

# The Best of Thailand

**T**raffic and tranquility, beaches and bargains, rural roads, ancient palaces, and stunning temples: Thailand has much to offer anyone from the casual visitor in search of affordable luxury to the rugged backpacker hoping to get off the track. What brings visitors back time and again is the allure of the ephemeral: seemingly spontaneous festivals, chance meetings, and whimsical moments in an unpredictable land of ancient culture and elusive wisdom. The kingdom's most notable sites are opulent royal palaces, ancient ruins, and peak-roofed temples housing serene images of the Buddha, places where the past comes alive in architecture and artwork as well as beliefs and practices. In bustling Bangkok, you'll find simple canal and riverside communities, a sprawling Chinatown, an ultra-modern cityscape, and giant outdoor markets that are a heady mix of sights, sounds, and smells. Beyond urban Thailand are flat plains carpeted with rice paddies and dotted with tiny villages, mountains of luxuriant teak forests where elephants once roamed wild, long stretches of white sand beach, and acres of coconut palms and rubber plantations on the southern islands and eastern gulf. Rural life is languid and hospitable, and behind every warm Thai smile there is true kindness and a certain wisdom of the ancients.

In Thailand you'll find adventure of all kinds—extreme sports on land and sea, trekking to tribal villages and rugged roads to bordertowns and outposts. The countryside is ripe for exploration by bus, train, car, motorbike, and boat, and visitors are only limited by their tolerance for hard-earned adventures. Gorgeous tropical island beaches play host to laid-back bungalow guesthouses and posh, Thai-style five-star resorts. The cuisine is captivating, a unique blend of sweet, sour, and salty tastes tempered with fiery spice.

In this chapter we list the best restaurants and hotels, as well as hints on where to find what you're looking for in this dazzling kingdom.

## 1 The Best Cultural Experiences

- **Celebrate Songkran:** April 13 marks the first day of *Songkran*, the Thai New Year. Traditionally, Thais wash the Buddha images in local temples with water and then sprinkle water on the hands of their elders as a show of filial piety. In recent years, however, *Songkran* has escalated into a nationwide water fight, and Khao San Road, the backpacker street in Bangkok, is the epicenter of water spraying, talc throwing, and good times. It is a riot, but stay inside unless you don't mind being wet to the bone, caked with chunks of powder, and aching from laughter. See p. 303.
- **Get off the "Track":** Whether just a day trip out of busy Bangkok or a ride inland from the beach resort of your choice, Thailand is a great place to explore the back of beyond and learn a little something about slow

living and hospitality. In areas like the Mae Hong Son Loop northwest of Chiang Mai, the Golden Triangle near Chiang Rai, or more out-of-the-way locations like Isan, the large northeastern territory near Laos offers adventures around every corner. Narrow roads, hairpin turns, sweltering heat, and unpredictable drivers make for lots of excitement. Jungle terrain supporting little-visited villages, paddy-carpeted valleys dotted with quaint wooden farmhouses, rolling hills green with lush foliage and jutting limestone cliffs are what attract so many. Adventure awaits. See chapters 12 through 15.

- **Make merit:** While many Thai people will “make merit” on a daily basis, it is possible for visitors to participate in this age-old tradition as well. This custom—gestures that secure a better life here and hereafter—can be performed in any number of ways: offer pails filled with necessary daily objects like soaps, food, robes, and a small donation to the abbot of a monastery; contribute to a monk’s morning meal with offerings of food; or purchase a caged bird at one of the temple complexes and set it free (a great photo op). It is best to consult a Thai person about formalities and customs beforehand in order to understand complex matters of etiquette. And remember, always thank the receiving monk—he will never thank you. He never begs; only offers you the opportunity to better your life.
- **Pet an Elephant:** Thailand’s gentle giants never fail to amaze, and it isn’t uncommon to see elephants padding along city streets. If these huge creatures are at first daunting, time spent around them proves their intelligence, grace, and majesty—the very symbols of the nation.

The many elephant camps in and around Chiang Mai are a good entree into the world of elephants, and there are tourist “pony-ride” style attractions and shows in many of the resort areas, but by far the best way to get to know an elephant is to visit or take a trek with the elephants from the Young Elephant Training Center in Lampang (☎ 05422-9042).

