

YOUR OWN PRIVATE THAILAND

It's easy to get hooked on Thailand. After all, Southeast Asia's most popular tourist destination is chock-full of gorgeous stupas, amazing street food, and see-it-to-believe-it islands with white sand beaches usually only found on postcards or screensavers. Best of all, not only is Bangkok just four hours by air from major Indian cities, it is also one of the few countries where Indian passport holders can get a visa on arrival. Whether you're a family plotting your first visit or are returning for the nth time, this five-point planner will help in planning the best Thai experiences and creating an itinerary.

BY MARGOT BIGG

The festival of Thai Songkran, held in April each year, features water fights and parades. The celebrations also have a more traditional element that includes families making time to pray together.

NORTH VS SOUTH



Visitors take in a beautiful sunrise from the Yun Lai Viewpoint (top) in northern Thailand's Mae Hong Song Province; Chiang Mai's Saturday Night Market (bottom) is a colourful array of stalls selling souvenirs and local food.

NORTHERN THAILAND

Why go?

Travellers seeking a culturally immersive experience are more likely to find what they're looking for in the north and northeast regions of Thailand. The north is known for hundreds of gorgeous temples and lush forested hills with excellent trekking trails. Motorcycling trips are popular, taking visitors through villages of the Karen hill tribe, nature reserves like Doi Inthanon National Park, and picturesque towns such as Mae Hong Son. It's in the north that travellers can really slow down and learn about life in Thailand by taking a cooking course; learning the basics of traditional Thai massage in tourist hot spots such as Chiang Mai and Pai; or spending time with rescued elephants at an animal sanctuary such as the Elephant Nature Park.

Seasons

Northern Thailand has three major seasons. The cooler, generally dry winter starts in November and carries on through February, with temperatures in the early or mid-20s. Things start to heat up by the time March rolls around. The weather then stays in the late 20s well into May, before the monsoon rains arrive and keep the area steadily drenched through October.

Don't Miss

If you're headed to northern Thailand, chances are you'll make your first stop in Chiang Mai, the country's second-largest city and epicentre of the region's cultural and economic life. Try to time your visit to coincide with the Saturday Night Market, when the city's central "Walking Street" fills up with street vendors hawking everything from rice paper lanterns to fried crickets. And if you happen to be in town during April, join in the annual Songkran festivities, in which participants ring in the New Year by engaging in playful water fights.



TWENTY-TWO HOURS/SHUTTERSTOCK (SUNRISE), NIJWATPHOTO/SHUTTERSTOCK (MARKET)

Thailand might be a small country, but the landscape and cultural diversity between the north and south is significant. From the historical temples of Chiang Mai to the beaches along the Gulf of Thailand, there is plenty to experience. This quick primer helps to align your interests with the country's geography.



The limestone outcrops around Railay Beach, Krabi, provide the perfect spot for rock climbing for beginners as well as seasoned climbers; Walking on hot coals (bottom) is among the many austerities practiced at Phuket's Vegetarian Festival.

SOUTHERN THAILAND

Why go?

Beach vacation seekers can head to southern Thailand, which is all about vast expanses of white sand, excellent water sports, and romantic sundowners. The south attracts travellers from around the world and from all walks of life, from hippie backpackers to families on a luxurious getaway at one of the country's umpteen posh resorts. Sample fresh catch of the day in Koh Lanta, try rock climbing on Krabi's limestone cliffs, or get pampered in Phuket's famous spas while enjoying gorgeous views of the sea. And though beach culture reigns supreme all along the southern coast, there are plenty of opportunities to go on jungle treks, visit temples, and immerse oneself in the laid-back southern Thai culture.

Seasons

Southern Thailand has two seasons, dry and wet, but temperatures are consistently warm throughout the year, usually hovering around the mid-20s. The rainy season starts in May and continues through November. The west coast on the Andaman Sea gets most of its rainfall during this time, while the eastern Gulf of Thailand coast is at its rainiest from September through December.

Don't Miss

The veg set and those with a taste for the bizarre will enjoy Phuket's Vegetarian Festival, held over nine days in October. While this annual celebration with its roots in the Thai Chinese community is a godsend for vegetarians thanks to the numerous stalls featuring fish-free delights, the focus is not on food. The festival name comes from the fact that participants abstain from eating meat during this period for spiritual reasons. The highlights include processions and ceremonies in which believers practice austerities ranging from fire-walking to facial piercing.



