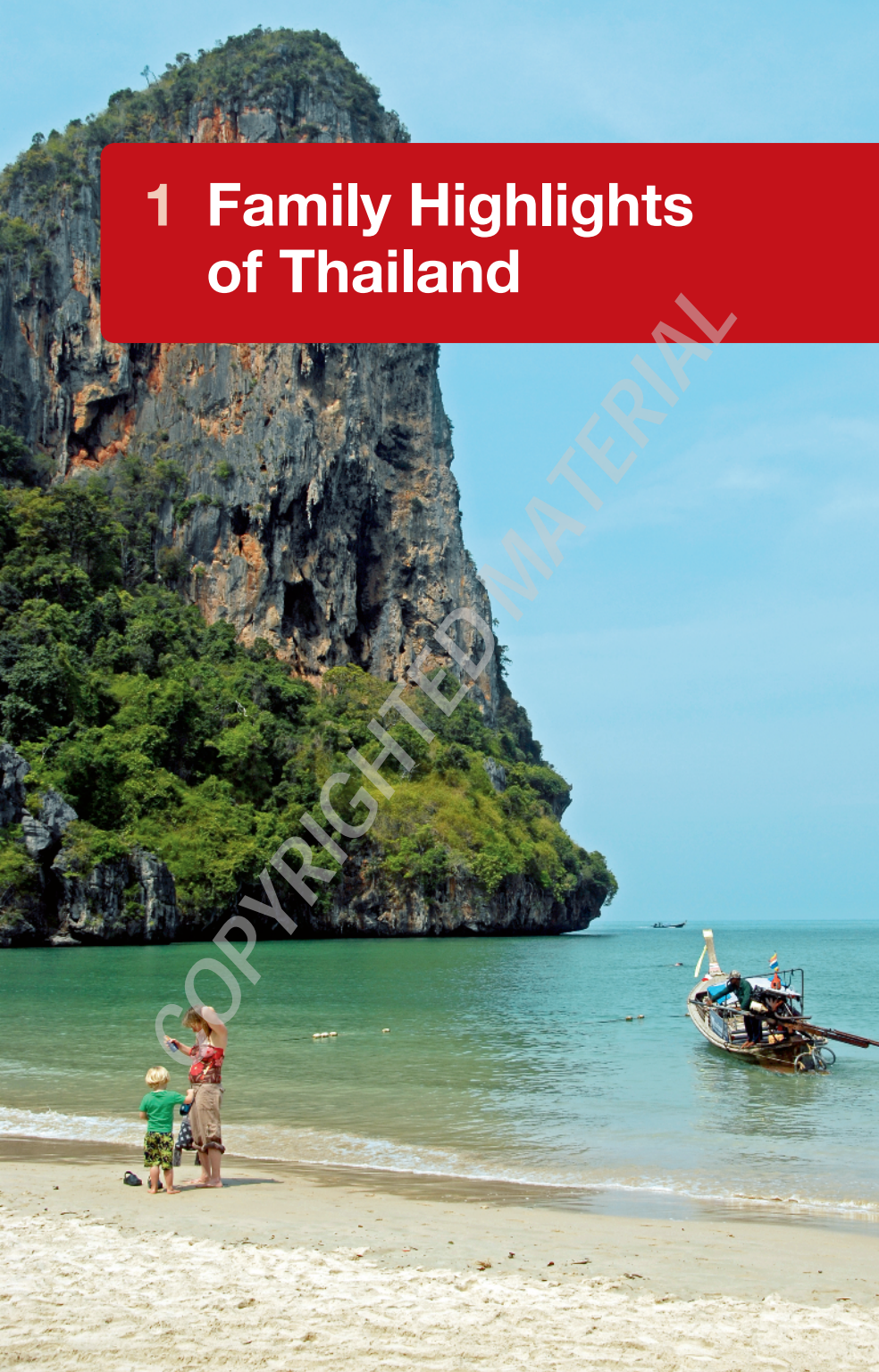


1 Family Highlights of Thailand



Nowhere is the term 'developing world' as apt as in Thailand.

Few countries have changed so fast and so quickly over a single generation. Children who used to play in the sand outside driftwood shacks now run deluxe air-conditioned beach resorts with swimming pools and spas; villages made of wood with dirt streets flocked with black-painted bicycles are now cities of concrete and glass, rushing headlong into the 21st century.