Officials claim that the practice is coming to an end, but elephants are often used in big cities as ploys to collect donations from diners and shoppers. You’ll be asked to buy a 20B (50¢) bunch of sugarcane, and the mahout, often guys who just rent the animals for the night like a livery cab, pockets the difference. It is a pity to see these majestic creatures wandering in traffic, blinking lights hanging from their tails, and it is tempting to buy some sugarcane and get close to the animals, but the real charity would be to buy the animal itself and free it from abusive handlers.

- **Shop ‘til you drop:** It is a full-contact sport in Thailand and there are a variety of venues where you can pick up anything from fine local crafts, weaving, and jewelry, to top brand-name items (or copies thereof). The busy markets are certainly the most atmospheric: Chatuchak, the weekend market, and Suan Lum, the night market in Bangkok, the busy Night Bazaar in Chiang Mai, and the many small markets in every small town. Thai towns of any size all support large retail outlets of varying quality, from small discount department stores to luxury malls like the Emporium or Gaysorn Plaza in Bangkok. Bangkok’s crazy Mah Boon Krong (MBK) Shopping Center or Siam Square is as reflective of current Thai culture as any temple or tour site, and a visit is a way to participate in Thai

pop culture anthropologist-style and pick up affordable gifts for the folks back home. See the “Shopping” section at the end of any destination chapter.

- **Discover Spirit Houses:** Take the time to notice one of these elaborate creations. Like dollhouse-size dainty shrines, some of them quite elaborate, spirit houses are usually set atop an eye-level post and can be seen in nearly every yard or business entry. They are meant to house spirits—family spirits or spirits of former dwellers—and every morning or on auspicious days householders will place offerings of flowers, drinks, and food to care for the spirits and keep them happy. The spirit house is erected shortly after a new occupant enters a home.

Each municipality also has a “city shrine,” a larger spirit house maintained for the entire town. These will always be well-tended, draped with colorful garlands and offerings. This rarely neglect the shrines, their ancestors, or the spirit world—a tradition that is as alive today as it has been for centuries.

- **Surrender to Fate:** In Thailand, fate works in strange ways—a broken down bus, nobody who speaks English for miles, help in the form of a kind stranger on a motorbike and a friend for life. When faced with big changes on the road (and there are sure to be some), it can either ruin your day or actually make your whole experience. Repeat this phrase often: *mai pen rai* (“never mind”), and you will enjoy Thailand all the more.

## 2 The Best Super-Luxe Resorts & Spas

- **Amanpuri** (Phuket; ☎ 07632-4333): If you know Aman you know what comes with the high price. Everything done to a “T.” Amanpuri is the first Aman and still one of the best. Great day cruises and a fantastic spa.
- **Banyan Tree Phuket** (Phuket; ☎ 800/525-4800 or 07632-4374): With private villas that are pure romantic luxury, Banyan Tree is a favorite for honeymooners—with great options for dining and activities. See p. 247.
- **Rayavadee** (Krabi; ☎ 07562-0740): The two-story private bungalows at Rayavadee are on a luxury campus that opens to three beaches in different directions and lies in the shadow of some of the most dynamic, precipitous cliffs in the country. Rayavadee is a dynamic property featuring a room standard and service unparalleled anywhere in Thailand. See p. 264.
- **Pimalai Resort and Spa** (Ko Lanta; ☎ 07560-7999): On a remote stretch of beach far down the west coast of

Ko Lanta, an as-yet little-developed island of budget bungalows and low-end resorts, Pimalai is a shining gem of luxury private bungalows, fine dining, and great service. They offer direct boat connections, and it is the perfect, upmarket escape. See p. 270.

- **Chiva-Som International Health Resort** (Hua Hin; ☎ 03253-6536): Luxury accommodations and personalized care makes this a popular choice for visiting celebrities. After experiencing Chiva-Som’s beauty and health treatments, you’ll know how the rich and famous stay so rich and famous, and a visit here can be a good starting over point for a new chapter of health. See p. 183.
- **The Tong sai Bay** (Koh Samui; ☎ 07742-5015): Casual and classy, the large suites of Tong sai Bay are the model of “outdoor living,” overlooking a beautiful, isolated bay from on high. See p. 206

- **Sila Evason Hideaway and Spa** (Koh Samui; ☎ 07724-5678): A new superluxe campus of designer villas, fine dining, and a great spa. See p. 207.
- **The Santiburi Resort** (Koh Samui; ☎ 07742-5031): This was the first five-star on the one-time backpacker isle, and today is still a very inviting campus of luxury bungalows amid palm groves at seaside. See p. 204.
- **The Four Seasons Resort & Spa** (Chiang Mai; ☎ 800/545-4000 or 05329-8181): Luxurious Thai-style suites, excellent restaurants, a multitude

of activities, and the most amazing swimming pool you've ever seen await you at The Four Seasons. Don't forget to meet their resident water buffalo family—they work the resort's private rice paddies. See p. 312.

