd has fuelled an alternative full moon party. No-one is in a hurry here.

Andaman Nature Resort (☎ 0 7562 2585; d 200-500B) is a climbers' hang-out that offers a variety of bamboo, wood or concrete bungalows – some

are crying out for a revamp, but the grungy and sporty don't seem to mind.

Choose from bamboo, wooden or concrete bungalows at **Dream Valley** (☎ 0 7562 2583; www.dreamvalleyresortkrabi.com; d from 300B; 📍) – all sit among myriad trees. The air-con choices are presentable.

Near the beach, the sprawling **Tonsai Bay Bungalows** (☎ 0 7562 2584; d from 600B; 📍) is a mixture of upmarket (and overpriced) bungalows and older ones with grotty share bathrooms (for 200B to 350B). The restaurant doubles as a common area – the bronzed and barely clothed climbers lounging on pillows and shooting pool make for a rather titillating pre- or postmeal show.

HAT RAI LEH

On the very tip of the peninsula, hypnotic Hat Rai Leh is divided into the superior West Rai Leh and the affordable East Rai Leh. The epitome of a honeymoon destination, West Rai Leh has only dream-on resort bungalows that monopolise the stunning scenery. Shoestring accommodation is off a public path in East Rai Leh, whose beach is a muddy mangrove forest unsuitable for swimming. Don't fret, though: the postcard-perfect beaches at West Rai Leh and Tham Phra Nang (south of East Rai Leh) are both open to the public (you just pay less to use them).

Popular with climbers and backpackers alike, **Ya-Ya** (☎ 0 7562 2593; East Rai Leh; r from 380B) sits right on the beach; longtail boats from Krabi will practically deposit you at the registration desk. Room size here doesn't seem to have anything to do with cost, so take care to see a few before deciding – and try for a balcony room while you're at it. The restaurant here (dishes 70B to 190B) is popular, and seems like a good place to make new friends.

Up 48 steps, **Rapala** (☎ 0 7562 2586; rapala@loxinfo.co.th; East Rai Leh; d 400-800B) has a smashing view of the surrounding limestone cliffs, but the log cabin bungalows are set pretty far back from the beach. The restaurant serves Indian fare.

Getting There & Around

Krabi's airport is 17km northeast of town on Hwy 4. Several airlines service Krabi. **Thai Airways International** (code TG; ☎ 0 7562 2439; www.thaiair.com) has three daily flights to and from Bangkok (2560B, 1¼ hours). PB Air and Phuket Air

also fly to Bangkok, although these flights are more sporadic and depend on demand.

The bus station is 4km north of Krabi town at Talat Kao. Red sawngthäew (20B) deliver passengers from the bus station to town, in front of the 7-Eleven on Th Maharat. Buses travel between Krabi and Bangkok (air-con 357B to 710B, 12 hours, seven daily); Hat Yai (air-con/ordinary 173/96B, four to five hours, hourly; note only the 1pm departure is for the non-air-con service); Phuket (air-con/ordinary 117/65B, three to four hours, hourly); and Surat Thani (air-con/ordinary 140/80B, two to three hours, regular daily departures until 4pm).

White sawngthäew (20B during the day, 50B after 6pm) to Krabi from Ao Nang take about 45 minutes. Longtail boats bounce between Krabi and Hat Rai Leh (70B) and Hat Ton Sai (110B), when enough passengers have accumulated.

KO LANTA

pop 20,000

Slip into a beachy existence on Ko Lanta. Don't be put off by the dusty unsealed road slithering down its coastline: you'll soon be greeted with great, flat beaches. The resident Muslim and Thai community don't want to see their island become someone else's to exploit, so there are strict building and development restrictions in place to fend off the big end of town (for the time being anyway). Things are quickly moving upmarket nonetheless.

Pick-up share taxis (30B to 120B) and motorbike hires (200B to 250B per day) are available from Ban Sala Dan, near the 7-Eleven in Saladan Village. Saladan's main street is lined with internet cafés and travel agencies selling onward and upward tickets.

Information

Ko Lanta Hospital (☎ 0 7569 7017)

Post office (📧 8.30am-3.30pm) In the street southeast of the pier.

Siam Commercial Bank (☎ 0 7568 4577) Opposite the 7-Eleven in Saladan village, it has currency exchange from 8.30am to 9.30pm, plus an ATM.

Sleeping & Eating

HAT PHRA AE

Many shoestringers head over to Hat Phra Ae (Long Beach) where the beach is long (surprise, surprise). There's a convenience store,

ATM and internet access in close proximity to the accommodation mentioned following.

Reggae House Pub & Restaurant (☎ 0 1091 1201; d 80-150B) A little piece of Jamaica in southern Thailand. Brick tepee-style huts are as cheap as they look. There's nightly bongo drumming and 'jam sessions' in the rambling driftwood bar and restaurant, which is open for breakfast, lunch and dinner (dishes 40B to 80B). Swing by on Bob Marley's birthday (6 February) or from 22 to 26 December for annual music festivals.

Sanctuary (☎ 0 1891 3055; sanctuary_93@yahoo.com; d 300-500B) Put some 'om' back into your life at this traveller's utopia. Beachfront bungalows capture sea breezes and there are cheaper cuties. Join a stretchy yoga class in the beachside pavilion from Monday to Saturday (per class 300B, or 1000B for four classes). The restaurant (open for breakfast, lunch and dinner) dishes out to-die-for banana fried rice, roti and breakfast burritos for 60B to 200B...mmm.

Nautilus Bungalows (☎ 0 6996 5567; 147 Moo 2; d from 600B; 📍) Next door to Reggae House, by a rocky cove, this place is run by a helpful family. You'll find tastefully decorated bungalows with outdoor bathrooms, high wooden beds and roomy decks.

Earth Bar (☎ 0 7265 9662; drinks 50-380B; 🍷 nightly) Behind the Sanctuary, Earth Bar projects a cool ambience and dazzling lighting made for after-dusk raging.

HAT KHLONG KHONG

Where Else? (☎ 0 1536 4870; d 200-500B) Backpacker-friendly bungalows. Decent Thai, Indian and vegetarian meals are served in the guesthouse restaurant.

AO KANTIANG

A fine sprinkling of sand on which to rest your travel-weary bones awaits you on Ao Kantiang. There are several nearby tour offices providing internet access and motorcycle hire.

Kantiang Bay View Resort (☎ 0 1787 5192; reekantiang@hotmail.com; d 400-1200B; 📍) Bamboo and pricier modern bungalows with fan or air-con to suit your budget and personal thermostat.

Getting There & Away

Ko Lanta is accessible by bus from Trang (ordinary 90B, two hours, two morning and two afternoon departures) or by minivan from

Trang (180B) or Krabi (150B, 1½ hours, three daily). Passenger boats between Ko Lanta's Ban Sala Dan and Krabi's Kong Ka (Chao Fa) pier run from October to April (200B, two hours, two departures daily).

