

THAILAND

General Information

Thailand was for centuries known as 'Siam', the official title changing to 'Muang Thai' ('home of the free') in 1939. The country is located in Southeast Asia and borders Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia and Malaysia. It has a population of nearly 65 million in a country roughly the same size as France and has 3,219 kilometers of coastline.

Thailand is a constitutional monarchy with a long democratic tradition – political parties and elections. The current monarch is his majesty of the King Bhumibol Adulyadej – the world's longest reigning monarch. He is revered within Thailand and thoroughly respected throughout the world. His solid guidance has seen his kingdom through some of the country's more tumultuous episodes.

95% of Thais are Buddhist with a smaller Muslim minority (3.8%) predominantly living in Thailand's southern regions. Aside from this Thailand has a small number of Christians (0.5%) and a few Hindus (0.1%). Thailand prides itself on religious freedom and newer religions (Jehovah's Witness, etc.) are emerging.

Situated in the northern hemisphere but in the tropics, Thailand is a tropical country with often hot and rainy weather and annual monsoons. Thailand has a range of geographic regions - mountainous, plains and plateaus, as well as a number of beach areas.



Chiang Mai

Often referred to as the 'Rose of the North', Chiang Mai is the economic and cultural center of Northern Thailand and the focus of tourism within the region.

Located about 700 kilometers from Bangkok, it is one of Thailand's better known and most visited provinces. Originally the capital of the Lanna Thai kingdom created by King Mengrai in 1296, the province has played a major part in the development of the country. Situated on the Mae Ping River and around 310 meters above sea level, Chiang Mai is one of the kingdom's most beautiful provinces, featuring mountain ranges and hills amidst lush greenery and jungle.

Climate conditions in the area can create swirls of mist and fog in winter – an unusual sight in a tropical country. The province's numerous national parks are extremely fertile, have an abundance of flowers, and support a broad range of wildlife (the area is particularly associated with elephants).

The province is also famed as being a home to numerous tribal peoples and visits to tribal villages are a key component of the area's tourism. Some of the main attractions in the area include Wat Phra That Doi Suthep and Doi Intanon – Thailand's biggest mountain.

Chiang Mai tourist attractions

With a legacy of 700 years of history and its own distinctive culture Chiang Mai offers its five million annual tourists a busy brochure of attractions. Only Bangkok has more urban sites to point your camera at, and this laidback city offers numerous stunning temples, waterfalls and national parks, ancient ruins, fascinating markets and animal parks for family fun.

CULTURE

Wat Prathat Doi Suthep

This is one of Thailand's most famous temples, overlooking the city from its spectacular mountain location. The winding road up to the temple passes a couple of nice waterfalls and the view from the temple platform is impressive.

The site dates from 1386 and is revered among Thais as one of the country's most important religious sites. With its distinctive gilded chedi and marble-floored courtyard, the temple is full of symbolism and is usually busy. If the 300 steps leading up to the temple are too much for you, a lift offers a quick shortcut.



On the way up to the temple, it's worth looking at Huay Kaew and Monthathan Falls - a meditation center is attached to the temple and food, drink and souvenirs are on sale at the entrance. *Open: 06:00-21:00.*

Wat Chiang Man

Chiang Mai's oldest temple began construction shortly after the city's founding in 1296, and has pretty grounds near the Sripum corner of the old city. It's one of the most important historic sites in Chiang Mai and although not as photogenic as other temples (and somewhat neglected), it



contains two ancient, diminutive Buddha images; one purported to be almost 2,000 years old. This temple is a good example of classic Lanna architecture. *Open: 06:00-17:00.*

Wat Chedi Luang

This is perhaps Chiang Mai's most striking relic and was once the most important in the Lanna capital. Dating from 1441, the 91-metre high pagoda was felled to half that height in an earthquake in the late 16th century. To this day the partially renovated chedi remains the tallest structure in the old city and the main attraction. There are several Viharn or Ubosots in the compound as well. The much revered Emerald Buddha, found in the Grand Palace in Bangkok, briefly lived here during its remarkable travels. *Open: 06:00-17:00.*