- **The Mandarin Oriental Dhara Dhevi** (Chiang Mai; ☎ 05388-8888): This is a new uber-luxe resort on the outskirts of Chiang Mai. The price is high and for good reason; accommodation and service is over-the-top, and it also houses a unique museum of Thai art and architecture.

### 3 The Best Mid- & High-end Resorts

- **Bangkok Marriott Resort & Spa** (Bangkok; ☎ 800/228-9290 or 02476-0022): After a day of crazy Bangkok traffic and exhausting sight-seeing, you'll be relieved to hop aboard the ferryboat that'll take you to this sanctuary on the other side of the river. A city hotel that looks like a resort, the Marriott is simultaneously convenient and remote. See p. 101.
- **Royal Cliff Beach Resort** (Pattaya; ☎ 03825-0421): A massive compound made of three distinct properties, this locally owned resort was one of the first and still one of the best, set well away from the Pattaya chaos (but close enough to go visit). See p. 166.
- **Amari Emerald Cove Resort** (Ko Chang; ☎ 03955-2000): New and meticulous, this stylish gem sets the stage for future development on Ko Chang, an island growing in popularity in the Eastern Gulf. See p. 176.
- **Katathani Hotel** (Phuket; ☎ 07633-0124): Newly renovated, on quiet Kata Noi Beach, Katathani is a good, affordable, cover-the-bases choice with plenty of quiet and atmosphere. See p. 238.
- **Hilton Phuket Arcadia Resort and Spa** (Phuket; ☎ 07639-6433): Newly

reopened as a Hilton, this sprawling resort has it all, including a great spa. See p. 241.

- **Amari Coral Beach Phuket** (Phuket; ☎ 07634-0106): A jewel in the Amari crown, this cozy resort overlooks Patong from on high and has all you'll need: great vistas, top services, and quiet. See p. 243.
- **Sheraton Krabi Beach Resort** (Krabi; ☎ 07562-8000): A self-contained enclave with a great spa, in-house dining, and lots of activities, the resort is set in a unique mangrove forest that daily ebbs and flows with the tide. See p. 267.
- **Hilton Hua Hin Resort and Spa** (Hua Hin; ☎ 03251-2888): Like a tidy city hotel in the heart of little Hua Hin, but with all the resort facilities and perks associated with the Hilton brand. See p. 184.
- **Laem Set Inn** (Koh Samui; ☎ 07742-4393): Laem Set is a shining star among the many cookie-cutter developments springing up over the island. In a quiet, isolated location the hotel's charming local decor and good amenities make for the ideal Samui getaway. See p. 213.

- **Peace Resort** (Koh Samui; ☎ 07742-5357): Modest and affordable, Peace Resort is just that—simple, comfortable, and peaceful. A good choice. See p. 206.
- **Coral Bay** (Koh Samui; ☎ 07742-2223): Large, semi-luxe, rustic bungalows on a verdant hillside overlooking a coral bay. Great little spa and services. See p. 209.
- **Anantara Resort and Spa Golden Triangle** (Chiang Saen; ☎ 05378-4084): There's nothing else like this luxurious resort overlooking the Mekong in the heart of a rugged region. Great spa and close to the Hall of Opium. See p. 184.