TRANG

pop 69,100

Midway between Krabi and Hat Yai, bustling Trang is a cheerful and pleasant Thai town. We love the lolly-coloured Vespas and vintage tük-tük whizzing around the place.

The city's **Vegetarian Festival**, taking place in September/October, is a frenzied fiesta complete with acts of self-mortification that would be struggling to attract even the most committed of Western activists.

Information

Should you need to top up your baht, there's a Bangkok Bank opposite the post office on Th Phra Ram VI, the main strip running east of the train station. Staff at **Chao Mai Tour** (☎ 0 7521 6380; 15 Th Phra Ram VI; per min 1B) travel agency are very helpful and you can jump on the internet here.

Sleeping & Eating

Ko Teng Hotel (☎ 0 7521 8622; 77-79 Th Phra Ram VI; d from 180B) 'Yes, I have room for you!' is Ko Teng's catch phrase. It feels like a massive school boarding house from the 1950s and offers clean rooms with sparse furnishings.

Yamawa (☎ 0 7521 6617; yamawa@scoms.com; 94 Th Visetkul; d 200B) This budget haven has clean, pleasantly decorated rooms with bamboo interiors.

Look for Trang's speciality, *khànmò jiin*, at the night market, just east of the provincial offices. Trang is also famous for its *ràan kaa-fae* or *ràan ko-pii* (coffee shops), which are usually run by Hokkien Chinese. These shops serve real filtered coffee. When you order coffee here, be sure to use the Hokkien word *ko-pii* rather than the Thai *kaa-fae*, otherwise you may end up with Nescafé or instant Khao Chong coffee – the proprietors often think this is what *faràng* want. Check out **Yuchiang** (Th Phra Ram VI; dishes 25-50B) opposite Khao Tom Phui.

Sin Ocha Bakery (Th Sathani; dishes 25-50B; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Near the train station, popular Sin Ocha is the most convenient *ràan ko-pii* around. Simple Thai dishes and breakfast are served (try the oversized muesli with fruit and

yogurt), along with huge coffee drinks (10B to 40B) and teas. Takeaway cakes and biscuits are tempting glucose hits.

Khao Tom Phui (☎ 0 7521 0127; Th Phra Ram VI; dishes 30-50B; ☎ dinner) Run by a gaggle of Thai teenage girls, this simple Thai eatery occupies a corner and has English menus on hand. It's open late.

Wang Boa Restaurant (dishes 30-80B; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Right next door to the train station, this casual place is popular with locals and serves Thai and Western dishes. Go on: try the 'Like a Virgin' salad.

Getting There & Away

The **bus station** (Th Huay Yot) is 400m from the centre. Buses travel to Bangkok (VIP 580B to 750B, air-con 490B, 12 to 13 hours, five daily), Hat Yai (ordinary 60B), Satun (air-con/ordinary 100/55B, two hours), Krabi (air-con/ordinary 90/55B, three hours) and Phuket (air-con 189B, five hours).

Share taxis and minibuses also service many of the popular destinations. Most leave from the train station. Minibuses to the nearby beaches (50B) leave from different spots around town.

The **train station** (Th Phra Ram VI) serves only two trains travelling all the way from Trang to Bangkok (175B to 1240B, 16 hours, evening departures).

KO TARUTAO NATIONAL MARINE PARK

Isolated, serene and full of rugged gorgeousness, Ko Tarutao National Marine Park – a little-known archipelago of 51 islands in the furthest southwestern reaches of Thai territory – is one of those rare places in Thailand that's far from the madding crowds and devoid of beachfront bars and maxed-out stereo systems. Let's just hope it manages to stay that way.

Admission to the park is 200B for foreigners, and the park is only 'officially' open from around November to May, depending on the weather patterns during the monsoon period.

Sleeping & Eating

Of the five accessible islands, park accommodation is available on mountainous Ko Tarutao and Ko Adang. Looking to do a little tourist activism? Think twice before you sign up for Ko Lipe, the only island in the park open to private development. Please excuse

the soapboxing, but consider this: once building restrictions have been removed, development will meet demand and before long Ko Lipe will be just as touristed as other 'national parks', such as Ko Phi Phi, Ko Samet and Ko Chang. If Ko Lipe is a successful moneymaker, then how long will other islands in the park be protected?

Park-managed **accommodation options** (☎ in Pak Bara 0 7478 3485, 0 7472 9002, in Bangkok 0 2562 0760; camp sites 30B, 4-person longhouse 500B, 2-4-person bungalows 600/1200B) on Ko Tarutao should be booked ahead in peak times, but can also be arranged at the park office in Pak Bara. Tents are available to rent (150B) and can be pitched right on the beach.

On Ko Adang, you'll find longhouse accommodation similar to that on Ko Tarutao for 400B (sleeps four).

Before leaving the mainland, load up on food and water supplies as the park shop is limited and the food at **Tarutao Café** (☎ breakfast & lunch) is average.

Getting There & Away

From Pak Bara pier, boats go to Ko Tarutao (one way/return 180/300B, one hour, 10.30am, 3pm, 4.30pm plus another afternoon departure depending on demand), Ko Adang (one way/return 500/900B, 1½ hours, 1.30pm) and Ko Lipe (one way/return 500/900B, 1.30pm). For up-to-date fast-ferry times call the **Tarutao Speed Boat Ferry Team & Tour** (☎ 0 7478 3055) and for regular-ferry times call **Andrew Tours** (☎ 0 7478 3459), **Adang Sea Tour** (☎ 0 7478 3368) or **Wasana Tour** (☎ 0 7471 1782).

Minibuses (60B to 70B) and vans (80B) to Hat Yai park near the pier, and share taxis will take you to the moon for the right price.

SATUN

pop 33,400

Travelling to the deepest western corner of Thailand, you pass woven bamboo huts and harvested fields where villagers stage football games, plus men dressed in the traditional Muslim garb, headscarved women and onion-domed mosques. With a large Muslim population speaking Yawi, Satun is barely Thailand – it didn't join the country as a province until 1932 and still clamours, along with other southern provinces, for independence.

The town boasts one major attraction: the **Satun National Museum** (☎ 0 7472 3140; Soi 5, Th Satun Thani; admission 30B; ☎ 9am-4pm Wed-Sun), which

GETTING TO MALAYSIA

You can travel by boat between Satun and Pulau Langkawi in Malaysia. Boats leave from Tha Tammalang daily at 8am, 9am, 1.30pm and 4pm (250B, 1½ hours). Tha Tammalang is 9km from Satun; to get there, take an orange *sàwngthàew* (small pick-up with two benches in the back; 20B) across the street from Wat Chanathip on Th Buriwanit. You can buy ferry tickets in Satun at the **Thai Ferry Centre** (☎ 0 7473 0511; Th Sulakanukoon), near Wat Chanathipchaloem.

