

Inspirational travel

Vietnam • Cambodia • Laos • Thailand

ABOUT THAILAND

One of the most popular tourist destinations in the world, and rightly so, Thailand has something for everyone and is why people keep coming back year after year. Whether you want to go island hopping, shopping, exploring national parks, or quite simply eating your fill of delicious Thai cuisine, you are guaranteed a fantastic holiday.

What we would like to emphasize however, is that Thailand is more than 'sun, sand and sea'. Although island hopping is a great way to start or end your holiday, Thailand offers a rich cultural experience as well as natural beauty. Allow us to design a more 'complete' tour that takes you into the heart of Thailand and its people, and show you all that this special country has to offer.

1. HIGHLIGHTS

Thailand can be broken down into Bangkok, Central Thailand (Pattaya, Auythaya, Kanchanaburi and River Kwai), North Thailand (Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai and the 'Golden Triangle'), North East Thailand or 'Isan' (Khao Yai National Park, Ubon Ratchathani and Khong Jiam), and South Thailand (Phuket, Khao Lak, Krabi, Koh Phi Phi, Koh Lanta, Koh Chang, Koh Phangan, Koh Samui, Phang Nga Bay and Koh Yao Noi). *Koh = Island.

Each region of Thailand has its own flavor - you can easily make multiple visits and still have plenty of reasons to return and discover new parts of the country. Some of our favorite destinations include:

'Isan' - North East Thailand

Offers a more 'off the beaten path' experience for travelers, where you can get an in-depth understanding of life in the Thailand countryside, and an opportunity for cultural and educational experiences. For example, the exotic national park of Khao Yai is teeming with wildlife, beautiful waterfalls (as seen on the movie 'The Beach'), vineyards where you can go wine tasting and long lunching, and quaint shopping streets designed to make you feel like you are walking through a small village in Tuscany, complete with gelato shops and excellent coffee.

River Kwai - Central Thailand

The River Kwai in Central Thailand offers another alternative for visitors, where you can unwind in jungle surrounds, go kayaking and elephant riding, or put on a lifejacket and float downriver to cool off.

Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai and the Golden Triangle - Northern Thailand

Northern Thailand offers plenty of hiking, rafting, elephant riding and mahout training experiences, as well as fantastic cooking classes. Chiang Mai is also a convenient point to fly to Luang Prabang, Laos, to extend your experience into Indochina (or departing from Chiang Rai, boat trips along the Mekong to Luang Prabang is also possible).

Khao Lak, Koh Yao Noi Island and Phang Nga Bay - Southern Thailand

In the south there is more to do than relaxing on sandy beaches, with a variety of multi-day sea kayaking tours as well as jungle survival courses, and coast to coast mountain biking adventures.

2. VISAS

Visitors from most countries who arrive in Thailand without a visa will be granted a 30 day stay if they have proof of onward ticket and adequate funds.

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Inspirational travel

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For longer stays you should apply for a visa before leaving home. A tourist visa allows the visitor to stay for 60 days, and a non-immigrant visa for 90 days. You should enter Thailand within 90 days of the visa being issued otherwise it will be invalid. Some countries have special agreements with Thailand regarding the issue of visas. Before travelling to Thailand check with the Thai embassy in your country or ask your travel agent for advice.

3. MAP



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4. ARRIVALS

If you arrive in Thailand by air, or by rail at Padang Besar, you will be given a customs declaration form and a sheet detailing the regulations. You should complete the form and hand it to the customs officer as you leave the airport arrivals hall. If you enter Thailand by rail, customs officers will board the train to carry out their duties. Customs formalities are straightforward, and the officers are polite and efficient.

You are allowed to bring in 200 cigarettes or 250 gr. of tobacco, 1 litre of spirits, plus a reasonable amount of perfume. If you are bringing in prescription drugs ask your doctor for a note detailing the drugs you are taking.

Fire-arms, pornography and narcotics are strictly prohibited, and the penalties for drug trafficking are severe.

Antiques may only be taken out of Thailand with a certificate from the Fine Arts Department in Bangkok. A reputable dealer will be able to offer advice on the practicality of obtaining this certificate. Buddha statues old or otherwise, may not be taken out of the country. (This does not apply to the very small items found in gift shops).