#### 4 The Best Luxury Hotels

- **The Oriental** (Bangkok; ☎ 800/526-6566 or 02236-0400): One of the world's premier hotels, the Oriental has its roots in the days of romantic steamship travel. On the Chao Praya River, ferries and long-tail boats stop at the pier regularly, making trips to old Bangkok incredibly simple and fun. See p. 100.
- **The Peninsula Bangkok** (Bangkok; ☎ 800/262-9467 in the U.S., 02861-2888 in Bangkok): One of those places where everything is automated and works, where the service is exacting without being effusive, where every detail is taken care of with alacrity. Everything at the Peninsula is new, shiny, and upscale, and the upper floors feature some of the best views of Bangkok. See p. 100.
- **The Sukhothai** (Bangkok; ☎ 02287-0222): Designed in a seamless Asian-styled contemporary luxury, Sukhothai's bold architecture successfully combines the best of old and new. See p. 103.
- **Metropolitan** (Bangkok; ☎ 02625-3333): Bangkok's latest catwalk for international celebs, hip Metropolitan has a sister hotel in London. See p. 103.
- **Sofitel Central Hua Hin Resort** (Hua Hin; ☎ 800/221-4542 or 03251-2021): Recent renovations and additions haven't altered this historic hotel's rich heritage, impeccable service, and fantastic grounds. A royal legacy. See p. 185.
- **Rachamankha** (Chiang Mai; ☎ 05390-4111): Stylish, sophisticated, a mini-museum of regional culture and style in Chiang Mai, new Rachamankha is one to watch. See p. 319.

#### 5 The Best Hotels with Character

- **The Atlanta** (Bangkok; ☎ 02252-6069): It is more or less "love it or leave it" at the Atlanta, one of Bangkok's quirkiest, most atmospheric haunts. Rooms are basic, but the hotel lobby is still decorated in the original Art Deco theme of the 1950s (the oldest unrenovated hotel in Bangkok). See p. 112.
- **Mom Tri's Boathouse** (Phuket; ☎ 07633-0015): Pricier than others in this category, Mom Tri's Boathouse is a longtime popular choice for long stays and return visitors right on the beach at Kata (also see their luxe hill-top resort). See p. 239.
- **Phra-Nang Inn** (Krabi; ☎ 07563-7130): From its rustic Thai-style log cabin exterior, to guest rooms with Chinese tiled floors, stucco walls pressed with tiny shells, canopy beds with seashell garlands, and odd slate

tiled bathrooms, the Phra-Nang never fails to delight. See p. 266.

- **Lotus Village** (Sukhothai; ☎ 05562-1484): An atmospheric guesthouse with fine, raised bungalows of teak and a certain mellow malaise that makes the place appealing (not far from the market and city center). See p. 289.
- **Cabbages & Condoms** (Pattaya; ☎ 03825-0556): A minihilltop resort with affordable rooms, Cabbages and Condoms touts its rural development and HIV protection mission all the while offering a great atmospheric stay outside of kooky Pattaya. See p. 167.
- **River View Lodge** (Chiang Mai; ☎ 05327-1109): A longtime Frommer's favorite, this quirky hotel looks over the Mae Ping River at the center of town, close to the Night Bazaar. See p. 317.
- **Tamarind Village** (Chiang Mai; ☎ 05341-8896): New on the scene and a masterful little escape within an enclosed compound right in the center of the old city in Chiang Mai,

Tamarind Village is budget boutique and quite cozy in a surprisingly pleasant blend of smoothed concrete, rattan matting, and local fabrics and carving. See p. 319.

- **The Golden Triangle Inn** (Chiang Rai; ☎ 05371-1339): One of the older choices in Chiang Rai, Golden Triangle keeps it simple and personalized. Preserving gardens and maintaining quaint guest rooms, the staff goes out of its way to make your stay enjoyable. See p. 359.
- **Belle Villa** (Pai; ☎ 05369-8226): On the outskirts of shanti-shanti Pai in the far north of Thailand, Belle Villa is cozy upscale riverside bungalows, a pool, and dining. Private, comfortable, and beautiful views. See p. 347.
- **Fern Resort** (Mae Hong Son; ☎ 05368-0001): You're well off the beaten path, and the place is just a collection of mid-range bungalows, but the setting is lovely and you can go on self-guided hikes with the resort's bevy of dogs. See p. 352.

## 6 The Best Fine Dining

- **Le Normandie** (Oriental Hotel, Bangkok; ☎ 02236-0400): The formal service and setting are a bit formidable, the prices are steep, but the food at The Normandie is to die for. See p. 116.
- **Bed Supper Club** (Bangkok; ☎ 02651-3537): Ever wanted to get in bed with Bangkok's young, hip elite? That's what it is all about at ultra-modern Bed Supper Club. Diners are feted from a limited menu nightly and sit (or lie) on huge, common beds, and nosh and hobnob to the tones of a house DJ. Great food and unique atmosphere. See p. 122.
- **Baan Kanitha** (Bangkok; ☎ 02253-4683): Authentic Thai tempered to

Western tastes and presented in stylish fashion in a cozy, always busy venue that feels like old Indochina. See p. 122.