Remember there is a one-hour time difference between Thailand and Malaysia.

See p455 for information on doing the trip in the reverse direction.

gives its visitors a surprisingly thorough introduction to the traditions and folk ways of the Thai-Muslim southern provinces.

Sleeping & Eating

There is just a handful of large dormlike hotels in Satun, including **Rian Thong Hotel** (Rain Tong; ☎ 0 7472 2518; Th Samanta Prasit; s/d from 250/300B; ☎) and **Udomsuk** (☎ 0 7471 1006; Th Hatthakam Seuksa; s/d from 150/250B; ☎). Rooms facing the street at both hotels suck in noise like a vacuum cleaner.

Near the gold-domed Bambang Mosque in the centre of town, there are several inexpensive Muslim shops. Morning coffee can be shared with chatty vegetable sellers at the **day market** (Khlong Bambang), south of town. The **night market** (btwn Th Buriwanit & Th Satun Thani), north of the mosque, provides the pleasurable evening entertainment of eating fluffy roti and watching the communal TV.

Getting There & Away

Minibuses to Hat Yai (65B, 1½ hours) stop at the bus shelter on Th Buriwanit, across from Bangkok Bank.

To get to Pak Bara pier (for boats to Ko Tarutao National Marine Park), take a *sàwngthàew* (20B) from this same bus shelter to the nearby village of La-Ngu, where you can pick up a motorcycle taxi (30B) for the remainder of the trip to Pak Bara. Getting yourself onto the right *sàwngthàew* is a little tricky, so let a Thai waiting at the bus station know where you're headed. The Satun-Pak Bara trip takes 1¾ hours.

See p803 for information on ferries to Pulau Langkawi.

THAILAND DIRECTORY

ACCOMMODATION

There is a healthy range of budget accommodation in Thailand, kicking off at around US\$2 (80B) for a dorm bed or a cheap single with fan and share bathroom. Make the leap to US\$6 (250B) and you get an attached bathroom, while US\$10 (400B) will see you enter the air-con league. The cheapest rooms include four walls of varying cleanliness, a bed of varying comfort and a creaking fan. Check out the sanitary standards of the shared bathroom before you make a decision. Although basic, the most comfortable lodging is at 'guesthouses'. Some long-running establishments will make a destination, while others can make you suspicious of all Thai motivations. More impersonal but sometimes the only choice in nontouristy places are the Chinese-run hotels that cater to Thai clientele. The rates run a little higher than budget guesthouses (200B to 350B) and include a private bathroom, TV and sometimes a view. However, communication with the staff will require a lot of hand gestures.

During Thailand's high season (December to February), prices increase and availability decreases. Reservations at most of the small family-run hotels are not recommended as bookings are rarely honoured. Advance payment to secure a reservation is also discouraged as this tends to disappear on arrival.

Practising Buddhists may be able to stay overnight in some temples for a small donation. Facilities are very basic, and early rising is expected. Temple lodgings are usually for men only. Neat, clean dress and a basic knowledge of Thai etiquette are mandatory.

In this chapter, assume that the prices listed are for rooms with a fan and en suite bathroom unless otherwise indicated.

ACTIVITIES

Despite the hot and humid weather, Thailand offers all sorts of athletic escapes. The most popular pursuits include diving, snorkelling and jungle trekking, but cycling, kayaking and rock climbing aren't far behind.

Cycling

Many visitors bring their own bicycles to Thailand. In general, drivers are courteous, and most roads are sealed with roomy shoulders. Grades in most parts of the country are moderate; exceptions include the far north, especially Mae Hong Son and Nan Provinces, where you'll need iron legs. Favoured touring routes include the two-lane roads along the Mekong River in the north and northeast – the terrain is mostly flat and the river scenery is inspiring. The 2500-member **Thailand Cycling Club** (☎ 0 2612 5510; www.thaicycling.com/index_en.html) serves as an information clearing house on bicycle tours and cycle clubs around the country.

Diving & Snorkelling

Thailand's two coastlines and countless islands are popular among divers for warm waters and colourful marine life. The biggest diving centre is still Pattaya, simply because it's less than two hours' drive from Bangkok. Phuket is the second-biggest jumping-off point and has the advantage of offering the largest variety of places to choose from. Reef dives off the coast of Phuket are particularly rewarding – some 210 hard corals and 108 reef fish have so far been catalogued in this understudied marine zone.

Dive operations have multiplied on the palmy islands of Ko Samui, Ko Pha-Ngan and Ko Tao, all in the Gulf of Thailand. Newer frontiers include the so-called Burma Banks (in the Mergui Archipelago northwest of Ko Surin) and islands off the coasts of Krabi and Trang Provinces.

Most of these places have areas that are suitable for snorkelling as well as scuba diving, since many reefs are covered by water no deeper than 2m.

Masks, fins and snorkels are readily available for hire, but quality is often second-rate. Most dive shops can offer basic instruction and NAUI or PADI qualification for first-timers. An average four-day, full-certification course costs around 10,000B, including instruction, equipment and several open-water dives. Shorter, less expensive 'resort' courses are also available.

Kayaking

Exploring the islands and limestone karsts around Phuket and Ao Phang-Nga by inflatable kayak is a whole lot of fun. Typical trips

seek out half-submerged caves, which can be accessed at low tide for a bit of on-the-water underground adventure.

Trekking

Trekking is one of northern Thailand's biggest attractions. Typical trekking programmes run for four or five days and feature daily walks through forested mountain areas, coupled with overnight stays in hill-tribe villages to satisfy both ethnotourism and ecotourism urges.

Other trekking opportunities are available in Thailand's larger national parks, including Khao Sok and Khao Yai, where park rangers may be hired as guides and cooks for a few days at a time. Rates are reasonable.

BOOKS

Lonely Planet titles include *Thailand*, *Thailand's Islands & Beaches* and *Bangkok*. *Diving & Snorkelling Thailand* is chock-a-block full of colour photos and essential diving information. *Bangkok Encounter* is a compact guide that's ideal for short-stay visitors. *World Food Thailand* is a unique culinary guide that takes you to the heart of the kingdom's culture.

Everyone in the City of Angels has a story and author James Eckardt tells it through a series of short stories and interviews with motorcycle drivers, noodle vendors, go-go dancers and heavy hitters in *Bangkok People*.

