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The Best of Thailand

Traffic and tranquillity, 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. 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 border-towns 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 and information on all there is to see and do in the Kingdom. Below are just a few hints on where to find what you're looking for.

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's 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. 280.
- **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. Some of the most

adventurous roads, 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, offer adventures around every corner. Narrow roads, hair-pin turns, sweltering heat, unpredictable drivers and maybe a wandering armed rebel or two, makes for lots of excitement (too much for some). 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 10, 11, 12, and 13.

- **Make merit:** While many Thai people will “make merit” on a daily basis, it’s 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, foods, robes, and a small donation to the Abbott 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’s 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 even 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 and 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 sugar cane 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’s a full-contact sport in Thailand and there are a variety of venues where you can pickup 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. Shopping may not be creative (as Andy Warhol believed), but it is a good way to participate in Thai pop culture as well as learn about traditional crafts. 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. Thais 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 Resorts & Spas

- **Bangkok Marriott Resort & Spa** (Bangkok; ☎ 800/228-9290 or 02476-0022): After a day of crazy Bangkok traffic and exhausting sightseeing, 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. 89.
- **Banyan Tree Phuket** (Phuket; ☎ 0800/525-4800 or 07632-4374): With private villas that are pure romantic luxury, Banyan Tree has become a favorite for honeymooners. But don’t just come for the romance—options for dining and holiday activities are endless. See p. 225.
- **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. 240.

- **Pimalai Resort and Spa** (Koh Lanta; ☎ 07560-7999): On a remote stretch of beach far down the west coast of Koh 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’s the perfect, upmarket escape. See p. 246.
- **Chiva-Som International Health Resort** (Hua Hin; ☎ 03253-6536): Luxury accommodations

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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. 167.

- **Laem Set Inn** (Koh Samui; ☎ 07742-4393): Heralded in glossy overseas publications, Laem Set is quite a shining star. And for good reason—the quiet, isolated

location and charming local decor make for the ideal Samui getaway. See p. 195.

- **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. 298.

3 The Best Luxury Hotels

- **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. Keep an eye out for their large spa set to open in 2004. See p. 93.
- **Hotel Sofitel Central** (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. See p. 168.
- **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 Phraya River, ferries and long-tail boats stop at the pier regularly, making trips to old

Bangkok incredibly simple and fun. See p. 85.

- **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. 88.
- **The Westin Chiang Mai** (Chiang Mai; ☎ 0800/WESTIN-1 or 05327-5300): This is the best address in Chiang Mai city. The northern capital's only luxury hotel has spacious, attractive rooms with city views, and fine service. See p. 292.

4 The Best Hotels with Character

- **The Atlanta** (Bangkok; ☎ 02252-6069): It's 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. 101.

- **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 Felix never fails to delight. See p. 242.

- **The Princess Village** (Koh Samui; ☎ 07742-2216): Koh Samui's Chaweng Beach has a slew of choices, but none as exotic as Princess Village. Thai-style houses on stilts surround lily ponds and gardens. While other places are definitely more modern, here you'll feel surrounded by exotic Thailand night and day. See p. 193.
- **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. 336.

- **Lotus Village** (Sukhothai; ☎ 05562-1484): An atmospheric guesthouse with fine, raised bungalows of teak and a certain melo-malaise that makes the place appealing (not far from the market and city center). See p. 264.
- **Tamarind Village** (Chiang Mai; ☎ 05341-8896): New on the scene and a masterful little escape of 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. 296.

5 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's a lot of fun and kicks late every night. The beach isn't the greatest, but it's a good area to yip it up at night. See chapter 8.
- **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 same), Chaweng can be a lot of fun and parties late into the night with some raucous little clubs and young crowds. Comparison with Patong (on Phuket island) are apt. See chapter 7.
- **Haad Rin** (Koh Phangan): People still talk about it in hushed tones, but the infamous Full Moon Parties on Koh 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 7.
- **Pattaya** (Pattaya, Eastern Seaboard): The infamous red-light capital of Thailand, Pattaya's very origins were as a base for U.S. troupes 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 6.