Wat Phra Singh

Situated in the middle of the old city, this temple contains Chiang Mai's most important Buddha statue. The recently restored Viharn Lai Kham is a classic example of a Lanna-style viharn while the main viharn (c. 15th century) houses the much venerated Phra Siying Buddha, which has a murky background yet a unique lion-style originating from Sri Lanka. A distinctive, elevated *Hoi Tra* (scriptures repository) is also on site. The mural paintings on the walls of Wat Phra Singh depict the scenes of Suwannahong and Sang Thong classic literature. *Open: 06:00-17:00.*



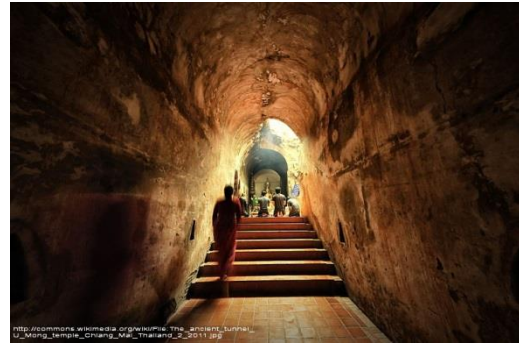
Wiang Kum Kam

The original Chiang Mai city was unearthed in 1984 and is situated just outside the modern metropolitan area, to the southwest. It was built by King Mengrai as his first attempt to establish a settlement in the valley before chronic flooding of the Ping River forced its abandonment. Almost 20 temples have been uncovered in the area and a ride by horse-drawn carriage, or by bicycle, will let you take most of them in within half a day. Some have been well excavated and offer a fascinating 'Atlantis of Chiang Mai'. There is also the striking Chedi Liam in the area, attached to a working temple. *Open: 08:00-17:00. Tel (053) 140 322, 277 322; email: tatchmai@tat.or.th.*



Wat U Mong

This forest retreat was built in 1296 by King Mengrai and is located in a rustic setting near Suthep Road. It was renovated during the reign of King Keu Na, but is unlike the usual gaudy temples of Thailand, being a retreat comprising mostly of forested grounds. It features a unique tunnel-like construction beneath an ancient chedi and there is a lake full of overfed fish and a deer sanctuary behind the temple on the mountain slopes. *Open: 08:00-17:00.*



Wat Suan Dok

This temple was established to the west of the old town as a Buddhist university that survives to this day and is noted for its collection of stark chedis under which several former rulers of Lanna have their ashes interred. There is a monk chat here every evening from 17:00, where novice monks practise their English by answering questions on Buddhism. *Open: 06:00-17:00.*



Wat Doi Kham

Rarely visited by the throngs of tourists coming to the city, this temple, located behind the Royal Flora grounds, pre-dates the city itself and is unremarkable except for a giant seated Buddha that was constructed more recently. *Open: 08:00-17:00.*



Wat Jed Yod

Built to host the Eight World Buddhist Council in 1477, the seven-spined Chedi is modelled on a similar one in Bodhgaya, where the Buddha reached enlightenment. The ashes of King Tilokarat, who supervised its construction, are interred here, and there is a sizeable Viharn with striking murals in the large spacious grounds. *Open: 08:00-17:00.*



Other Chiang Mai temples

There are many other temples in Chiang Mai that display various styles of influence over the seven centuries of the life of the city. Three striking temples, **Wat Bupparam**, **Wat Mahawan** and **Wat Chetawan**, are all found on the central Thapae Road. Others that are particularly worth getting to are **Wat Lokmoli**, outside the northwest corner of the moat, with its impressive chedi, and **Wat Chaimongkhon**, which fronts the river and has a garish Chinese style to it.

ADVENTURE

The city of Chiang Mai has a wide variety of activities to suit all ages and preferences. It's certainly one of the draw cards of the city, offering a far greater choice than any other tourist centre in Thailand. Activities on offer include: trekking, mountain biking, walking, elephant riding (and mahout courses), whitewater rafting and kayaking, ATV and motorbike trips, soft adventure activities and extreme sports such as bungee jumping and even drift karting. There is also tenpin bowling, tennis, golf, walking and swimming and kick boxing camps. More sedate activities include cooking courses, meditation, yoga, tai chi and even shopping.