Meet a prepubescent Thai 12-year-old who lives in Bangkok, lusts after girls and meets the adult world, in the semiautobiographical *Jasmine Nights* by wunderkind SP Somtow. Born in Bangkok, educated at Eton and Cambridge, and now a commuter between two 'cities of angels' (Los Angeles and Bangkok), Somtow's prodigious output includes a string of well-reviewed science fiction/fantasy/horror stories.

What can a 1950s housewife teach you about Thailand? A lot! Author Carol Hollinger writes of her romance with Thai culture in *Mai Pen Rai Means Never Mind* as the atypical wife of an American businessman living in Bangkok.

Celebrated writer Pira Sudham was born into a poor family in northeastern Thailand, and brilliantly captures the region's struggles against nature and nurture. *Monsoon Country* is one of several titles Sudham wrote originally in English.

BUSINESS HOURS

Most government offices are open from 8.30am to 4.30pm weekdays, but often close from noon to 1pm for lunch. Businesses usually operate between 8.30am and 5pm weekdays and sometimes on Saturday morning. Larger shops usually open from 10am to 6.30pm or 7pm, but smaller shops may open earlier and close later. Restaurants keep erratic hours, but most are open from mid-morning to late at night.

Any exceptions to these hours are noted in specific listings. Note that all government offices and banks are closed on public holidays.

CLIMATE

Tropical Thailand is warm year-round. The three seasons are: hot (from March to May), wet (from June to October) and cool (from November to February). Towards the end of the hot season the northeast can get even hotter than Bangkok, although it's a drier heat. In the cool season, night-time temperatures in the north can drop as low as 4°C. Brrrrr!

The wet season is no reason to put off a visit to Thailand, even though Bangkok is often flooded come September – the whole place is sinking, just like Venice.

See the climate charts on p916 for more.

CUSTOMS

A reasonable amount of clothing for personal use, toiletries and professional instruments are allowed in duty free. Up to 200 cigarettes and 1L of wine or spirits can be brought into the country duty free. The **customs department** (www.customs.go.th) maintains a helpful website with more specific information.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Although Thailand is not a dangerous country, it's wise to be cautious, particularly if travelling alone. Theft in Thailand is still usually a matter of stealth rather than strength; travellers are more likely to have pockets picked than to be mugged. Take care of valuables, don't carry too much cash around and watch out for razor artists who ingeniously slit bags open in crowded quarters.

All travellers should ensure their rooms are securely locked and bolted at night. Inspect cheap rooms with thin walls in case there are strategic peepholes. We receive regular reports of thefts frequently occurring from

guesthouses in Bangkok's Th Khao San and on the island of Ko Pha-Ngan.

Take caution when leaving valuables in hotel 'safes', usually a filing cabinet or desk drawer. Many travellers have reported problems with leaving valuables in Chiang Mai guesthouses while trekking, particularly credit cards taking themselves out on shopping sprees. Make sure you obtain an itemised receipt for property left with hotels or guesthouses – note the exact quantity of travellers cheques and all other valuables.

When you're on the road, keep zippered luggage secured with small locks, especially while travelling on buses and trains. Several readers letters have recounted tales of thefts from their bags or backpacks during long overnight bus trips, particularly on routes between Bangkok and Chiang Mai or Ko Samui.

Thais are friendly and their friendliness is usually genuine. Nevertheless, on trains and buses, particularly in the south, beware of strangers offering cigarettes, drinks or chocolates. Several travellers have reported waking up with a headache to find their valuables have disappeared. Travellers have also encountered drugged food or drink offered by friendly strangers in bars and by prostitutes in their own hotel rooms.

Armed robbery does occur in some remote areas of Thailand, but the risk is fairly low. Avoid going out alone at night in remote areas and, if trekking in northern Thailand, always travel in groups.

There has been widespread unrest in the four southernmost provinces of Thailand during the last few years. Muslim separatists have been clashing with government forces in Songkhla, Yala, Pattani and Narathiwat, and civilians have been targeted and killed, including children and monks. The government's response has been pretty heavy-handed and the violence shows no signs of dying down. See the boxed text on p785 for more details.

Penalties for drug offences are stiff these days in Thailand: if you are caught using marijuana, mushrooms or LSD, you face a fine of 10,000B plus one year in prison; for heroin or amphetamines, the penalty can be anywhere from a 5000B to 10,000B fine and six months' to 10 years' imprisonment, or worse. Remember that it is illegal to buy, sell or possess opium, heroin, amphetamines, LSD, mushrooms or marijuana in any quantity.

DRIVING LICENCE

An International Driving Permit is necessary to drive vehicles in Thailand, but this is rarely enforced for motorcycle hire.

SCAMS

As old as the hippy trail, the gem scam is still alive and well. Over the years, Lonely Planet has received dozens of letters from victims who've been cheated of large sums of money by buying colourful pieces of glass masquerading as rare gems. Every report Lonely Planet receives follows the same scenario: you, the traveller, are headed to a popular attraction, when a friendly local approaches you speaking your native language fluently and tells you that the attraction is closed. You curse Lonely Planet for not telling you and then look imploringly at your new friend who says that there are other interesting attractions nearby and they will arrange a ride for you. Now you are being taken for the proverbial 'ride'. What comes next is a one-day only, super bargain opportunity to learn an expensive lesson. If the price is too good to be true, then a scam is afoot.

The scam has also morphed into deals on clothing and card games. If you happen to become involved in one of these scams, the police (including the tourist police) are usually of little help: it's not illegal to sell gems at outrageously high prices and everyone's usually gone by the time you come back with the police.

Any tük-tük (three-wheeled motorcycle taxi) driver who offers you a ride for only 10B or 20B is a tout who will undoubtedly drag you somewhere else for a commission.

When you land in a bus station, a crowd of touts, as tactful as celebrity paparazzi, jockey for your business. Often these guys are harmless and even helpful, but some are crafty and will steer you to hotels that pay higher commissions rather than long-established places that don't 'tip' the driver. Hence, don't believe them if they tell you the hotel or guesthouse you're looking for is closed, full, dirty or bad – this is all 'tout speak' for no commission.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

For information on Thai visas, see p812.