5. MONEY

Banking hours in Thailand are 8.30 am to 3.30pm Monday to Friday. You will find currency exchanges at all major tourist areas. These are open daily from 9.00am until around 6.30pm, with some staying open until late evening. There are ATM machines across most of the country which tender the Thai Baht.

Banks adjust their exchange rates on a daily basis, in line with international money markets, and usually offer the best rates. Hotels and some shops also offer exchange services usually at less favorable rates.

6. CLIMATE

Thailand's climate is tropical, high both in temperature and humidity, and dominated by monsoons. April and May are the hottest months of the year, when even the locals are moved to complain about the heat! June sees the beginning of the southwest monsoon, and brings with it the rainy season, which continues intermittently until the end of October.

From November to the end of February the climate is much less trying with a cooling northeast breeze and a reduction in the humidity level. This is also the main tourist season, and the best time to visit Thailand. Low season is during May to October and is known as the 'green season' (expect a lot of rain on these days). It is also a good time to visit as it is cooler (particularly in the North and North East), and prices are cheaper.

7. CUISINE

Thailand's cuisine is regarded by many people as one of the best in the world. And, if variety is the spice of life, you can literally have a different meal every day of the year. Almost all Thai food is cooked with fresh ingredients, including vegetables, poultry, pork, fish and some beef. Lime juice, lemon grass and fresh coriander give the food its characteristic tang, while liberal helpings of fresh chillies are used to add some fire to many dishes. Other common seasonings include black pepper, ginger, tamarind, and coconut milk which is often added to curries.

Inspirational travel

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Beers, wines and spirits are readily available but the imported items can be a little expensive. A big favourite among Thai people is rice whisky. It has a sharp, sweet taste similar to rum. Several brands of beer are produced in Thailand, most popular is the local Singha beer.

Some of the more popular dishes are listed below:

- Gaengmus-sa-man: Rich spicy curry with beef or chicken.
- Gaeng kari gai: Mild yellow curry with chicken.
- Gaeng khiaw waan: Sweet green curry with coconut milk and shrimp, chicken, or beef.
- Tom yam kung: Spicy soup with lime juice, lemon grass, mushroom and shrimp.
- Tom khaa gai: Soup with galangal root, chicken feet and coconut milk.
- Gaeng jeud: Chilli free soup with vegetables and minced pork.
- Khao phat: Fried rice with shrimp, beef, pork or chicken.
- Khao man gai: Sliced boiled chicken over marinated rice.
- Khao na phet: Roast duck over rice.
- Kuay-tiaw nam: Soup with rice noodles, meat and vegetables.
- Laat naa: Rice noodles, meat and vegetables in a thick gravy.
- Phad siyu: Fried rice noodles with meat and vegetables
- Sang kha-yaa maphraow: Coconut custard.
- Kluay khaek: Fried banana.
- Mamuang khao niaw: Ripe mango with sticky rice in coconut cream.

8. CLOTHING

Light, loose fitting, easy to launder clothing is best. Sandals or slides that are easy to remove are particularly useful when visiting temples. It can be cooler in the North at certain times of the year so a light jacket or scarf could be useful of an evening.

9. PEOPLE

Thailand is often called the "land of smiles", and rightly so because you will see more smiling people here than anywhere else in the world.

The country has a population of about 59 million, with some 6.7 million of these people living in the Bangkok area. Approximately 75% of the citizenry are ethnic Thais, 14% are Chinese, and the remaining 11% are mostly Indian, Malay, Karen, Khmer, or Mon. The literacy rate is high at about 94% and the average life expectancy is 66 for men and 72 for women. Whilst Thai people are among the most tolerant and forbearing of hosts, they have nevertheless a number of customs and taboos which the visitor should respect. To help with this the Tourist Authority of Thailand publishes a tiny booklet entitled "Do's and Don'ts in Thailand". A few extracts are included here:

Public displays of affection between men and women are frowned upon. You may see Westernised young Thai's holding hands in public, but that is as far as it goes, in polite society. Topless bathing may be considered acceptable in your own country, but is inappropriate in Thailand.

Thai's consider the head as the highest part of the body, both literally and figuratively. As a result they don't approve of touching anyone on the head, even as a friendly gesture. It is considered rude to point the sole of your foot at another person, so try to avoid doing so when sitting opposite someone, and following the concept that the foot is the lowest limb, don't point your foot to show anything to anyone.