Soft adventures that offer a chance to get into the mountainous wilderness of Northern Thailand are a primary attraction in Chiang Mai, certainly for backpackers and even families. Numerous tour companies in the town centre offer a range of activities in Chiang Mai, either as day trips or multi-day adventures, at reasonable prices. Alternatively you can find your own way to some of these, or plan your own adventure on rented motorbikes. Here are the most recommended or popular activities.



Zip line and canopy tours in Chiang Mai

These treetop canopy tours are a popular and relatively new addition to the Chiang Mai adventure brochures and probably the best fun a family can have. **Flight of the Gibbon** is the original zipline adventure in the area comprising three kilometres of zip lines, sometimes suspending you 40m above the valley below. The entire system has been safety checked by an international inspector and the three-hour trip includes abseiling down giant dipterocarpus trees, walking across 'sky bridges' and hanging out on platforms high up in the jungle canopy. They also apparently have the longest single forest canopy zipline in the world. Flight of the Gibbon is located in the lesser visited Mae Takhrai national park on the east side of Chiang Mai's valley and includes a trip to the eco-village of Mae



Kampong. **Jungle Flight** offers a similar experience in the nearby mountains, and offers a shortened half-day tour. You'll probably wish you had spent more time in the canopy, however.

Whitewater rafting and kayaking in Chiang Mai

Chiang Mai is one of the best places in Thailand to go whitewater rafting since the nearby Mae Taeng river has an excellent run of grade three and four rapids. Several companies in town offer this experience. Siam Rivers is perhaps the most reliable, since their guides have been trained by international swift water rescue instructors.

They also offer kayaking for those experienced in the sport. The multi-adventure company The Peak also offers good services. Another outfit with competitive rates is Chiang Mai Adventure. Be warned!! There is a risk in this activity as whitewater sections of the river can be steep and powerful in the rainy season. Over the years there have been several fatalities, and the tour companies are rarely held responsible.



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Kayaking the whitewater is strictly for the experienced and expert paddler, but those who have no idea what a 'barrel roll' is, can spend a more leisurely day kayaking the upper reaches of the Ping river, on surf-style kayaks.



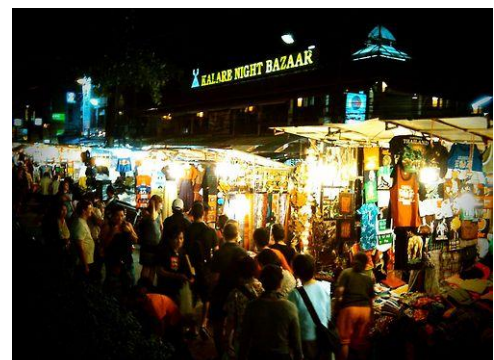
This a far safer and easier option for the whole family and a 'cool' option during the hot season as you navigate the creek-like parts of this river over tame rapids and through lush river banks of bamboo. The views of Chiang Dao mountain are fantastic and tours are also offered paddling the Mae Ngat Dam, provided by Chiang Mai Kayaking.

SHOPPING

Every evening, the centre of Chiang Mai comes alive with the massive Night Market that stretches for several blocks and includes restaurants, bars and entertainment. Few people visit Chiang Mai without picking up a few bargains here. In fact, the stalls that are squeezed on to the pavement and in the purpose-built arcades of Chang Klan Road are one of Chiang Mai's biggest attractions.

Night Bazaar

At the Chiang Mai Night Bazaar you can pick up everything and an astonishing variety of handicraft souvenirs, or sample the smoothness of the colourful silk on sale everywhere. You can have a suit measured up, ready for your collection the following evening or browse exquisite Asian silver jewelry



The Chiang Mai Night Market is considered legendary and certainly one of the cheapest places for tourists to shop in Thailand, owing to its close proximity to the source of products and the lower cost of living in Chiang Mai. It is situated along a three-block stretch of Chan Klan Road in the heart of the city, and within walking distance of most hotels.

Clustered around it are many restaurants and other useful services, such as camera shops, travel agents, internet cafes, massage and more. One popular activity is to have your portrait done all dressed up in traditional Thai costume. A word of warning; it does get crowded in the high season and the narrow lanes between the stalls become a human traffic jam. Many of the more traditional handicrafts can be found at the more pleasant Sunday Walking Street in the old town.