Despite all this, Thailand in many ways retains an almost childlike innocence; a reverence for the past alongside a fervour for the future. Anywhere in the country you can step out of the traffic into the calm oasis of a Buddhist monastery and find an open welcome from the resident monks. Travelling with children is a breeze. All Thais – and I've yet to find an exception – seem to genuinely love children, and are especially fascinated by small westerners, something they very rarely see. While adults must negotiate commercial relationships and practical matters, children are exempt. With their curious, kind and gentle personalities the Thais you meet can calm and charm the hottest, tiredest, western child.

As if this wasn't enough, Thailand is a land of exceptional natural beauty. The beaches are sublime, from the Gulf of Thailand to the long glimmering waters of the Andaman Coast. But there's nothing bland about this tropical landscape. It rears up in sheer limestone outcrops in the south and rugged mountain landscapes of the north, sheltering minority hill tribes and riven by cave systems, tracked by rivers and – off the main roads – immediately reverting to a traditional way of life.

On an urban level, the Thai culture has blossomed with all the advantages of the modern age but has kept in touch with its traditional past. Candles and sacrifices still grace spirit houses alongside each new Thai home, and temples are filled with devout Buddhists paying homage.

Thailand is nothing like Europe. Those who've visited before as backpackers will know this and long to return. In many ways it is more simple to travel here as a family than it would be in Europe. There are hotels to suit all budgets, and getting around is easy, with a huge range of transport options for every given route. In every resort city there are 'planned' attractions for children, but just as many highlights come from the smallest encounters, the spark of new friendships with other children that transcend culture and language. And if there should ever be a problem, a missed flight, a hotel reservation gone astray, a smile and a few well-flung baht will solve most issues in a way that just wouldn't be possible in the 'developed' world. If you want to introduce your children to a new way of life, rapidly overhauling our established western model, Thailand is perfect.

BEST FAMILY EVENTS

Of all Thailand's spectacular festivals, **SongKran** (see p 19 and p 53) is the one that displays each Thai's inner child. The Thai New Year celebrations bring the country to a halt in frenzied waterfights that transcend cultural barriers and bond the generations. Shops set out great vats of water in the street and recruit visitors, friends and family to fight running battles with open-backed pickup trucks carrying their own barrels of water, using their height to drench pedestrians below. Coming at the height of the hot, humid build up to the rainy season everyone gets soaked – and nobody minds. The concept is that the water will wash away your sins, and occasionally spiritual insights creep in: a little old lady dabs flour on your children's cheeks for good luck, and quiet

Elephants in Ayutthaya



ceremonies in temples mark the start of a new year, but generally, for most children, it's the waterfights they remember. In the north the endless drenching battles go on for days; the south, more reasonably, calls a truce after one day.

BEST WATERBORNE ADVENTURE

From the canals of the capital to the tropical islands of the south, Thailand is a marine society. Fast, sleek and loud, longtailed boats spray past more genteel passenger vessels. Even mountain rivers are negotiated in rubber zodiacs and rafts made from bamboo. Of all the aquatic adventures on offer, one stands out: the sea canoe tours of Phang-nga Bay's **hongs** (p 133). Here you paddle through hidden, bat-filled caves to discover miraculous lagoons in the heart of sheer limestone islands, unique ecosystems concealed, over the ages, from the outside world.

BEST SNORKELLING & DIVING

Teaching children to dive is brave or possibly foolish, but snorkelling has acceptable risks – and there are few countries that can match Thailand's tropical waters for coral reefs and fish. There's superb diving in the

Gulf of Thailand, off Pattaya and in Ang Thong National Marine Park near Koh Samui. But the ultimate snorkelling, in season, is off the Andaman Coast. Take a boat from Phuket (See p 134) and sail south to discover vivid coral reefs, bright with the colours of endless shoals of fish, with occasional glimpsed pelagics lurking in the depths.