Embassies & Consulates in Thailand

Unless otherwise stated, the following embassies are found in Bangkok:

Australia (Map pp694-5; ☎ 0 2287 2680; 37 Th Sathon Tai)

Brunei (Map pp694-5; ☎ 0 2204 1476-9; 132 Soi 23, Th Sukhumvit)

Cambodia (Map pp694-5; ☎ 0 2254 6630; 185 Th Ratchadamri)

Canada (Map pp694-5; ☎ 0 2636 0540; 15th fl, Abdulrahim Bldg, 990 Th Phra Ram IV)

China Bangkok (Map pp690-1; ☎ 0 2245 7043; 57 Th Ratchadaphisek); Songkhla (☎ 0 7431 1494; Th Sadao)

France Embassy (Map pp694-5; ☎ 0 2266 8250; 35 Soi 36, Th Charoen Krung); Consulate (Map pp694-5; ☎ 0 2287 1592; 29 Th Sathon Tai)

Germany (Map pp694-5; ☎ 0 2287 9000; 9 Th Sathon Tai)

India (Map pp694-5; ☎ 0 2258 0300; 46 Soi 23, Th Sukhumvit)

Indonesia Bangkok (Map pp694-5; ☎ 0 2252 3135; 600-602 Th Petchaburi); Songkhla (☎ 0 7431 1544; Th Sadao)

Japan (Map pp694-5; ☎ 0 2207 8500, 0 2696 3000; 177 Th Withayu)

Laos Bangkok (Map pp690-1; ☎ 0 2539 6679; 520/1-3 Th Pracha Uthit, end of Soi 39, Th Ramkhamhaeng); Khon Kaen (☎ 0 4324 2856; 191/102-3 Th Prachasamoson)

Malaysia Bangkok (Map pp694-5; ☎ 0 2679 2190; 35 Th Sathon Tai); Songkhla (☎ 0 7431 1062; 4 Th Sukhum)

Myanmar (Map pp694-5; ☎ 0 2233 2237; 132 Th Sathon Neua)

New Zealand (Map pp694-5; ☎ 0 2254 2530; 19th fl, M Thai Tower, All Seasons Pl, 87 Th Withayu)

Philippines (Map pp690-1; ☎ 0 2259 0139; 760 Th Sukhumvit)

Singapore (Map pp694-5; ☎ 0 2286 2111; 9th & 18th fl, Rajanakam Bldg, 183 Th Sathon Tai)

UK (Map pp694-5; ☎ 0 2305 8333; 1031 Th Withayu)

USA (Map pp694-5; ☎ 0 2205 4000; 120-122 Th Withayu)

Vietnam Bangkok (Map pp694-5; ☎ 0 2251 5836; 83/1 Th Withayu); Khon Kaen (☎ 0 4324 2190; 65/6 Th Chatapadung)

Thai Embassies & Consulates Abroad

Thai diplomatic offices abroad:

Australia (☎ 02-6273 1149; 111 Empire Circuit, Yarralumla, ACT 2600)

Canada (☎ 613-722 4444; 180 Island Park Dr, Ottawa, Ontario K1Y 0A2)

France (☎ 01 56 26 50 50; 8 rue Greuze, 75116 Paris)

Germany (☎ 030-794 810; Lepsiusstrasse 64-66, 12163 Berlin)

Israel (☎ 972-3 695 8980; 21 Shaul Hamelech Blvd, Tel Aviv)

New Zealand (☎ 04-476 8618; 2 Cook St, Karori, PO Box 17226, Wellington)

UK (☎ 020-7589 0173; 29-30 Queen's Gate, London SW7 5JB)

USA (☎ 202-944 3608; 1024 Wisconsin Ave NW, Washington, DC 20007)

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Many Thai festivals are linked to Buddhist rituals and follow the lunar calendar. Thus they fall on different dates each year, depending on the phases of the moon. Many provinces hold annual festivals or fairs to promote their specialities. A complete, up-to-date schedule of events around the country is available from TAT offices in each region or from the central Bangkok TAT office. See p809 for public holiday listings.

Businesses typically close and transportation becomes difficult during the following festivals:

Chakri Memorial Day Held on 6 April to celebrate the founder of the current royal dynasty.

Songkran Festival From 12 to 14 April, Buddha images are 'bathed', monks and elders have their hands respectfully sprinkled with water by younger Thais, and a lot of water is generously tossed about for fun. Songkran generally gives everyone a chance to release their frustrations and literally cool off during the peak of the hot season. Hide out in your room or expect to be soaked; the latter is a lot more fun.

Queen's Birthday (Mother's Day) Held on 12 August; festivities occur mainly in Bangkok.

Lunar festivals include the following:

Magha Puja (Maakhā Buuchaa) Held on the full moon of the third lunar month to commemorate Buddha preaching to 1250 enlightened monks who came to hear him 'without prior summons'. It culminates with a candlelit walk around the *wian tian* (main chapel) at every wat.

Visakha Puja (Wísakkhā Buuchaa) This event falls on the 15th day of the waxing moon in the sixth lunar month and commemorates the date of the Buddha's birth, enlightenment and passing away. Activities are centred on the wat.

Khao Phansa (Khāo Phansāa) This marks the beginning of Buddhist 'lent', the traditional time of year for young men to enter the monkhood for the wet season. It's a good time to observe a Buddhist ordination.

Loi Krathong On the night of the full moon, small lotus-shaped baskets or boats made of banana leaves containing

flowers, incense, candles and a coin are floated on Thai rivers, lakes and canals.

FOOD & DRINK

Food

Thai food is a complex balance of spicy, salty, sweet and sour. The ingredients are fresh and light with lots of lemon grass, basil, coriander and mint. The chilli peppers pack a slow, nose-running burn. And pungent *naam pla* (fish sauce; generally made from anchovies) adds a touch of the salty sea. Throw in a little zest of lime and a pinch of sugar and the ingredients make a symphony of flavours that becomes more interesting with each bite. A relationship with Thai food has a long courtship phase – at first the flavours are too assertive and foreign, the hot too hot, the fish sauce too fishy. But with practice you'll smell rice cooking in the morning and crave a fiery curry instead of dull toast and jam. Now you are 'eating', which in Thai literally means to 'eat rice', or *kin khao*.

Thailand is a country where it is cheaper and tastier to eat out than to cook at home. Day and night markets, pushcart vendors, makeshift stalls, open-air restaurants – prices stay low because of few or no overheads, and cooks become famous in all walks of life for a particular dish. It is possible to eat well and cheaply without ever stepping foot into a formal restaurant. No self-respecting shoe-stringer would shy away from the pushcarts in Thailand for fear of stomach troubles. The hygiene standards are some of the best in the region, and sitting next to the wok you can see all the action, unlike some of the guest-houses where food is assembled in a darkened hovel.

Take a walk through the day markets and you will see mounds of clay-coloured pastes all lined up like art supplies. These are the finely ground herbs and seasonings that create the backbone for Thai *kaeng* (curries). The paste is thinned with coconut milk and decorated with vegetables and meat. Although it is the consistency of a watery soup, *kaeng* is not eaten like Western-style soup, but is ladled onto a plate of rice.

For breakfast and late-night snacks, Thais nosh on *kua-ytiaw*, a noodle soup with chicken or pork and vegetables. There are two major types of noodles you can choose from: *sen lek* (thin) and *sen yai* (wide and flat). Before you dig into your steaming bowl, first use the

chopsticks (or a spoon) to cut the noodles into smaller segments so they are easier to pick up. Then add to taste a few teaspoonfuls of the provided spices: dried red chilli, sugar, fish sauce and vinegar. Now you have the true taste of Thailand in front of you. The weapons of choice when eating noodles (either *kua-ytiaw* or *phat thai*) are chopsticks, a rounded soup spoon or a fork.