BEN HORTON/ALAMY/INDIAPICTURE (ROCK CLIMBING), LIM YA CHUI/DEMOTIX/CORBIS NEWS/CORBIS/IMAGE LIBRARY (FIRE WALKING)

THE BANGKOK NOODLE STORY

Visitors to Thailand, whether novices or die-hard foodies, cannot miss one of the country's most ubiquitous dishes as they negotiate the country's varied foodscape. Pad thai, that beloved local fry-up of flat noodles, veggies, tofu, and/or meat, can be found on most menus in restaurants as well as at street food carts throughout Bangkok. However, don't think of this as the definitive Thai noodle experience for there are plenty of wonderful dishes that merit more than a taste. Here are a few noodle favourites and where to find them.

KHAO SOI

Among the most popular Northern Thai dishes, the Burmese-influenced *khao soi* (from the coconut based *ohn no khao swè*) is a delicious departure from the fried, seafood-heavy noodle dishes popular in central and southern Thailand. This rich dish is made of fried, crisp egg noodles, mustard greens, shallots,

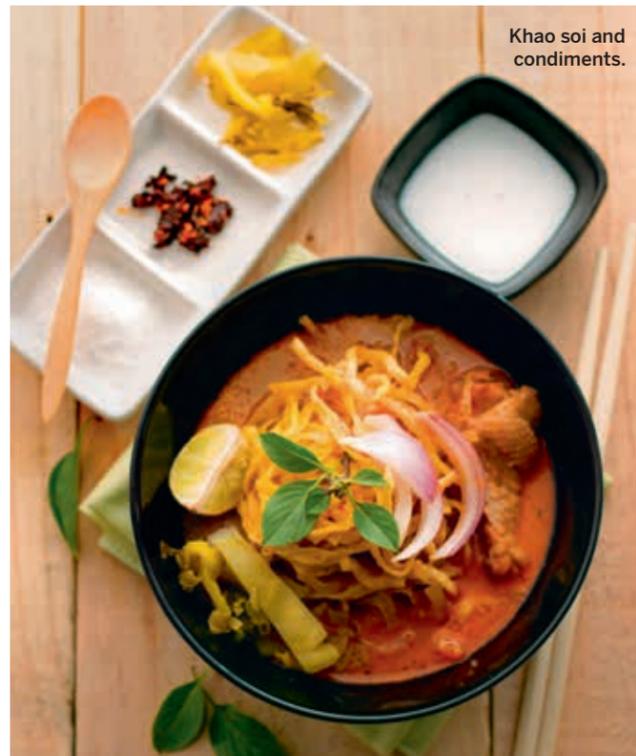
and meat, all drenched in a thin coconut-based curry. While it's easy to find *khao soi* in restaurants and at street food vendors in northern cities such as Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai, it's more challenging to track down this northern classic in the capital. Still, the few places that do offer it tend to do it well; the Bangkok branch of Chiang Mai restaurant Lam Duan Fah Ham is among the best (*Soi 58, Vibhavadi Rangsit; +66-2-5796403; THB35-45/₹66-85*).

PAD SEE EW

Second only to pad thai in popularity, *pad see ew* is a mix of wide, flat rice noodles, veggies, meat or tofu, shrimp, and eggs cooked in a mixture of dark and light soy sauce. While this beloved street food is easy to find throughout Bangkok, the meat-free *pad see ew* at May Kaidee Vegetarian Restaurant near the backpacker haven of Kao San Road is particularly tasty. The restaurant also offers cooking lessons for those who want to impress friends and family with their mastery over Thai vegetarian cooking (*Tanao Road, behind Burger King; +66-2-6294413; www.maykaidee.com; open 9 a.m.-10 p.m.; dishes from THB80/₹152; cooking class from THB1,000/₹1,920*).

SUKI HAENG

A lesser-known Thai noodle dish, *suki haeng* is a fried noodle dish consisting of glass noodles (ultra-thin vermicelli-style noodles), wok-fried with cabbage, carrots, bean sprouts, water spinach, eggs, and tofu and/or meat and served with a spicy, garlicky dip. It's similar to its soupier cousin, *sukiya* (a popular Japanese DIY hotpot dish reinterpreted for the Thai palette). Locals recommend the *suki haeng* at Elvis Suki, a street vendor meets cafeteria-style restaurant that's been serving up tasty and inexpensive renditions of the dish for decades (*No. 200/37 Soi Yotse, Phubplachai Road; +66 (0)2 223 4979; www.elvis-suki.com, THB40-50/₹76-95*).



