

A weathered stone statue
in the Wat Po Temple
part of the Grand Palace
in Bangkok.



Taxis, known as “tuk tuks,” on Khao San Road, a popular landmark featuring a street-side market and many bars.

Thailand

A TALE OF TWO CITIES

Tourists flock to this country in Southeast Asia for its rich culture, chaos—and calm

BY JODI ETTEMBERG

THAILAND IS A COUNTRY OF SUBTLE LAYERS, a complicated onion of history, culture and food that can be best explored by gradually pulling away pieces. With one of the highest rates of tourism in Southeast Asia, it has remained a top vacation spot for backpackers and luxury travelers alike. With its bustling capital of Bangkok, its cultural heart in the northern city of Chiang Mai and dozens of islands to explore in the south, the country packs a seemingly dizzying number of sights into a relatively small geographic area.

To truly appreciate its cities, beaches and lush green forests, however, it is worthwhile

digging under the surface to discover what makes Thailand such a unique destination. As the only country in Southeast Asia to have avoided colonial rule, its story and traditions are deeply intertwined with its monarchy and dominant religion, Buddhism. In recent years, the country has been in the news for a number of coups, a series of violent protests in the capital, a festering insurgency in Thailand's deep south and a massive flood that inundated large swaths of several provinces, including parts of Bangkok. Despite these struggles, tourism has thrived. It is partly Thailand's resilience that makes it such a fascinating destination.



An Escape from the Cities: Ko Samui

For those who want beaches as well as cities and mountains, Ko Samui is an easy option from Bangkok, with flights on Bangkok Airways (bangkokair.com/eng) and Thai Airways (thaiairways.com) plying the route several times a day.

While Samui is built up and fairly developed compared

to some of the smaller islands in Thailand, it is also easy to access and has some stunning beaches. For those looking for a place to stay, Rocky's Boutique Resort (rates available at rockyresort.com) is on Lanai beach, Samui's second-biggest shoreline and a quieter choice than the packed Chaweng beach.



Bangkok

Don't miss:

- A trip on the public boats along the Chao Phraya river, offering a very different view of the city.
- A morning at Wat Pho, one of the largest and oldest temples in Bangkok and the resting place for the huge reclining Buddha, his feet encrusted in mother-of-pearl.
- A weekend trip to Chatuchuk, one of the world's largest outdoor markets.

Name means: Where the olive plum trees grow. (The official

city name is Krung Thep Mahanakhon Amon Rattanakosin Mahinthara Ayuthaya Mahadilok Phop Noppharat Ratchathani Burirom Udomratchaniwet Mahasathan Amon Piman Awatan Sathit Sakkathattiya Witsanukam Prasit, one of the longest in the world.)

Where to stay: The Eugenia (267 Sukhumvit Soi 31, tel. +66 2259-9011, theeugenia.com), a colonial-inspired mansion with only a dozen rooms, tucked away on Soi 31. A quiet break from the chaos of Bangkok, it is

decorated with quirky art and furniture and offers a beautiful pool to counter the heat of the city.

Where to eat: American chef and food writer Jarrett Wrisley started Soul Food Mahanakorn

(56/10 Sukhumvit Soi 55 [Thong Lor], tel. +66-85-9042691, soulfoodmahanakorn.com) as an outlet for his love of Thailand's street food and its many nuanced flavors. On any given day, his menu is a variety of perfectly braised meats, rich coconut curries and spicy, tangy papaya salads. With sleek décor and a location right next to the Skytrain, this restaurant is the perfect spot for an evening meal. Don't miss his signature cocktails.





Wat Chedi Luang

Chiang Mai

Don't miss:

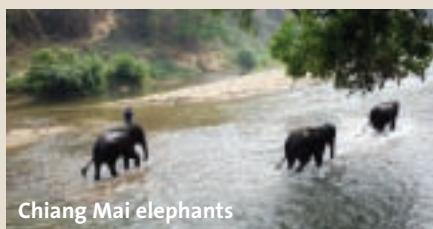
- The beautiful, old temple of Wat Chedi Luang in the center of town, with one of the oldest trees in Chiang Mai in its courtyard.
- An afternoon visit to the temple on the hill, Wat Doi Suthep, which overlooks the city below.
- A trip to the Elephant Nature Park, a rehabilitation center for abused and abandoned elephants. Volunteers can stay one day or a full week. Strongly recommended instead of an elephant ride at a closer camp.
- The Sunday night walking market on Ratchadaemnon road. Bring your appetite since every temple courtyard becomes a mini food court of its own. Cap off the night with a foot massage on the streets.