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Buddhist monks are forbidden to touch or be touched by a woman, or to accept anything from the hand of one. If a woman wants to give anything to a monk or novice, she first hands it to a man, who then presents it. In case the woman wants to present it with her hand, the monk or novice will spread out a piece of saffron robe, and the woman will lay down the gift on the material. It is alright to wear shoes whilst walking around the grounds of a Buddhist temple, but not inside the chapel where the Buddha image is kept. Women should ensure that their legs and shoulders are covered before entering a Buddhist temple. Please do not wear shorts.

The Thai people have a deep traditional reverence for the Royal Family, and the visitor should also show respect for the King and the Queen, and the Royal Children. When attending a public event where a member of the Royal Family is present, the best guide on how to behave is to watch the crowd and do as it does.

10. LANGUAGE

Thai is one of the oldest languages in East and South-East Asia. It is a monosyllabic language which uses five tones (high, mid, low, rising, and falling tone) to alter the meaning of a single syllable. This makes it rather tricky to learn for most Westerners used to speaking non-tonal languages. Most Thai people in the tourism industry speak English, so as a general rule it is quite easy to get by with just a few basic words in Thai (at least in the more tourist populated areas).

11. PUBLIC HOLIDAYS

Thailand celebrates many public holidays! See below for a list of the key holidays and celebrations:

New Years Day

In Thailand there are three New Year's days. The Western (Jan 1st), the Chinese New Year on the first day of the First Lunar month (usually in February) and the Thai New Year, marked by the 'Songkhran Festival' in April. Thais usually exchange gifts on January 1st.

Phra Buddha Baht Fair

Held at the temple of the Holy Footprint at Saraburi, 236Km north of Bangkok, from 31st January to 1st February. There are many activities including music and outdoor drama.

Bosang Umbrella Fair

Held in Chiang Mai during January, it features colourful paper umbrellas and other local handicrafts.

Chinese New Year

First day of the first Chinese Lunar month, usually in February. Businesses close for 3-4 days giving families time to get together and worship at one of the Chinese Buddhist temples. There may also be public celebrations with acrobats, Lion Dance and firecrackers. The latter are believed to frighten away "foreign devils".

Flower Carnival

Held in Chiang Mai during February it features parades and colourful floats exhibiting the local flora.

Makha Bucha Day

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End of February/beginning of March, depending on the moon. This commemorates the day when 1250 of Buddha's disciples gathered spontaneously to hear him preach. Buddhists visit Wats and make merit by such acts as releasing caged birds. In the evening the celebrations culminate in a candle lit procession around the main temple building.

Chakri Day

Held on the 6th April, this day commemorates the founding of the Chakri Dynasty, of which the present King Bhumipon is the 9th King. Portraits of the King and Queen are prominently displayed and decked with tributes of flowers.

Songkhran

Held on 13-15 April, this is the celebration of the old Thai New Year. Buddhists visit the temple for the ceremony of Rod Nam Dam Nua. They sprinkle water on the Buddha images, and on the hands of the monks and novices at the temple, as an offering to express confidence that the supply of water will be adequate to cover the dry season.

Songkhran is a time when the Thai family will try to be together, and many people will travel back to their home village.

This holiday has now become secularized, with exuberant merrymakers taking to the streets throwing water at each other, and you, by the cup full, the bucket full, or even with a hose. To add to the fun, talc is mixed with the water and may be daubed on your face. Take it all in good spirit, no one is exempt, not even the policemen. The cool water may even be a welcome relief as the festival coincides with the time when the sun is due overhead and the weather can be very hot.

Pattaya Festival

Held during the second week of April in Pattaya on Thailand's Eastern Seaboard. It features processions, floral displays, and other special events plus a spectacular fireworks display.

National Labour Day

This holiday on 1st May follows the lead of many Western countries, whose workers now celebrate Labour Day.

Coronation Day

Held on the 5th May, this celebrates the coronation of the present King Bhumipon, Rama IX. Tributes are paid at shrines and portraits of His Majesty.

Royal Ploughing Ceremony

This is an ancient Brahman ceremony, held under Royal patronage in Bangkok during May, which celebrates the beginning of the rice planting season.