Khao soi and condiments.



A vegetarian's guide to Bangkok

Although vegetarianism is not unheard of in Thailand, many local dishes incorporate fish sauce or shrimp paste, so vegetarian diners should specify if they don't want either. Also, note that vegetarian or "jay" dishes as they are called in Thai, often include eggs. If you don't eat eggs remember to separately request a version of the dish without them. And while vegetarians are usually better off eating at all-vegetarian restaurants or spots popular with tourists, there are some excellent veg street food options, particularly near the temples. Vegetarian food is usually indicated with a red "jay" inside a yellow circle or flag (in picture).

SHARPAECNIX/SHUTTER (FOOD); OH STUDIO IMAGE GALLERY (SIGN)



Pad thai, Thailand's ubiquitous noodle, veggie, meat, and sauce fry-up, is available at nearly every street corner. Vendors at Khao San Road, popular among backpackers, sell numerous variations of the dish.

STEVE VIDLER/ALAMY/INDAAGTURE

IF LIFE WERE A BEACH

Thailand has it all covered as far as beach pursuits go from wild party weekends to a quiet place to read, tan, and indulge in massages and cocktails. Use this island decoder to determine which tropical paradise suits you best.

GULF OF THAILAND

Koh Chang

Koh Chang is popular in part due to its proximity to Bangkok but there are plenty of reasons beyond just convenience to visit this large island. Along with white sand beaches and a vibrant backpacker and party scene, this large marine national park is full of gorgeous waterfalls, some of which spill into crystal-clear swimming holes.

Koh Pha Ngan

Party lovers should try and coordinate a visit to coincide with a full moon and head to the island of Koh Pha Ngan. It's known and loved for its monthly Full Moon Party held in the busy backpacker enclave of Hat Rin. Electronic music lovers

and anyone with a beach party bucket list won't want to miss this. Even travellers who'd rather sleep than dance at night are likely to find plenty of opportunities for quiet navel-gazing.

Koh Samui

One of the largest islands in Thailand, Koh Samui has been a tourism hotspot for decades. What started out as a haven for hippie backpackers, is now filled with lots of large hotels and glamorous resorts. In fact, it can get quite crowded in peak season, particularly in Chaweng. It is the island's most popular beach, lined with posh restaurants as well as casual seafood barbecues. However, once you get away from the main commercial areas, you can easily find gorgeous beaches, quiet rental bungalows, and low-key eateries.

Koh Chang or Elephant Island is a popular spot for boat trips. Guests enjoy snorkelling and fishing in the waters off the island, and visiting its verdant jungle and white sand beaches.

ONNE VAN DER WAL/TERRA/CORBIS/IMAGELIBRARY



ANDAMAN COAST

Koh Lanta

Popular with families and older couples, Koh Lanta attracts travellers who prefer rest and relaxation over all-night parties. Although it's got all the requisite white sand beaches and snorkelling opportunities that tourists love, the atmosphere is low-key and less commercial than some of Thailand's more popular holiday spots. It is a good place to while away the days swimming, getting massages, and sampling freshly caught seafood. Getting to the island requires some dedication however—travellers must first fly to Krabi and then take a ferry to the island.

Koh Lipe

With no cars and only a few motorcycle taxis, romantic Koh Lipe is ideal for a quiet and intimate holiday. The waters off this little island are shallow and crystalline, making it ideal for parents with young children or non-swimmers who want to take a dip safely. For the same reasons, it's popular with divers and snorkellers, and its nearby reefs are known for their abundance of aquatic life.

Phuket

Connected by a bridge to mainland peninsular Thailand, Phuket—Thailand's largest island—is suitable for travellers who value luxury; some of the country's most opulent resorts are situated here. Phuket is popular with package tourists and has plenty to offer families, but certain areas can get loud and crowded during peak tourist season (November-March).



Phuket is well known for its vibrant nightlife (top) that includes everything from cabaret shows to live bands and performances by international DJs; Swimming in Koh Lipe's shallow, crystal-clear waters (bottom) is pure joy.