Name means: The new walled city.

Where to stay: 3 Sis Bed and Breakfast (1 Phra Pokklao Soi 8, tel. +66-5327-3243, 3sisbedandbreakfast.com). Located in the heart of Chiang Mai and around the corner from Wat Chedi

Luang, 3Sis is meticulously decorated in traditional northern Lanna style and features an attached restaurant and café, free WiFi, spotless rooms and a very friendly staff. The B&B is a short walk to Chiang Mai's huge Sunday night market.

Where to eat: The Riverside Bar and Restaurant (11 Charoenrat Rd., tel. +66-5324-3239, theriversidechiangmai.com) is located at the edge of the Ping River, with beautiful nighttime views of the city just over the bank. Its expansive menu of curries, *khao soi* (local coconut-based soup) and noodles offers something for everyone.



Chiang Mai elephants

Getting there: Air Asia (airasia.com), Thai Airways (thaiairways.com) and Bangkok Airways (bangkokair.com/eng) fly to Chiang Mai from Bangkok several times a day.

The Kingdom of Siam

The country's recent era can be traced back to the mid-14th century, when several kingdoms were jockeying for power in the region. The Kingdom of Ayutthaya emerged as a strong monarchy, channeling its energies along the Chao Phraya River near Thailand's central plains and establishing the city of Ayutthaya as the capital. Eventually calling the territory Siam, a name that held until the late 1930s, the Kingdom of Ayutthaya ruled until its fall at the hands of the Burmese in 1767.

With the city of Ayutthaya in ruins, Siam's new king, Taksin, moved the capital to Thonburi, across the river from Bangkok. Just over a decade later, Taksin was removed in a coup (and subsequently executed), and the new king, Rama I, relocated the capital yet again to Bangkok proper, where it has since remained.

The Chakri Dynasty, Rama I's descendants, have ruled Thailand ever since, shifting from absolute monarchy (in which the monarch rules with total power) to constitutional monarchy (limiting the monarch's power since he/she must rule along with a governing body) after a 1932 coup. In the years following the abolition of absolute monarchy, Thailand's politics have seen an uptick in political protests, coup attempts and charges of *lèse-majesté* (insults to the monarchy). Notwithstanding the cycles of occasional violence, the most recent in 2010, tourism in Thailand consistently bounces back. When violence does occur, it is almost always confined to the epicenter of the protests. For example, in 2010 as Bangkok was under curfew and emergency rule, the islands to the south were unaffected by the clashes.

It is worth noting that the country is extremely sensitive to any criticism of its monarchy, and *lèse-majesté* laws are some of the strictest in the world. See "Thailand Basics," on page 27 for more information about complying with *lèse-majesté* as these laws also affect travelers.