Fruit Fair

A festival is held in Rayong during May and another in Chantaburi during June. They feature locally grown fruit such as rambutan, durian, and jack fruit.

Visakha Bucha Day.

Held on the full moon of the 6th Lunar month, this celebrates the birth, death and enlightenment of Buddha, and is therefore the most sacred day on the Buddhist calendar.

Asalaha Bucha Day

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Held in mid July, this is the day before the start of Buddhist Lent. Many young men, who are about to become monks, hold parties on this day.

Buddhist Lent

Held in mid July, this marks the start of Khao Pansa, period similar to the Christian Lent. During the period monks do not travel to other monasteries, their religious duties are strictly observed, and the novice monks receive their training in the teachings of Buddha.

Candle Festival

Held in Ubon Ratchatani on Khao Pansa Day. Candles carved from bees wax are paraded through the streets.

H.M. Queen's Birthday

Tributes are paid to Her Majesty on the 12th August, and donations are made to the many charitable organisations that are patronised by the Queen.

Chulalongkorn Day

Held on 23rd October, this commemorates the death of King Chulalongkorn, Rama V, who reigned between 1868 and 1910. He is renowned for his achievements in the fields of education, modernisation and progressive thinking.

Buffalo Races

Held in Chonburi (80Km east of Bangkok) during October.

Loy Krathong

The festival held during the full moon on the 12th Lunar month in November, is believed to date back to the Sukhothai period, but its exact significance is uncertain. Krathongs, or lotus flowers made of natural materials, containing a candle, incense sticks, a coin or two and beautifully decorated with flowers are launched into the sea, or any convenient stretch of water, as a thanksgiving to the water spirits, and a cleansing of sins.

River Kwai Bridge Week

A week long series of historical exhibitions, light and sound shows, and vintage train rides held in Kanchanaburi during the last week of October.

Annual Elephant Roundup

Held during the third week of November at Surin in North East Thailand.

Trouping of the Colour - 3rd December

Their Majesties the King and Queen preside over this annual event on 3rd December which is held in the Royal Plaza, Bangkok.

H.M. King's Birthday - 5th December

People demonstrate their respect for King with flags, displays and other tributes, on the 5th December.

Constitution Day



Inspirational travel

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Held on 10th December, this marks the day in 1932, when the monarchy became constitutional, at the very beginning of democracy on Thailand.

New Year's Eve

The end of the old year when everybody celebrates on 31st December.

12. POST

There are many agency post offices that are open seven days. These stores are slightly more expensive to use than normal Thailand Post services but are an efficient alternative and the branches are often easier to access.

Postal services within Thailand are cheap and well organized. Stamps can be purchased at post offices, hotels and many convenience stores. Hotels will generally post your letters too. Letters sent at the standard rate by airmail will take about a week to reach Europe or America. The cost depends on the international postal zone of the destination country. Regular post is not recommended for parcels or high value items. For a slightly higher fee, letters or packages can be sent by registered Express Mail Service (EMS). The cost depends on the destination and the size and weight of the package sent, and whether it is sent by air or surface mail. Parcels must be wrapped in approved packaging, which can be done for you at the post office.

International courier companies such as DHL, FedEx, UPS and TNT operate from Thailand and are a good but expensive way to send packages back home. Certain handicraft shops will arrange to send your purchases home for you.

13. INTERNET

There are numerous internet cafés in Bangkok as well as in large towns throughout Thailand. Major shopping malls and department stores also provide internet access points. You certainly won't need to go far to find internet access and rates are reasonable.

14. BUSINESS HOURS

Government officials (e.g., immigration) open their desks at 9.00 a.m. Lunch is from midday to 1.00p.m. and they close at 4.30p.m. If your tourist visa expires on a Sunday or holiday you can extend it the next working day.

Banks open from 9.00 a.m. to 3.30 p.m., Monday to Friday. Banks and government offices are closed on public holidays.

Department stores open around 10 a.m. and close between 8.00 p.m. and 10.00 p.m. Smaller businesses are open from 8.30/9.00 a.m. until 5.30/6.30 p.m., while some family-run shops are open all day.

Pubs and clubs are open from around 7.00 p.m. until the early hours - times differ. Restaurant hours vary, some close at 5.30/6.00 p.m. while others stay open until midnight and later.