- **Sala Rim Nam** (Bangkok; ☎ 02437-2918): Across the river from and managed by the Oriental Hotel, Sala Rim Nam is the best choice for authentic Thai dance and fine Thai buffet dining. See p. 128.
- **New York Steakhouse** (Bangkok; ☎ 02656-9798): Just closed the deal and want to celebrate (or impress)? This authentic steakhouse at the JW Marriott is where to do it up right. Imported steaks, wines, and ales. Nothing like it in town. See p. 123.

- **Mom Tri's Boathouse & Villa Royale aka The Boathouse** (Boathouse Inn, Phuket; ☎ 07633-0015): While there are other more formal dining experiences on the island, the Boathouse Inn has first-class cuisine—so delicious, travelers enroll in their cookery school to learn their secrets. Wine lovers appreciate their fine selection of labels. See p. 251.
- **Le Coq d'Or** (Chiang Mai; ☎ 05328-2024): Have your French cuisine in a

delightful old British country house in northern Thailand. Coq d'Or's menu is limited, but each offering is done to perfection. See p. 321.

- **Le Grand Lanna** (Chiang Mai; ☎ 05326-2569): Fine Thai dining at affordable prices, this longtime favorite is a stylish setup, complete with live Thai music and dance, and great for a romantic evening. See p. 324.

## 7 The Best Small Restaurants

- **May Kaidee** (Bangkok; ☎ 02629-4839): It is just tables in an alley-way, and you choose from a limited picture menu, writing your own order (and the service is hit or miss), but friendly May serves up some of the best authentic Thai food going, and it's all vegetarian to boot. See p. 127.
- **Le Bouchon** (Bangkok; ☎ 02234-9109): A real find, this hole in the wall fine French restaurant is in the thick of seedy Patpong. Real French, a long wine list, and a hoot to get there down the busy red-light soi.
- **Somboon Seafood** (Bangkok; ☎ 02233-3104): A unique local spot, four floors of chaos every evening and a crab curry to die for.
- **Lemongrass** (Bangkok; ☎ 02258-8637): Real Thai served Western-style in an atmospheric storefront just a stone's throw from the Emporium.
- **Ka Jok See** (Phuket Town; ☎ 07621-7903): A unique one, Ka Jok See—smart decor, chic and elite, and very, very good Thai food. The kind of hush-hush upscale joint that attracts hotel GMs and mafia Dons. See p. 254.
- **Tatanka** (Phuket; ☎ 07632-4349): Just outside of the luxurious Laguna Beach Complex, Phuket's upscale community of resorts, Tatanka is the answer to dull hotel restaurants, a

panoply of international tastes in a constantly evolving menu. Worth the trip from other beaches. See p. 253.

- **The Mangrove** (Koh Samui; ☎ 07742-7584): With a roster of daily specials dreamed up by a vibrant husband-and-wife team, the Mangrove is the best fine dining choice on the island. Don't miss it (out by the airport).
- **Itsara** (Hua Hin; ☎ 03253-0574): Set in a 1920s era villa at seaside, this Thai and seafood restaurant is a local favorite and a fun evening. See p. 187.
- **Dream Café** (Sukhothai; ☎ 05561-2081): With a quiet courtyard out back, and cool indoor seating amid decor that is more like an old carved temple, little Dream Café is a fun find and a great place to relax after a day of temple touring. See p. 290.
- **Khaomao-Khaofang Restaurant** (Mae Sot; ☎ 05553-2483): As much an oddity as it is a restaurant, the organic-themed decor of the upscale Khaomao-Khaofang would be wonderfully chic in Bangkok or Chiang Mai, but it comes off as somehow otherworldly in tiny Mae Sot, as do the portraits of Thailand's best and brightest who have visited. The place is out in the boonies on the Burmese border and the upscale design couldn't be more out of place, but the food is great

and the atmosphere is laid-back, if a bit surreal. See p. 295.