Wandering along the crowded pavements, admiring the beautifully-made handicrafts and seeking out bargains on more contemporary consumer goods, is the best way to enjoy the Chiang Mai Night market. Take your time and be patient but, most of all, learn how to bargain

Walking Street

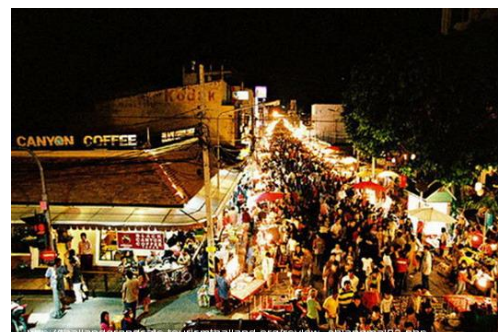
- Wualai Walking Street (Saturday Market):

Best known for its high quality authentic northern silver and lacquer wares, unique handicraft, Thai local food, and traditional performance, Wualai Walking Street is one of the most popular shopping destination in Chiang Mai. Come here to shop till you drop from 4 PM to 10 PM.



- Tha Pae Walking Street (Sunday Market):

Every Sunday from 7 PM until midnight, from Tha Pae Gate runs along the length of Ratchdamnoen Road is the famous Sunday Tha Pae Walking Street. Best known for its showcase of the northern craftsmanship product, Tha Pae Walking Street is a perfect place for souvenir shopping at a reasonable price.



Bosang umbrella and Thai handicraft village

Chiang Mai is rightly famous for its handicrafts industry, which supplies the Night Market and tourist souvenir vendors across Thailand. If you're planning on buying Thai handicrafts as gifts



to take home, or wholesale, then Chiang Mai is certainly the place to do so. Although you can pick these up from the Night Market or Sunday Walking Street, it's worth spending a morning visiting the sources in Borsang and Baan Tawai.

Handicrafts have been produced in these two satellite towns close to Chiang Mai for generations. Methods of wood carving and use of natural materials, such as saa (mulberry paper), among others, have been developed over hundreds of years by skilled artisans. Lately, a new generation of university educated art students have added their own contemporary styles.



OTHER

Phuping Palace and National Park

Located another six kilometres up the mountain, this site is decorated with plenty of colourful, exotic flowers. It serves as the royal winter residence from mid-December to early February, when it is closed to visitors. Carry on up the mountain and you visit a very touristy Hmong hill tribe village, Baan Doi Pui, or continue to a lovely viewpoint near the summit.



Chiang Mai Zoo

Spread out over a huge area, at the foot of Doi Suithep, is this exhausting zoo - it's very hilly - although there is a tram and a monorail. Most of the animals enjoy quite large natural habitats here, with inhabitants ranging from bears to penguins. The latest additions are two pandas (on loan from China) and their recent offspring, which have become national celebrities. There is also a brand new snow dome, which is a novelty for the locals. *Open: daily 08:00-17:00, 100 Huay Kaew Road, Suthep, tel: (053) 221 179, email: cmzooinfo@center@yahoo.com, website: www.chiangmaizoo.com.*



Chiang Mai Night Safari

One of Chiang Mai's newest attractions, this 120-acre woodland at the foot of Doi Suithep National Park is worthwhile for the whole family. A two-kilometre Jaguar



Trail around a pretty lake has many zoo-like enclosures and when it gets dark two different tram rides take visitors through open safari area full of African, Asia and South American predators and wild animals. It includes a large pavilion area with restaurant and Southeast Asia's biggest musical fountain. *Open: daily, 11:00-22:00, Day Safari (Thai version) – Depart every 30 mins, During 15:00-16:30 (the trip takes 60 mins), Night safari Tram ride (Thai version) – Depart 18:30, 19:30, 20:30, 21:30 and 22:00, Night safari Tram ride (English version) – Depart 18:50, 19:30, 20:30, 21:30 and 22:00. 33 Moo 12, Nong Kwai, Hang Dong, tel: (053) 999 000, Fax: (053) 999 099. More on the Night Safari. website: www.chiangmainightsafari.com.*

