

# Thailand



China Williams  
Mark Beales, Tim Bower, Catherine Bodry,  
Austin Bush, Brandon Presser

# Traveller Highlights

On these pages, travellers and Lonely Planet staff and authors share their top experiences in Thailand. Do you agree with their choices, or have we missed your favourites? Go to [lonelyplanet.com/thailand](http://lonelyplanet.com/thailand) and tell us your highlights.



1

## CHIANG MAI

Having never ridden a motorbike before, renting a scooter and riding up the mountain overlooking Chiang Mai to the Buddhist temple Wat Phra That Doi Suthep (p296) was probably not the smartest thing to do. But joining the chaos of túk-túks, scooters and cars on the multi-lane moat road was certainly exhilarating, and experiencing the ancient temple and its views over the city was infinitely rewarding.

MICHAEL COYNE

Robyn Loughnane, Australia



VIVIANE PONTI

2

## ELEPHANT NATURE PARK, CHIANG MAI

Feed elephants, bathe elephants and walk beside elephants at this sanctuary (p298) for elephants outside of Chiang Mai. Incomparable experiences and photo opportunities aside, whether visitor or volunteer, your support will help save the lives of elephants abused or decommissioned from logging and tourism industries. It's an experience, like the elephants, you won't forget.

**Debra Herrmann, Australia**



AUSTIN BUSH

3

## ANG THONG MARINE NATIONAL PARK

As an Australian travelling overseas, I had been a bit underwhelmed by much-hyped beaches. But Ang Thong Marine National Park (p623) is as close to tropical paradise as I've ever seen – soft white sand, turquoise water, lush palm trees and all totally unspoilt. Not even getting seasick and being dramatically ill on a pristine stretch of beach could ruin it for me.

**Emma Chapple, Australia**

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# Central Thailand



Both the geographic and cultural heart of the kingdom, the central region is the birthplace of modern-day Thailand. Kings ruled, empires grew and merchants traded from here, aided by the area's extraordinary natural features. The soaring mountain ranges separating Thailand from Myanmar (Burma) are the source of several major rivers flowing down to the area's fertile plains.

As well as being historically important, the region is environmentally significant, with some of the largest protected territories in Southeast Asia. Logging and deforestation have reduced much of the natural landscape, but the majority of terrain is still wild forest, jungle and grassland. Deep within the dense vegetation dwell tigers, elephants and leopards.

Just north of Bangkok is the former Siam royal capital of Ayuthaya, home to fabled palace and temple ruins. Once one of the world's great cities, at its peak it was a major hub for trade, art and culture, but these days the pace is far more genteel. Slightly further north is the small town of Lopburi, where monkeys play and scavenge among the Khmer-style ruins.

Northwest from Bangkok is Kanchanaburi, the country's third-largest province. Its natural beauty makes it a popular destination for Thais and tourists, who come to bathe in waterfalls, trek through jungles and kayak along rivers. War veterans make pilgrimages here to remember those who died in WWII when Japanese forces used prisoners of war to build the 'Death Railway'.

In the mountains of northwest Kanchanaburi are sleepy Thong Pha Phum and Sangkhlaburi. Many ethnic groups live in and around these towns near the border. Few travellers make it this far, but those that do are richly rewarded with a fascinating blend of cultures and beliefs.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Exploring the grassy ruins of **Ayuthaya** (p198), Unesco World Heritage Site and former capital of Siam
- Clambering up the seven-tiered waterfall at **Erawan National Park** (p218)
- Snapping pictures of the mischievous monkeys in **Lopburi** (p207)
- Visiting the WWII memorials in easygoing **Kanchanaburi** (p212)
- Living among the treetops and exploring nature trails in **Thong Pha Phum National Park** (p222)
- Taking a dawn boat along the misty morning waters in sleepy **Sangkhlaburi** (p225)



■ BEST TIME TO VISIT: OCTOBER–DECEMBER

■ POPULATION: 2.3 MILLION

number of Chinese immigrants started out as farmers and labourers and then later as merchants. Significant numbers of Mon and Karen live in Kanchanaburi Province. Pockets of Lao and Phuan – the descendents of war captives who were forcibly resettled following Thai raids into Laos over the centuries – can be found in the region's three provinces of Ayuthaya, Lopburi and Kanchanaburi.

### Getting There & Away

Most people come to central Thailand by bus or train. Buses are quicker, cleaner and usually more comfortable; trains are slower but more scenic and can be more social. Central Thailand is connected to the north and northeast via train. There is a good highway network so it is possible to hire vehicles and travel independently.

### Getting Around

Local buses and trains provide a cheap and simple way to get from A to B. In most towns you can catch a private *sāhm-lór* (also spelt *sāamlāw*; three-wheeled pedicab) or *túk-túk* (pronounced *dúk dūk*; motorised transport). These have a set fare for locals which tourists are rarely offered, so it's important to agree a price beforehand. Lopburi can be covered on foot, Ayuthaya requires a bicycle while in Kanchanaburi you'll need private transport or help from tour agencies to visit some of the sites.