- **The Whole Earth** (Chiang Mai; ☎ 05328-2463): Real Thai, Indian, and great vegetarian food served in a quiet *sala* at the city center. See p. 324.
- **The House** (Chiang Mai; ☎ 05341-9011): Stylish and romantic, set in an old villa on the edge of the Old City of Chiang Mai, the cool and candlelit House serves innovative Pacific Rim Fusion cuisine. See p. 322.
- **Golden Triangle Café** (Chiang Rai; ☎ 05371-1339): The Thai menu here tops the list—almost a guidebook of Thai cuisine. Outside of Chiang Rai’s busy market, this is the best dining going. A great meal, plus an education. See p. 359.
- **Baan Benjarong** (Pai; ☎ 05369-8010): Find this little place if you’re in far northern Pai: a great feed of authentic local cuisine for very little. See p. 348.

## 8 The Best Party Beaches

- **Patong Beach** (Phuket): The busiest beachside strip on Phuket, Patong is a great place for shopping, dining, and the nightlife. Though a bit seedy along some side streets, it is a lot of fun and kicks late every night. The beach isn’t the greatest, but it is a good area to yip it up at night. See chapter 9.
- **Chaweng Beach** (Koh Samui): If you like the beach, but don’t want to feel like you’re marooned, then Chaweng has all the action you’re looking for. With countless dining options, shopping, nightlife choices, and activities (and lots of tourists enjoying the same), Chaweng can be a lot of fun and parties late into the night with some raucous little clubs and young crowds. Comparisons with Patong (on Phuket island) are apt. See chapter 9.
- **Haad Rin** (Ko Phangan): People still talk about it in hushed tones, but the infamous Full Moon Parties on Ko Phangan’s Haad Rin have been attracting crowds of rave babies in the thousands. Drug busts are on the rise and the parties are becoming a more “packaged” experience than the more grass-roots hoedowns they once were, but it is where to get your proverbial “freak on” in Thailand. See chapter 9.
- **Pattaya** (Pattaya, Eastern Seaboard): The infamous red-light capital of Thailand, Pattaya’s very origins were as a base for U.S. troops on R and R from fighting in Vietnam, and the city still has a certain “last stop before hell” feel to it. The go-gos and beer bars of Pattaya attract guys from all over the world. See chapter 7.

## 9 The Best Outdoor Adventures

- **Trekking** (Northern Thailand): A top draw for would-be adventurers, trekking is a great way to get out of the maze and get up among lush jungle terrain and meet with unique cultural experiences in hill-tribe villages. See the many options about Thailand’s far north in chapters 11 through 14.
- **Rock Climbing at Raillay Beach** (Krabi): The dynamic karst cliffs above Krabi’s Raillay beach make for some of the best sport rock-climbing in the world. But you don’t have to be an expert. Beginners are welcome to sign up for an intro course and enjoy the challenge and the breathtaking views from on high. See chapter 9.



- **Scuba Diving:** If you're not certified, Thailand is a great place to do it; scuba services are affordable yet offer a high standard of safety, and many large outfitters have long track-records in the business and experienced expat staff. The most popular centers—Phuket, Ko Phi Phi, Koh Samui, and nearby Ko Tao (almost strictly a divers island)—have the largest concentration of operators to beautiful coral sites with lots of marine life. The best scuba operators offer all levels of PADI courses, daily junkets, and longer stays on live-aboard trips—even short introduction dives for beginners. See chapters 7, 8, and 9.
- **Snorkeling just about anywhere:** With huge living reefs and other odd creatures close to the water's surface, snorkeling in both the Andaman Sea and the Gulf of Thailand opens up under-the-sea wonders to anybody who can swim (or even just float). Check out Phuket's bays, Ko Phi Phi, areas around Krabi, Koh Samui, and islands along the eastern seaboard. See chapters 7, 8, and 9.
- **White-Water Rafting (Pai):** Paddle through protected forests and along canyon walls lined with fossils and be carried over wild rapids as well as beautiful calmer stretches. Thai Adventure Rafting organizes exciting but safe tours from their office in laid-back little Pai. See chapter 13.