Chiang Mai Aquarium

Surprisingly, landlocked Chiang Mai now boasts the largest aquarium in Southeast Asia (opened in November, 2008). It's located inside the zoo and has an 8,000 cubic-litre tank that apparently includes the world's longest aquarium tunnel (at 133m). More than 8,000 aquatic species, including 250 fresh water varieties, are found here. *Open: 10.00-16.00 (Monday-Friday), 09:30-16:30 (Saturday-Sunday and Public Holiday); 100 HuayKaew Road, Suthep, tel: (053) 893 111, fax: (053) 892 100; email: info@chiangmaiaquarium.com, website: www.chiangmaiaquarium.com.*



Queen Sirikit Botanical Garden

Continue up the Mae Sa valley, just past Mae Sa Elephant Centre, and discover this lovely landscaped mountainside garden collection which covers an area of 560 acres among the cool hills of Mae Sa Valley. Home to over 700 species of plants, including cacti and some spectacular orchids, it also features a number of attractive nature walks, along with greenhouses, a pretty cascading river, restaurant and a great gift shop. *Open: 08:30-17:00. Queen Sirikit Botanic Garden, 100 Mu 9, Mae Ram Sub-district, Mae Rim, tel: (053) 841 000, email: bgo@qsbg.mail.go.th, website: www.qsbg.org.*



Royal Flora grounds

Developed as an 80-hectare flora expo in 2006/2007 to commemorate the King's 60th year on the throne, this enormous landscaped park with permanent exhibition space has become a public park and is nice for a stroll. It is located



near the Night Safari, south west of the city. *Open: 08:00-18:00 (daily). Mae Hie, Muang; tel: (053) 114 110-5, fax: (053) 114 196, email: rprp@hrdi.or.th, royalparkrajapruek2011@gmail.com, website: www.royalparkrajapruek.org.*

Elephant riding in Chiang Mai

There are a number of elephant camps where you can ride through the jungle on the back of these massive beasts and see them in action. There are camps in Mae Sa, Chiang Dao, Mae Taeng, Lampang and Mae Wang. Finding them can be tricky so it's best to arrange a tour through your guesthouse, hotel or a tour guide. Independent travellers can follow their tourist map to the Mae Sa Valley (north of the city) and drive up into the mountains to the well-signed and very popular Elephant Camp. The other camps around Chiang Mai tend to be less touristy and are preferred for longer day tours. Aside from watching the elephants bathing and eating, you can witness one of their entertaining shows where the elephants kick balls, beat drums, dance and even paint - it sounds silly but they have little other use now that logging has been banned. This is one way to keep the elephants and their mahouts employed, and makes for a great family outing.



Mae Sa Elephant Training Centre

Mae Sa offers elephant shows, bathing elephants and elephant rides. Located about an hour's drive into the Mae Sa Valley, this is a great outing for the whole family. There's even a bamboo rafting centre. It's one of several camps in the area, with the rival Mae Taman camp in Mae Tang operated by the estranged wife of this camp's owner.



There's another well-known camp in Lampang, and all provide a fun experience with elephants trained to paint, play musical instruments and conduct humorous stunts.

Doi Inthanon National Park mountain guide

At 2,565m, Doi Inthanon is the highest mountain in Thailand and its surrounding areas are designated as the Doi Inthanon National Park. The park itself lies roughly 90 minutes' drive southwest of Chiang Mai and is popular for its magnificent waterfalls, flora and excellent views. You can drive all the way to the top, where stately chedis have been erected in honour of the present King and Queen of Thailand. The climate up at the top is almost alpine and cool at all times of the year, with sub-zero (Celsius) temperatures in winter.

Halfway up is Wachiratan waterfall, which plunges over a 40m drop and cascades down through some suitable swimming pools. The final waterfall, Siriphum, can be seen from the road near the ranger station and campsite and is also a tall wisp of white water and usually less busy. However, the water level varies greatly from dry to rainy season.



On the top of Doi Inthanon are the Royal Chedis, from where you can have sweeping views of the valley below, especially to Mae Chaem. However, cloud cover is the norm and visibility may be poor. The chedis commemorate the 60th birthdays of the King and Queen respectively and contain Buddha images and tiled murals. There is a good photo opportunity at the peak in the form of a giant sign proclaiming 'The highest point in Thailand'.



<http://www.1stopchiangmai.com/>

<http://www.tourismthailand.org/See-and-Do/Sights-and-Attractions-Detail/>