Expat Writers

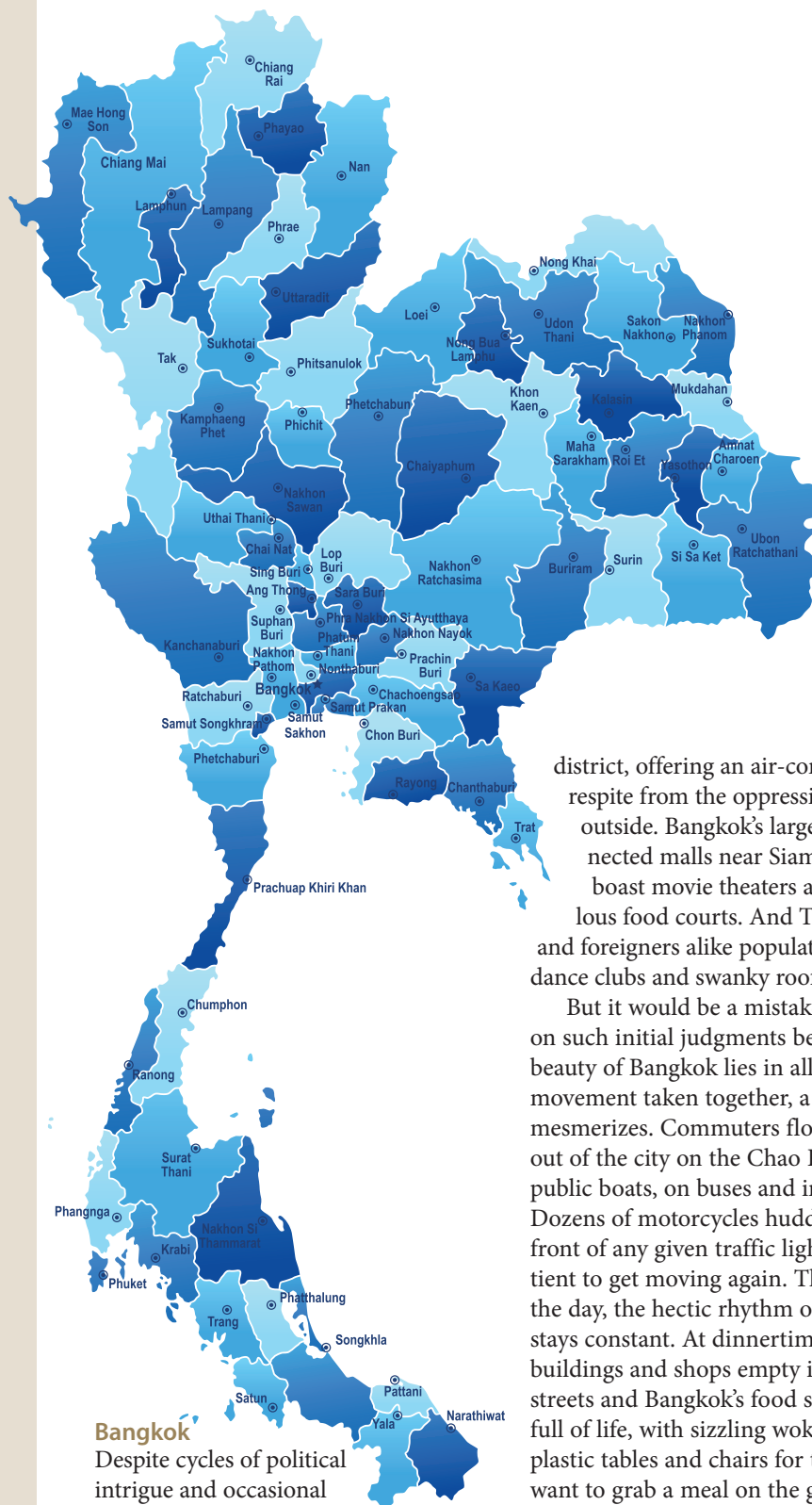
One of the more interesting ways to learn about a foreign country is through the eyes of its expats. Here are several websites and blogs written by Bangkok residents:

■ **Mark Wiens:** Arizona-born writer who grew up in Kenya and the States. Wiens' site emphasizes photography of food and the many attractions in Thailand and elsewhere in Southeast Asia. Though based in Bangkok, he also writes about his travels through Asia and Africa. migrationology.com

■ **Greg Jorgenson:** Canadian expat who has lived in Thailand for more than a decade. He writes about the quirks and chaos in his new home. gregtodiffer.com

■ **Newley Purnell:** American journalist living in Thailand and writing for a slew of different publications. His personal website focuses on the background to the stories he covers and other interesting happenings in Thailand. newley.com

■ **Austin Bush:** An American photographer who traveled to Thailand in 1999 and has remained there ever since. His photoblog, focusing primarily on food, is not to be perused on an empty stomach—it will make you hungry. austimbushphotography.com/blog



Bangkok

Despite cycles of political intrigue and occasional violence, Bangkok's economy continues to flourish. Like many capital cities, it receives an influx of residents from around the region, contributing to the bustling chaos that fuels the city from dawn until dusk. At first glance, Bangkok's 21st-century additions shine through: The ultra-modern Skytrain whisks travelers from the airport to the downtown business

district, offering an air-conditioned respite from the oppressive humidity outside. Bangkok's large interconnected malls near Siam station boast movie theaters and meticulous food courts. And Thais and foreigners alike populate trendy dance clubs and swanky rooftop bars.