Not sure what to order at some of the popular dinner restaurants? Reliable favourites are *yam pla* *mèuk* (spicy squid salad with mint leaves, coriander and Chinese celery), *tôm yam kung* (coconut soup with prawns, often translated as 'hot and sour soup') or its sister dish *tôm khua kài* (coconut soup with chicken and galangal).

At the simple open-air restaurants there is a standard range of dishes that every cook worth their fish sauce can make. These are the greatest hits of the culinary menu and include the following:

kai phat bai ka-phrao – fiery stir-fry of chopped chicken, chillies, garlic and fresh basil

khao phat – fried rice

phat phrik thai kra-thiam – stir-fried chicken or pork with black pepper and garlic

phat thai – fried rice noodles, bean sprouts, peanuts, eggs, chillies and often prawns

phat phak khanáa – stir-fried Chinese greens, simple but delicious

Thais are social eaters: meals are rarely taken alone and dishes are meant to be shared. Usually a small army of plates will be placed in the centre of the table, with individual servings of rice in front of each diner. The protocol goes like this – ladle a spoonful of food at a time on to your plate of rice. Dishes aren't passed in Thailand; instead you reach across the table to the different items. Using the spoon like a fork and your fork like a knife, steer the food (with the fork) onto your spoon, which enters your mouth. To the Thais placing a fork in the mouth is just plain weird. When you are full, leave a little rice on your plate (an empty plate is a silent request for more rice) and place your fork so that it is cradled by the spoon in the centre of the plate.

Even when eating with a gang of *faràng*, it is still wise to order 'family style', as dishes are rarely synchronised. Ordering individually will leave one person staring politely at a piping hot plate, and another staring wistfully at the kitchen.

Drink

Water purified for drinking is simply called *naam deum* (drinking water), whether boiled or filtered. All water offered in restaurants, offices or homes will be purified. Ice is generally safe in Thailand. *Chaa* (tea) and *kaa-fae* (coffee) are prepared strong, milky and sweet – an instant morning buzz.

Thanks to the tropical bounty, exotic fruit juices are sold on every corner. Thais prefer a little salt to cut the sweetness of the juice; the salt also has some mystical power to make a hot day tolerable. Most drinks are available in a clear plastic bag designed especially for takeaway customers; in time you'll come to prefer the bag to a conventional glass.

Cheap beer appears hand-in-hand with backpacker ghettos. Beer Chang and Beer Singha (pronounced 'sing', not 'sing-ha') are a couple of local brands you'll learn to love, although they pack a punch. Thais have created yet another innovative method for beating the heat; they drink their beer with ice to keep the beverage cool and crisp.

More of a ritual than a beverage, Thai whisky (Mekong and Sang Thip brands) usually runs with a distinct crowd – soda water, Coke and ice. Fill the short glass with ice cubes, two-thirds whisky, one-third soda and a splash of Coke. Thai tradition dictates the youngest in the crowd is responsible for filling the other drinkers' glasses. Many travellers prefer to go straight to the ice bucket with shared straws, not forgetting a dash of Red Bull for a cocktail to keep them going.

GAY & LESBIAN TRAVELLERS

Gays won't have a problem travelling in Thailand as the country has a long history of homosexuality. Prominent gay communities exist in large cities such as Bangkok and Chiang Mai, and gay pride events are celebrated in Bangkok, Pattaya and Phuket. While public displays of affection are common (and usually platonic) between members of the same sex, you should refrain from anything beyond friendly hand-holding for the sake of social etiquette.

Gay, lesbian and transsexual Thais are generally tolerated, living peaceably in even the most conservative Thai towns. All is not love and understanding, though. Labelled 'sexual deviants', suspected gays are barred from studying to become teachers or from joining the military.

Utopia (www.utopia-asia.com) is a good starting point for more information on Thailand for

the gay traveller. **Anjaree Group** (☎ 0 2668 2185; PO Box 322, Th Ratchadamnoen, Bangkok 10200) is Thailand's premier (and only) lesbian society.

HOLIDAYS

Businesses typically close and transportation becomes difficult during the following public holidays:

New Year's Day 1 January

National Labour Day 1 May

Coronation Day 5 May

Chulalongkorn Day King Chulalongkorn is honoured on 23 October.

King's Birthday (Father's Day) 5 December

Constitution Day 10 December

New Year's Eve 31 December

Also see p807 for details on festivals and events.

INTERNET ACCESS

You can't walk far without tripping over an internet café in Thailand. Connections tend to be slow and unreliable, but rates are usually cheap (20B to 50B per hour).

INTERNET RESOURCES

Bangkok Post (www.bangkokpost.com) This English-language newspaper posts its entire newspaper content online; check out Bernard Trink's 'Night Owl' column for this dirty old man's unabashed coverage of the go-go bar scene, as well as wit and wisdom.

Elephant Guide (www.elephantguide.com) Find news and reviews of Bangkok restaurants, clubs and events.

Nation (www.nationmultimedia.com) Another English-language newspaper that also posts content on the web.

Thaifootball.com (www.thaifootball.com) The online headquarters of the Thai national football team profiles players and posts news and scores. Great prereading for conversations with taxi drivers.

TourismThailand.org (www.tourismthailand.org)

Thailand's official tourism website covers major tourist spots and lists operators.

Virtual Hilltribe Museum (www.hilltribe.org) This virtual hill-tribe museum is a good way to learn about the hill tribes of northern Thailand and etiquette in minority villages.

LEGAL MATTERS

In general, Thai police don't hassle foreigners, especially tourists. One major exception is in regard to drugs (see p805).

If you are arrested for any offence, the police will allow you the opportunity to make a phone call to your embassy or consulate in

Thailand, if you have one, or to a friend or relative if not. Thai law does not presume an indicted detainee to be either 'guilty' or 'innocent' but rather a 'suspect', whose guilt or innocence will be decided in court. Trials are usually speedy.

MAPS

The Roads Association of Thailand produces a useful bilingual road atlas, *Thailand Highway Map*. Updated every year, it has city maps, distance charts and an index.

MEDIA

Newspapers

Thailand is considered to have the freest print media in Southeast Asia, although there is self-censorship in matters relating to the monarchy, and the Royal Police Department reserves the power to suspend publishing licences for national security reasons. The *Bangkok Post* in the morning and the *Nation* in the afternoon are the country's two English-language newspapers.

Radio

Thailand has more than 400 radio stations, almost all of them government owned and operated. English-language broadcasts of the international news services can be picked up over short-wave radio. The frequencies and schedules appear in the *Post* and *Nation*.