6 The Best Secluded Beaches

- **Koh Chang** (Eastern Seaboard): Pick any beach on this island. It's just 5 hours from Bangkok overland and is gaining a popular

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following (and development is in full swing) but Koh Chang is the third largest island in Thailand and still supports lots of quiet, untouched beaches along more remote stretches. See chapter 6.

- **Nai Yang** (Phuket): As one of the most famous island resort areas in the world, it would seem impossible to find a place on Phuket without the tourist hassle; but Phuket's Nai Yang area developed as a wildlife preserve, has one of the

most isolated beaches, and fantastic snorkeling. See chapter 8.

- **Mae Nam** (Koh Samui): Choose this small bay if you'd like a more intimate atmosphere at beachside. Quiet and calm, with just a few comfortable hotels and small bungalow resorts, Mae Nam is a good choice. The water is deep for the best swimming around, and visitors tend to be more mature and relaxed. See chapter 7.

7 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 hilltribe villages. See the many options about Thailand's far north in chapters 10, 11, 12, and 13.

- **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 8.

- **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, Koh Phi Phi, Koh Samui and nearby Koh 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 6, 7, and 8.

- **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, Koh Phi Phi, areas around Krabi, Koh Samui, and islands along the eastern seaboard. See chapters 6, 7, and 8.
- **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 just north of their office in laid-back little Pai. See chapter 12.

8 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. It's gotten so sadly touristy, this place, but it really is very beautiful. You won't believe your eyes. See chapter 8.

- **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 11.
- **Khao Yai National Park** (North-east): 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 13.

- **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 7.

9 The Best Offbeat Vacation Activities

- **Manhara Song** (Bangkok): Few things capture the allure of old Bangkok like this old renovated rice barge turned luxury cruiser. Let your imagination run wild as you gaze out at life along the Chao Phraya River—if you can pull your eyes away from the beauty of the boat itself. See chapter 5.
- **Northern Thailand by Motorcycle:** Exercise great caution on motorbikes in Thailand (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 as uncomplicated as it is exhilarating. Some of the most adventurous trips are in the northern mountains, especially along the Mekong River on the Mae Hong Son Loop northwest of Chiang Mai. 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 10, 11, 12, and 13.

- **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 Koh Phangan). In the north, try Wat Rampoeng (near Chiang Mai). In Bangkok, try Wat Mahathat. See chapters 5, 8, and 11.

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- **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 get to get down and dirty with pachyderms; this is not picnic nor pony ride. You'll be given a set of baggy elephant-trainer togs and taught the language of the

elephants (a mix of Thai and Karen language). 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 multi-day treks, you'll be assigned your own animal and ride alone.

10 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 5.
- **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 5.

- **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 11.
- **Sankamphaeng Road** (Chiang Mai): This 9km (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 11.

11 The Most Intriguing Archaeological Sights

- **Ayutthaya:** 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's easily reached in a day trip from Bangkok. See chapter 5.
- **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 9.

12 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. 122.

- **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. 340.

13 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 12.
- **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 9.
- **Nong Khai** (Isan): A busy border-town 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; a good place to put your feet up and reflect while watching the mighty Mekong flow past. See chapter 13.

14 The Best First-Class Restaurants

- **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. 103.
- **Bed Supper Club** (Bangkok; ☎ 02651-3537): Ever wanted to get in bed with Bangkok's young, hip elite? That's what it's 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. 110.
- **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. 300.
- **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. 218.

15 The Best Small Restaurants

- **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. 228.
- **May Kaidee** (Bangkok; ☎ 02629-4839): It's just tables in an alleyway, 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. 107.
- **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. 337.
- **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. 272.

- **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. 231.

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. 124.
- **Wat Arun** (Thonburi/Bangkok): The golden Temple of Dawn shimmers in the sunrise across the Chao Phraya 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. 126.
- **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. 253.

- **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. 252.

- **Wat Koh Keo Suttharam** (Phetchaburi): The walls of the main hall were painted in the 1730s, during the Kingdom of Ayutthaya, and while the murals are fading, you can still make out the images of the earliest Westerners to come to the country. See p. 173.
- **The Erawan Shrine** (Bangkok): Not a site notable for its size or super-structure, 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. 127.