But it would be a mistake to rely on such initial judgments because the beauty of Bangkok lies in all of its movement taken together, a dance that mesmerizes. Commuters flow in and out of the city on the Chao Phraya's public boats, on buses and in minivans. Dozens of motorcycles huddle at the front of any given traffic light, impatient to get moving again. Throughout the day, the hectic rhythm of the city stays constant. At dinnertime, office buildings and shops empty into the streets and Bangkok's food stalls are full of life, with sizzling woks and tiny plastic tables and chairs for those who want to grab a meal on the go.

Though the city appears extravagant from afar, its spirit lies in the confluence of its many disparate groups of people. Each back alley has a different feel, a specific type of food, a different cluster of residents. Like many capitals, Bangkok has an overabundance of sights and smells and noise, offering up miniature versions of the many provinces that make up the country of Thailand.

Chiang Mai

If Bangkok's strengths lie in its chaos, Chiang Mai's assets are its relative calm, emphasis on culture and its tantalizing proximity to the mountains. Chiang Mai sits about 600 kilometers (372 miles) north of Bangkok. Despite housing more than a million people, Chiang Mai remains a quieter alternative to Bangkok, with a history that developed in tandem with the south. Starting in the 13th century, the Lanna Kingdom ruled the north, flourishing as a trade point between Yunnan in China and Burma. It fell to the Burmese in the mid-1500s and was long ignored as Bangkok and its surroundings flourished. It was only during the last century that Chiang Mai saw a surge in development.

The Lanna Kingdom left its imprint on Chiang Mai, both on the temples and the ancient walls that trace a square around the old city. Northern Thailand has a different feel, a language closer to Khmer and a Lanna style of architecture with curled teak roofs and crumbling stupas (large moundlike burial structures

used as a place of worship).

Chiang Mai and its surrounding areas provide days' worth of sights to see. The city's ancient walls flank the center of town on all sides, with four main gates (and several smaller ones) still intact. They are not only a beautiful sight, lit up at night and glowing against Chiang Mai's tiny moat, but also excellent markers for navigating the city. Within the walls, it is easy to explore the many temples by foot; the roads are set out in a grid with tiny alleyways connecting the main thoroughfares.

Allocating a week to Chiang Mai allows for a thorough exploration of the city but also the flavors of the valleys and towns that surround it. With no water artery, getting around outside the moat is best effected with a motorbike taxi or a *songthaew*, a shared ride in the form of a red covered pickup truck. The Mae Tang valley is a short day trip out of the city, an adventure traveler's paradise with mountain biking, rafting and more. In addition, smaller surrounding villages provide a shopper's delight with handicrafts, Northern Thai

silk weaving and umbrella making.

Further adventures are recommended for those with more than a week to spare. To the north is Mae Hong Son, close to the Burmese border. The first road connecting it to Chiang Mai opened in 1960, and today's version has a nauseating 1,864 curves to maneuver on the six-hour drive (about 285 kilometers or 177 miles). The sleepy town features several temples, including the twinned temples of Wat Jong Klang and Wat Jong Kham, many small family-run restaurants with Shan-style Burmese food and an evening market around its tiny lake. It also presents an ideal jumping-off point to learn about the hill tribes of Northern Thailand, away from the clusters of tourists that breeze through Chiang Mai.

Bangkok and Chiang Mai are both popular tourist destinations in Thailand. With distinctive foods, opposing urban architecture and captivating histories, taken together they provide a small snapshot of a complicated and beautiful country. ■



THAILAND BASICS

WHEN TO VISIT: The most popular time to visit Thailand is between November and February, with a spike in pricing around Christmas time. Rainy season begins in earnest in early June, with the hottest months just prior, April and May. The islands to the south of Bangkok are affected by separate monsoon cycles.

ENTERING THE COUNTRY: Thailand offers free 30-day visas to Americans upon arrival in any of its international airports, with 15-day visas offered for land entries. Overstaying your visa is not recommended.

CURRENCY: Thailand's currency is the Baht, available at ATMs throughout the country, with several large banks to choose from (1 USD=30 Thai Baht). Higher-end hotels and restaurants will accept credit cards but carrying Baht is recommended for day-to-day transactions, and will be appreciated at smaller stalls and lunch spots.

PROCEED WITH CAUTION WHEN DISCUSSING THE MONARCHY: Given the country's strict interpretation of its lèse-majesté law, travelers are strongly advised not to voice any negative thoughts about the monarchy. This includes statements about not just the king, but also others within the royal family.