STEPHEN J. BOITANO/LONELY PLANET IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES (NIGHTLIFE), YVAN COHEN/GETTY IMAGES (SWIMMERS)

AN OUTDOOR ADVENTURELAND



Kayaking tours are a popular way to explore the mangrove forests and limestone caves in the northern part of Krabi.

SEA KAYAKING IN PHANG NGA BAY

One of the most iconic images of Thailand that pops up the moment anyone googles the country is James Bond Island, a large chunk of rock immortalised in the 007 caper, *The Man with the Golden Gun* (1974). While this iconic island is among Phang Nga Bay's best-known attractions, the area is equally known for its exceptional sea kayaking. Day-long trips for beginners and experienced kayakers are available and usually include meals, hotel transfers, and gear. Longer expeditions—some of which last up to a week and include camping gear—are also an option.

While learning to paddle across the open sea and getting a good workout is a highlight for many travellers, some also use these kayaking trips to hone their photography skills. The unique vantage points offered on the kayaking routes allow for capturing unusual images of the water and the surrounding natural landscape. There are also plenty of opportunities to paddle into the mangroves for up-close views of birds, monkeys, snakes, and other jungle dwellers. Expect to get wet and be sure to bring waterproof bags to store electronics. John Gray's Sea Canoe is by far the most popular operator who has

been providing kayak ecotours in the area since 1983 (www.johngray-seacanoes.com).

TREKKING AND MOTOR BIKING AROUND CHIANG MAI

Most of Thailand's popular treks start out in Chiang Mai and tend to average 2-4 nights. Trekking outfitters generally provide a guide or two who double-up as cooks and translators, and porters can often be arranged. Travellers must be relatively fit to undertake some of the longer and more strenuous treks, but plenty of the shorter circuits only involve a few hours of walking a day. Bring a raincoat even when visiting outside of the rainy season, as unseasonal showers are common.

Treks generally stop in villages of the Karen hill tribe, where visitors can learn more about the rural way of life and maybe even share a meal with a local family. Many packages also involve visits to the Maetaeng Elephant Park and include a break at a waterfall for a quick dip. Travellers who want to spend time in the midst of nature can look into trekking options in the abundantly forested Doi Inthanon National Park. Turtles, lizards, gibbons, civets, and hundreds of species

SERGI REBORW/OAGE FOTOSTOCK/DINODIA

From climbing limestone cliffs along the Andaman coast to trekking in the hill villages in northernmost Thailand, there is plenty on offer for outdoor enthusiasts and those who thrive on adventure. Here are a few of Thailand's top outdoor activities and the best places to experience them.



of birds are found there as is Thailand's highest peak, the 8,415-foot-high Doi Inthanon.

Another way to explore Northern Thailand without hiking or taking guided tours is by renting a motorcycle. Head out on the Mae Hong Son Loop, a 600-kilometre ring of road that traverses valleys peppered with gorgeous temples, caves, hot springs, and viewpoints. The loop passes through the quiet town of Mae Sariang and the picturesque lakeside city of Mae Hong Son before leading up to the little backpacker village of Pai. The route takes around four days.

DIVING IN KOH TAO

Clear waters and spectacular marine life on the Gulf of Thailand and Andaman Sea make for excellent diving. The sites range from crystal-clear waters off the Similan Islands to the famous Richelieu Rock off Surin Islands in the Andaman Sea, best known for its violet-hued coral and regular manta ray and whale shark encounters. Those new to the world of diving can best get their feet wet in Koh Tao (Turtle Island) which sits just north of Koh Samui and Koh Pha Ngan. The 21-square-kilometre island has dozens of dive shops, and is easily the most popular beginner dive spot in Thailand, thanks to its abundance of easily accessible dive sites and affordable certification programmes. Popular operators include Asia Divers (www.asia-divers.com) and Ocean Sound Dive & Yoga (www.oceansoundkohtao.com).