TV

Thailand possesses five VHF TV networks based in Bangkok, all but one of which are government operated. The single private network, ITV, was taken over by the government's public relations department in 2007 and is now called Thai Independent Television (TITV).

MONEY

The baht (B) is divided into 100 satang, although 25 and 50 satang are the smallest coins that you're likely to see. Coins come in 1B, 5B and 10B denominations. Notes are in 20B (green), 50B (blue), 100B (red), 500B (purple)

LEGAL AGE

- voting starts at 18
- you can begin driving at 18
- sex is legal at 15

and 1000B (beige) denominations of varying shades and sizes.

ATMs

All major Thai banks, which are well distributed throughout the country, offer ATM services; most of the machines will accept international credit and debit cards. ATMs typically dispense 1000B notes that should be broken at 7-Elevens or guesthouses rather than in the market.

Bargaining

Bargaining is mandatory in markets and small family-run stores, and with túk-túk and taxi drivers (unless the cab is metered). By and large bargaining is not appropriate in hotels or guesthouses unless staff initiate it, but you can ask politely if there's anything cheaper. Always smile and never become frustrated.

Credit Cards

Credit cards are widely accepted at upmarket hotels, restaurants and other business establishments. Visa and MasterCard are the most commonly accepted, followed by American Express (Amex) and Diners Club. Cash advances are available on Visa and MasterCard at many banks and exchange booths.

Exchanging Money

Banks give the best exchange rates and hotels give the worst. In the larger towns and tourist destinations, there are also foreign-exchange kiosks that open longer hours, usually from 8am to 8pm. Since banks charge commission and duty for each travellers cheque cashed, use larger cheque denominations to save on commission. British pounds and euros are second to the US dollar in general acceptability.

Exchange rates at the time this book went to press were as follows:

Country	Unit	Baht (B)
Australia	A\$1	26.68
Cambodia	1000r	7.94
Canada	C\$1	31.14
Euro zone	€1	44.39
Japan	¥100	27.81
Laos	1000 kip	3.34
Malaysia	RM1	9.18
New Zealand	NZ\$1	22.60
Singapore	S\$1	21.08
UK	£1	63.80
USA	US\$1	32.00

POST

The Thai postal system is relatively efficient and few travellers complain about undelivered mail or lost parcels. Never send cash or small valuable objects through the postal system, even if the items are insured. Poste restante can be received at any town that has a post office.

RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL

Be aware about having a negative impact on the environment or the local culture. Read p680 for guidance on observing social mores. See p4 for suggestions on treading lightly through Thailand's environment and through tribal peoples' villages.

Despite Thailand's reputation among sex tourists, prostitution was declared illegal in the 1950s. Many of the sex workers are uneducated women or girls from villages who are struggling to support children or who have been sold into the business by their parents. The government does little to enforce anti-prostitution laws in cases of consenting adults; however, a jail term of four to 20 years and/or a fine up to 40,000B can be imposed on anyone caught having sex with a person under 15 years of age. If the child is under 13, the sentence can amount to life imprisonment. Many Western countries have also instituted extraterritorial legislation where citizens can be charged for child prostitution offences committed abroad.

The Thai government encourages people to help eradicate child prostitution by reporting child sexual abuse. You can contact **End Child Prostitution & Traffic International** (Ecpat; ☎ 0 2215 3388; www.ecpat.org; 328 Th Phayathai, Bangkok 10400), a global network of organisations that works to stop child prostitution, child pornography and the traffic of children for sexual purposes.

STUDYING

Thai cooking, traditional medicine, language, *muay thai* (Thai boxing): the possibilities of studying in Thailand are endless and range from formal lectures to week-long retreats.

Especially popular are meditation courses for Western students of Buddhism. Unique to Buddhism is the system of meditation known as *vipassana*, a Pali word that roughly translates as 'insight'. Foreigners who come to study *vipassana* can choose from dozens of temples and meditation centres. Thai language is usually the medium of instruction but

several places provide instruction in English. Contact details for some popular meditation-oriented centres are given in the city, town and province sections of this chapter. Instruction and accommodation are free at temples, but donations are expected.

Described by some as a 'brutally pleasant experience', Thai massage does not directly seek to relax the body, but instead uses the hands, thumbs, fingers, elbows, forearms, knees and feet to work the traditional pressure points. The client's body is also pulled, twisted and manipulated in ways that have been described as 'passive yoga'. The objective is to distribute energies evenly throughout the nervous system to create a harmony of physical energy flows. The muscular-skeletal system is also manipulated in ways that can be compared to modern physiotherapy. Thailand offers ample opportunities to study its unique tradition of massage therapy. Wat Pho (p700) in Bangkok is considered the master source for all Thai massage pedagogy, although Chiang Mai (p731) boasts a 'softer' version.

Training in *muay thai* takes place at dozens of boxing camps around the country. Be forewarned, however: training is gruelling and features full-contact sparring. Many centres are reluctant to take on foreign trainees. Rates vary from US\$50 to US\$250 per week, including food and accommodation. The website www.muaythai.com contains loads of information including the addresses of training camps. Also see the Bangkok (p700) and Chiang Mai (p731) sections for information on *muay thai* training programmes in these two cities.

Several language schools in Bangkok and Chiang Mai offer courses in Thai language. Tuition fees average around 250B per hour. See the Courses sections in this chapter for further detail.

TELEPHONE

The telephone system in Thailand, operated by the government-subsidised Telephone Organization of Thailand (TOT) under the Communications Authority of Thailand (CAT), is quite efficient and offers International Direct Dial (IDD) universally. In smaller towns these services are available at the main post office. You can make international calls from public telephone booths with a prepaid phonenumber available from 7-Eleven stores. Rates tend to be about the same as the

government phone offices. Guesthouses also offer phone services that are considerably more expensive.

Roaming charges are quite reasonable in Thailand for those with mobile phones. There are several cheap international call carriers that offer significant savings on international calls from a mobile: dial out using ☎ 008 or ☎ 009 for a bargain.

The telephone country code for Thailand is ☎ 66. All Thai phone numbers listed in this book are preceded by ☎ 0, but you only need to include the zero when dialling numbers within Thailand. City prefixes were recently integrated into the phone numbers for all calls regardless of their origin.

TOILETS

As in many other Asian countries, the 'squat toilet' is the norm except in hotels and guesthouses geared towards tourists and international business travellers. These sit more-or-less flush with the surface of the floor, with two footpads on either side. For travellers who have never used a squat toilet, it takes a bit of getting used to.

Even in places where sit-down toilets are installed, the plumbing may not be designed to take toilet paper. In such cases the usual washing bucket will be standing nearby or there will be a waste basket where you're supposed to place used toilet paper.