## AYUTHAYA PROVINCE

### AYUTHAYA

พระนครศรีอยุธยา

pop 137,553

Ayuthaya is a former Asian powerhouse that today offers fragmented evidence of its magnificent past.

This former royal capital was a major trading port during the time of the trade winds, when international merchants were regular visitors. Many traders proclaimed Ayuthaya to be the finest city they had ever seen, with towering temples and treasure-laden palaces. After its sacking by an invading army, the city faded as a power and is now remembered as something of a fallen hero.

Today, thanks to major renovation and restoration work, it's possible to envisage

### AYUTHAYA'S TOP FIVE SITES

- Wat Phra Si Sanphet
- Wat Phanan Choeng
- Wat Chai Wattanaram
- Wat Yai Chai Mongkhon
- Wihaan Mongkhon Bophit

just how spectacular the ruins would have looked in their heyday.

Despite the town's popularity among tourists, Ayuthaya remains relatively unspoiled and has its own charm. Away from the grassy ruins, the surrounding countryside is changing from an agricultural to manufacturing base as new factories replace the old rice paddies.

Ayuthaya is a place of great cultural interest and its proximity to Bangkok ensures it is a popular stop-off destination for visitors as part of their journey north.

### History

Ayuthaya was the capital of Siam for 417 years, between 1350 and 1767, and had strong links to several European nations. At its peak it controlled an area larger than England and France combined, and was a melting pot of culture, art and trade. Its glorious reign ended in 1767 when the invading Burmese army sacked the city, looting most of its treasures.

Named after Ayodhya (Sanskrit for 'unconquerable'), Prince Rama's city in the Indian epic Ramayana, Ayuthaya emerged as little more than a Khmer outpost to become one of Asia's foremost cities. The first Westerners arrived from Portugal in 1511 and were so astounded by the city's beauty that they named it the 'Venice of the East'.

In 1685 French diplomat Abbe de Choisy wrote that Ayuthaya was a 'large city on an island surrounded by a river three times the size of the Seine, full of French, English, Dutch, Chinese, Japanese and Siamese vessels and an uncountable number of barges, and gilded galleys with 60 oarsmen'.

Ayuthaya had 33 kings, who generally ruled through tolerance rather than violence. Adroit diplomacy ensured no Western power ever took control.

After the Burmese sacked the city there was a period of instability until General Taksin

## MAP LEGEND

## ROUTES

	Tollway		One-Way Street
	Freeway		Mall/Steps
	Primary		Tunnel
	Secondary		Pedestrian Overpass
	Tertiary		Walking Tour
	Lane		Walking Trail
	Under Construction		Walking Path
	Unsealed Road		

## TRANSPORT

	Ferry		Rail (Underground)
	Subway		Skytrain
	Rail		Cable Car, Funicular

## HYDROGRAPHY

	River, Creek		Canal
	Reef		Water

## BOUNDARIES

	International State, Provincial		Ancient Wall
	Marine Park		Cliff

## AREA FEATURES

	Airport		Forest
	Area of Interest		Land
	Beach, Desert		Mall
	Building		Market
	Campus		Park
	Cemetery, Christian		Sports
	Cemetery, Other		Urban

## POPULATION

	<b>CAPITAL (NATIONAL)</b>		<b>CAPITAL (STATE)</b>
	Large City		Medium City
	Small City		Town, Village

## SYMBOLS

	<b>Sights/Activities</b>		<b>Eating</b>		<b>Information</b>
	Beach		Eating		Bank, ATM
	Buddhist		Drinking		Embassy/Consulate
	Castle, Fortress		Drinking		Hospital, Medical
	Christian		Cafe		Information
	Confucian		Entertainment		Internet Facilities
	Diving, Snorkelling		Shopping		Police Station
	Hindu		Shopping		Post Office, GPO
	Islamic		Sleeping		Telephone
	Monument		Sleeping		Toilets
	Museum, Gallery		Camping		<b>Geographic</b>
	Point of Interest		Transport		Lighthouse
	Pool		Airport, Airfield		Lookout
	Ruin		Border Crossing		Mountain, Volcano
	Shinto		Bus Station		National Park
	Sikh		General Transport		Pass, Canyon
	Surfing, Surf Beach		Parking Area		River Flow
	Taoist		Petrol Station		Waterfall
	Trail Head		Taxi Rank		
	Zoo, Bird Sanctuary				

## LONELY PLANET OFFICES

## Australia

Head Office

Locked Bag 1, Footscray, Victoria 3011

☎ 03 8379 8000, fax 03 8379 8111

talk2us@lonelyplanet.com.au

## USA

150 Linden St, Oakland, CA 94607

☎ 510 250 6400, toll free 800 275 8555,

fax 510 893 8572

info@lonelyplanet.com

## UK

2nd fl, 186 City Rd,

London EC1V 2NT

☎ 020 7106 2100, fax 020 7106 2101

go@lonelyplanet.co.uk

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