Many dive schools offer scuba diving programmes for people who want to learn the basics in a day or two. However, if you have a few extra days to spare you're better off enrolling in a proper diving certification course. Once certified, you can



Travellers who want to experience Thailand beyond its beaches, often hike through Doi Inthanon National Park (left); Koh Tao (right) is a hotspot for scuba diving.

dive without an instructor at dive spots around the world. Certifications are generally issued under the auspices of PADI (the Professional Association of Diving Instructors) or the SSI (Scuba Schools International) and beginner courses last three to four days. Most diving courses take aspiring divers to the area's best-known dive sites, including the anemone-covered Chumphon Pinnacle, a popular habitat for sailfish, eels, and colourful angelfish. Another not-to-be-missed site is the HTMS Sattakut, a WWII ship that was intentionally sunk in 2011 to create a dive site. It has since become a habitat for a host of aquatic species, including snappers and barracudas.

ROCK CLIMBING AT RAILAY BEACH

One of the best-known areas for rock climbing in Thailand, if not Southeast Asia, is Krabi Province's Railay Beach. The surrounding area is covered with hundreds of routes along limestone rocks suitable for everyone from beginners to experienced climbers.

Though there are plenty of climbing centres and most offer similar packages. These range from short beginner courses that cover basics such as knot-tying and belaying (controlling safety ropes) to more comprehensive programmes in sport climbing (in which climbers attach themselves to bolts fixed into the wall). Equipment—including shoes, harnesses, and helmets—is included in most packages, and children's courses and kids'-size equipment is available.

Railay also caters to the extreme sport of deep-water soloing. This activity involves climbing up sea cliffs—without the use of ropes or other protective gear—and relying on the depth of the sea waters to break your eventual (or planned) fall.

JOHN ELK/LONELY PLANET IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES (BRIDGE); SHUTTERSTOCK/INDIAPICTURE (DIVING)

TEMPLE RUN

Thousands of Buddhist temples or wats can be found throughout Thailand, as nearly 95 per cent of the population is Buddhist. From simple shrines to elaborate edifices with gilded towers and giant Buddha statues, these temples are repositories of history, learning, and faith. Discover some of the most beautiful structures in the country through this guide.



Pattaya's spectacular Sanctuary of Truth is carved in wood (left); Chiang Mai's Wat Phra That Doi Suthep (right) was founded in the 14th century.

WAT RONG KHUN, CHIANG RAI

Popularly referred to as the "White Temple," this iconic structure is the youngest of Thailand's landmarks, and a major reason why many visit Chiang Rai. The creation of Chiang Rai artist, Chalermchai Kositpipat, the temple itself is covered with intricate curlicue patterns, many highlighted in silver mirror work. Visitors approach the shrine via a narrow passageway flanked by faux fountains filled with hundreds of hellish arms reaching up; some carry bowls and others hold human skulls.

WAT PHRA THAT DOI SUTHEP, CHIANG MAI

Located just outside Chiang Mai on a hilltop overlooking the city, this temple dates back to 1383 when it was first established as a Buddhist monastery. Its main attraction is an enormous golden stupa, although the entire complex is a gorgeous amalgamation of intricately detailed structures topped with multi-tiered gables. Note that accessing the temple requires a steep climb up about 300 steps; those unable to make the trudge can take a lift to the top for THB30/₹57.

WAT ARUN, BANGKOK

Rising up from the west banks of the Chao Phraya River, Wat Arun is also known as the Temple of Dawn. It is celebrated for its gorgeous architecture, particularly the central *prang* (tower), which is decorated with intricate porcelain, glass patterns, and statuary. It is most beautiful at dusk, when the sun sets behind the structure, and at night when it is lit up—best viewed at that hour from the opposite side of the river.

THE SANCTUARY OF TRUTH, PATTAYA

Right on the beach overlooking the Gulf of Thailand, Pattaya's Sanctuary of Truth complex is an ornate 344-foot-high structure made of teak wood. Though not a temple in the traditional sense, its interiors feature panel upon panel of intricately carved artistic interpretations of dharmic philosophies—notably Mahayana Buddhism and Vedic traditions—with a strong Khmer influence reminiscent of Cambodia's Angkor Wat. The four halls are full of beautifully carved reliefs depicting Hindu deities, bodhisattvas, and cosmological symbols.

PAUL BIRIS/MOMENT OPEN/GETTY IMAGES (TOWER); TAKE PHOTO/SHUTTERSTOCK (STATUE)

Although Chiang Rai's Wat Rong Khun has been for open less than two decades, this stunning masterpiece has already established itself as one of Northern Thailand's most iconic structures.