## 10 The Best of Natural Thailand

- **Phang Nga Bay** (near Phuket): Imagine yourself in a Chinese scroll painting. Above you are hundreds of towering cliffs, jagged limestone towers peppered with lonely trees—each one an island in a peaceful bay. This place has gotten so sadly touristy, but it really is very beautiful. You won't believe your eyes. See chapter 9.
- **The Road from Chiang Mai to Mae Hong Son:** Mountaintops open onto views of the misty hills all the way to Myanmar (Burma), while valleys are filled with pleasant farming communities and shimmering rice paddies. The overland route to this Myanmar border town leads you through the foothills of the Himalayas. See chapter 12.
- **Khao Yai National Park** (northeast): Thailand's oldest and most visited park still supports lots of wildlife, from elephants and even tigers to more than 300 species of birds. Hike along nature trails, or camp out and hold a vigil in high watchtowers at night, the best time to see the nocturnal creatures in action. See chapter 6.
- **Khao Sok** (from Surat Thani or Phuket): Best visited by kayak (a few companies arrange custom trips; try Paddle Asia, ☎ 07631-1222; www.paddleasia.com), the hilly jungles and hidden bays of Khao Sok are your best chance to witness rare jungle animals like tapirs, sloths, bears, and beautiful hornbills. See "Day Trips from Surat Thani" in chapter 8.

## 11 The Best Offbeat Vacation Activities

- **Northern Thailand by Motorcycle:** Be careful (riding a bike is statistically the most dangerous thing going in the kingdom), but travel by motorbike is a great way to see the countryside. With good paved roads, plenty of gasoline stations and rest stops, and friendly folks along the way to lend a hand, touring the kingdom by motorcycle is exhilarating. It's best around the Mae Hong Son Loop northwest of Chiang Mai, but anywhere will do

(Isan is great to explore). Mountain passes, wandering rivers, small villages and towns, the rural roads of the Thai north pass by natural wonders and temples glorious and pedestrian, and the beauty of riding a motorbike is that you can make your own itinerary, stop and smell the flowers, or hit the accelerator and get bugs in your teeth. Get your motor running. See chapters 11 through 14.

- **Novice monk and meditation programs:** Almost every Thai man enters the sangha, or monkhood, for some period of time, usually just a few weeks as a young man and again later, during marriage. Since the first Western spiritual seekers started coming in droves to Thailand in the 1970s and '80s, many monasteries opened their doors to foreign laypeople interested in practicing meditation. Opportunities abound in Thailand for joining meditation courses of varying length and intensity, most in the Theravada Buddhist tradition of Vipassana, or "Insight" meditation. In the south, try Wat Suan Mohk (near Surat Thani) or Wat Kow Thom (on Ko

Phangan). In the north, try Wat Rampoeng (near Chiang Mai). In Bangkok, try Wat Mahathat.

- **Become an Elephant Mahout** (Lampang, near Chiang Mai; ☎ 05422-9042): Sign-up for a homestay or longer trek with the Young Elephant Training Center and you'll get down and dirty with pachyderms; this is not a picnic or pony ride. You'll be given a set of baggy elephant-trainer togs and taught the language of the elephants (a mix of the Thai and Karen languages). Participants spend the better part of the day caring for the animals, feeding and washing them, as well as learning all that you need to hop on the neck (no basket ride here) and steer your own two tons of elephant. On multiday treks, you'll be assigned your own animal and ride alone.
- **One Nose-job or Two?** (Phuket): **Medical Tourism** is all the rage in Thailand, and many folks find that the cost and quality of many procedures (particularly cosmetic work) is so good in Thailand that it is worth the trip, and the savings affords you a groovy recovery on the beach.

## 12 The Best Shopping

- **Chatuchak Weekend Market** (Bangkok): A tourist attraction in its own right, Thailand's largest market is a never-ending village of bargains—from fighting cocks to clothing, tools, antiques, and so much more. Don't get lost (you will). See chapter 6.
- **Suan Lum Night Market** (Bangkok): Newly set up near Lumpini (and soon a stop on the subway), the Suan Lum Night Market is a better choice, especially with the kids, than a visit to the crazy night market in the red-light area of Patpong. At Suan Lum, you can find similar goods to those at the

Weekend Market, as well as some newer high-end shops. See chapter 6.

- **Night Bazaar** (Chiang Mai): Tribal crafts and locally produced items line Chang Klan Road and the giant market building—find bags, clothes, jewelry, and trinkets, plus cheap knockoffs. Don't forget to bargain. See chapter 12.
- **Sankampaeng Road** (Chiang Mai): This 9 kilometer (5½-mile) stretch of highway is home to shops, showrooms, and factories with Thailand's best handicrafts—bronze and silver, furniture, ceramics, antiques, umbrellas, silks and cottons, and paper goods. See chapter 13.