TOURIST INFORMATION

The **Tourist Authority of Thailand** (TAT; www.tat.or.th) has offices throughout the country, which are helpful for bus schedules, local maps and finding accommodation. Contact information for regional offices is listed under each town.

TRAVELLERS WITH DISABILITIES

Thailand presents one large, ongoing obstacle course for the mobility-impaired. With its high kerbs, uneven pavements and nonstop traffic, Bangkok can be particularly difficult. Rarely are there ramps or other access points for wheelchairs.

For wheelchair travellers, any trip to Thailand will require advance planning. The book *Exotic Destinations for Wheelchair Travelers* by Ed Hansen and Bruce Gordon contains a useful chapter on seven locations in Thailand. See p923 for organisations promoting travel for special-needs travellers.

VISAS

Citizens of 39 countries (including most European countries, Australia, New Zealand and the USA) can enter Thailand visa-free for 30 days at no charge. See the website of Thailand's **Ministry of Foreign Affairs** (www.mfa.go.th) for the full story. For a longer stay, just leave and re-enter the country at any border point: upon re-entry you get another 30 days, thank you very much. You can also extend the 30-day visa for seven to 10 days at any Thai immigration office for 500B.

With advance planning, a 60-day tourist visa is available from Thai embassies or consulates worldwide (see p807). Application fees are usually US\$30 and take up to a week. Contact the embassy for an application form and additional instructions.

The Non-Immigrant Visa is good for 90 days, must be applied for in your home country, costs US\$60 and is not difficult to obtain if you are travelling for business, study, retirement or an extended family visit. For anyone planning on staying longer than three months, this is the one to go for.

If you overstay your visa, the usual penalty is a fine of 200B for each extra day, with a 20,000B limit; fines can be paid at any official exit point or in advance at the **Bangkok Immigration Office** (Map pp694-5; ☎ 0 2287 3101; Soi Suan Phlu, Th Sathon Tai; ☎ 9am-noon & 1-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat); go to the Investigation Unit on the 4th floor.

Cambodian and Lao visas are now available at most land-border crossings with Thailand and all international airports. For trips to Myanmar, short-visit visas are available for day crossings, but get a visa in advance if you are flying into Yangon. Most visitors to Malaysia do not require a visa.

Immigration offices in major centres:

Chiang Mai (off Map p730; ☎ 0 5320 1755; ☎ 9am-noon & 1-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat) Located near the airport, off Rte 1141.

Hat Yai (Map p783; ☎ 0 7425 7019; Th Phetkasem) Near the railway bridge, in the same complex as the tourist police station.

Nakhon Phanom (☎ 0 4251 1235; Th Sunthon Wijit; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri)

Nong Khai (☎ 0 4241 2089; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri) On the road leading to the Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge, south of the bus stop.

Phuket Town (off Map p794; ☎ 0 7621 2108) South of town, almost at the end of Th Phuket near Saphan Hin park.

Ranong (☎ 0 7782 2016; Th Ruangrat; ☎ 8.30am-6pm Mon-Fri) Seven hundred metres north of Saphan Pla pier, 4.5km from Ranong centre. Border check for travellers crossing to Myanmar by boat.

Satun (☎ 0 7271 1080; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri) Processes visa extensions for 500B. There's also an immigration office at Tha Tammalang, but it doesn't extend visas.

Songkhla (☎ 0 7430 1011; Th Lang Prarum; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri)

VOLUNTEERING

Voluntary and paid positions with charitable organisations can be found in the education, development or public health sectors.

Mon, Karen and Burmese refugee camps along the Thailand-Myanmar border often need volunteers. Since none of the camps are officially sanctioned by the Thai government, few of the big NGOs or multilateral organisations are involved here. If this interests you, travel to Mae Sot and ask around for the 'unofficial' camp locations, or contact **Burma Volunteer Programme** (www.geocities.com/maesotes), which offers three-month volunteer jobs teaching English or working on human rights issues.

Other volunteer organisations:

Ecovolunteer Programme (www.ecovolunteer.org; per person US\$600-800) A network of NGOs working on environmental issues; in Thailand volunteers collect data on mangrove forests, study sea turtles or help run an animal rescue sanctuary. Minimum stay is around three weeks, but longer stays are encouraged; an average stay is around two to three months.

Habitat for Humanity (www.habitat.org; per person US\$2000-3000) One- to three-week house-building trips in northeast Thailand with a charitable organisation founded by former US president Jimmy Carter.

Human Development Foundation (www.fatherjoe.org) A community outreach centre in the Bangkok slum of Khlong Toei; volunteers work on basic medical care, HIV/AIDS education and drug prevention.

WOMEN TRAVELLERS

By and large women are safe travelling in groups or solo through Thailand. Extra caution needs to be exercised at night, especially when returning home from a bar or arriv-

ing in a new town late at night. Thais, both men and women, are chatty and will extend the hand of friendship, give you a ride or take you to the disco. Often accepting these invitations is a fun experience, but women should be aware that Thai men don't adhere to their own culture's rules when dealing with foreign women. While hand-holding, hugging or any other public contact between members of the opposite sex is a huge no-no in Thai society, Thai men think it is appropriate to touch (however innocently) foreign women even if the advances aren't encouraged.

Despite Thailand's peaceful nature, rape is a concern. Over the past decade, several foreign women have been attacked while travelling alone in remote areas and there have been several high-profile murders. Still, given the huge tourist numbers visiting Thailand, there is no need to be paranoid.

WORKING

Teaching English is one of the easiest ways to immerse yourself into a Thai community. Those with academic credentials, such as teaching certificates or degrees in English as a second language (ESL) or English as a foreign language (EFL), get first crack at the better-paying jobs at universities and international schools. But there are hundreds of language schools for every variety of native English speaker.

Maintained by an EFL teacher in Bangkok, www.ajarn.com has tips on where to find teaching jobs and how to deal with Thai classrooms, as well as current job listings.

Rajabhat Institute (☎ 0 2628 5281, ext 2906; teerawat23@hotmail.com; Teerawat Wangmanee, Office of Rajabhat Institute, Ministry of Education, Th Ratchadamnoen Nok, Bangkok 10300) has one-year English-teaching positions available in 41 teachers colleges right across the country. These positions pay well by Thai standards, and most students are preparing to be the country's next generation of primary- and secondary-school English teachers.

© Lonely Planet Publications. To make it easier for you to use, access to this chapter is not digitally restricted. In return, we think it's fair to ask you to use it for personal, non-commercial purposes only. In other words, please don't upload this chapter to a peer-to-peer site, mass email it to everyone you know, or resell it. See the terms and conditions on our site for a longer way of saying the above - 'Do the right thing with our content.'