### 13 The Most Intriguing Archaeological Sights

- **Ayuthaya:** The former capital of Siam was one of the world's largest and most sophisticated cities before it was sacked by the Burmese in 1756. Today it remains one of Thailand's greatest historical treasures, with abundant evidence of its former grandeur. It is easily reached in a day trip from Bangkok. See chapter 6.
- **Sukhothai:** Founded in 1238, Sukhothai (The Dawn of Happiness) was a capital of an early Thai kingdom. Many of the ruins of this religious and cultural center are faithfully preserved and well maintained in an idyllic setting. See chapter 11.

### 14 The Best Museums

- **The National Museum** (Bangkok): Simply the biggest and best repository of the nation's treasures. Objects from throughout Thailand's long and various history include beautiful stone carvings of Hindu deities, exquisite Buddha images, gold jewelry, ceramics, royal costumes, wood carvings, musical instruments, and more. See p. 135.
- **The Hall of Opium** (Near Chiang Saen at the Golden Triangle): Newly opened to replace a tiny roadside shack that drew tourists for years to the same purpose: explaining the cultivation process and history of opium growth in the Golden Triangle Region. This new museum, supported by the royal family, is a large, luxurious campus overlooking the Mekong and displays are quite high-tech and informative. See p. 363.

### 15 The Best Small Towns

- **Pai:** Not your typical tiny mountain-valley farming village, Pai is a favorite for budget travelers who want to put their feet up and relax. The scenery is gorgeous, bungalows are cheap, food is good—and the nightlife is surprisingly fun. You will want to stay longer than you planned. See chapter 13.
- **Mae Sot:** A charming little border town—you can jump over to Burma on a day pass, or stay and shop for Burmese trinkets in the market on the Thailand side of the river. Small and friendly, this town is very accessible to foreigners. See chapter 10.
- **Nong Khai** (Isan): A busy bordertown perched on the edge of the Friendship Bridge between Thailand and Laos, Nong Khai has a sprawling central market and supports some quiet little neighborhoods where budget guesthouses kind of suck you in. Day trips by bicycle to the unique sculpture gardens near town or, much further afield by car or bus to an ancient archeological oddity will keep you busy, but you may not want to be; this is a good place to put your feet up and reflect while watching the mighty Mekong flow past. See chapter 14.

## 16 The Most Fascinating Temples

- **Wat Phra Kaeo** (Bangkok): With its flamboyant colors and rich details, this shrine is a magnificent setting for Thailand's most revered image, the Emerald Buddha. Inside the main temple building, a profusion of offerings surrounds the pedestal that supports the tiny image. See p. 137.
- **Wat Arun** (Thonburi/Bangkok): The golden Temple of Dawn shimmers in the sunrise across the Chao Praya River from Bangkok, but the sunset is even better still. As you climb its steep central *prang* (tower), you get a close view of the porcelain pieces that make its floral design. See p. 139.
- **Wat Yai Chai Mongkon** (Phitsanulok): One of the most holy temples in the country, Wat Yai is home to the Phra Buddha Chinarat image, cast in bronze. One of the few remaining Sukhothai images, this one is the prototype for many replicas. Outside, the temple complex hums with activity, and many Thais make the pilgrimage here. See p. 278.
- **Wat Mahathat** (Nakhon Si Thammarat): The city is the center of southern Buddhism in Thailand—the first Thai capital to convert to Theravada Buddhism, and a major influence on the kingdoms to follow. The main *chedi* contains a relic of the Buddha brought from Sri Lanka more than a millennium ago. See p. 278.
- **Wat Ko Keo Suttharam** (Phetchaburi): The walls of the main hall were painted in the 1730s, during the Kingdom of Ayuthaya, and while the murals are fading, you can still make out the images of the earliest Westerners to come to the country. See p. 189.
- **The Erawan Shrine** (Bangkok): Not a site notable for its size or superstructure, the Erawan Shrine is famed for the veracity of its devotees. Located near Chit Lom BTS station in the center of town, few Thai people pass without offering a bow, or *wai*, in reverence. See p. 139.