BEST ELEPHANT EXPERIENCE

You won't see any elephants in Bangkok: they've been banned as a traffic hazard. Everywhere else in the country you will. Although some are still wild, most are domesticated, having lost their traditional role in logging and agriculture. Elephants live as long as humans, need 250kg of food each day and continue to breed: funding them is often a considerable problem. Throughout the country lone elephants roam the streets, guided by their mahout, begging shopkeepers, restaurateurs and people to buy them food. In the remote jungle interiors of the southern islands they are kept in camps, earning their living by letting westerners wash them and go for lumbering forest rides. At Phuket's Fantasea a great herd performs in unison, acting out scenes from Thai history and mythology. It's in the north, however, that they are seen at their best: around

Chiang Mai (see p 211) a selection of elephant camps put on displays where these majestic animals play football, perform musical concerts and paint works of art that would put Van Gogh to shame.

BEST BEACHES

With the huge sweep of the Gulf of Thailand and the long run of the Andaman Sea coast, Thailand has beaches to suit every mood. Not all are perfect. Photographs rarely show that the beaches of the southern Andaman, Koh Jum and Koh Lanta, and the sheltered inlets of Phang-nga Bay often slope slowly far out to sea. They're great as large ocean-sized family wading pools, but no great shakes for swimming. Others are only perfect for six months of the year: at certain times monsoon winds make many of the beaches in Samui and Phuket brooding and dangerous, as the winds bring rip-tides and waves. For year-round equanimity and perfect soft sand, I'd choose the small bays of Koh Samet: specifically the social golden sands of Haad Sai Kaew. See p 100.

BEST AQUARIUM

It's not just tourists who flock to Thailand's aquaria. Most Thais have no culture of swimming: water is seen at best as where fish come from, at worst as a drowning hazard. Children are not

encouraged to swim in the sea, and certainly not to dive below its surface. A number of aquaria bring the experience to them. Startlingly sophisticated and ambitious aquaria, often built with Australian expertise, have been built in Phuket and Pattaya, and although both are excellent, the best one is where you'd least expect it: occupying an area the size of two football pitches below one of the capital's best shopping malls. Yes, the best aquarium is in Bangkok. See p 63.

BEST TIGER TREAT

Captive tigers inevitably evoke mixed feelings. That such magnificent creatures should be caged and confined seems intolerable: even worse are the 50-baht photo opportunities where tiger cubs, sucking on baby bottles of possibly tranquilised milk, are passed from tourist to tourist. Soft sentiments don't solutions make. Thailand's remote forest regions are already home to as many tigers as they can support: any captive animals released would soon be killed as they fought to establish their own territories. At Sri Racha Tiger Zoo you can see how easily they breed, where a pig acts as a surrogate mother while coachloads of Korean tourists say 'ahhh' and take photographs. I'd go for the controversial Tiger Temple (see p 70) near Kanchanaburi, where circumstances have led a pioneering Buddhist temple to

become a well-known and popular refuge for all types of animal.

BEST RIVER JOURNEYS

Roads are a recent development in Thailand. Until recently rivers were the main line of communication. In the north of the country you'll still see rafts made of bamboo crashing through shallow rapids, and you can ride on one yourself – though these days Thais will pole your boat safely down the river and you're no longer allowed to steer it yourself. From Bangkok longtail boats, named after the plume of water thrown up by the propeller dangling on the back of a truck engine, tour the backwater canals, revealing the disappearing Thailand of stilted buildings over water, where commuting is by boat and the canal waters are somehow used to wash clothes sparkling white on makeshift front-step laundries. But the first prize has to go to the inexpensive river taxis that make travelling through the capital city a pleasure, easing their way between cargo vessels, pleasure cruisers and dine'n'dance discos and also whisking you between Bangkok's greatest sights. See p 62.

BEST TEENAGE LAND CHALLENGE

There are a number of courses where aspects of Thailand's

culture are imparted to young visitors, including carving soap and fruit, Thai cookery classes and Thai boxing lessons. But the greatest – and attainable – sense of achievement can come from climbing. Climbing courses are available on Koh Phi Phi and Koh Samui as well as amongst the mountains of the north, but the greatest of all are up the sheer limestone cliffs that back Railay Beach, near Krabi. See p 142.

BEST HISTORY LESSON

Thailand's sense of tradition imbues the country, from the humblest spirit house to the grandest incense-strewn temple. Get up early on any morning and you'll see monks streaming forth to beg for the ingredients for their one daily meal. Across the border in Laos this attracts mobs of video-toting tourists,

but in Thailand it's just routine. The origins of this tradition are sometimes lost in the tumultuous world of Thailand today. For a sense of the spiritual relevance of this ancient culture there are few places to beat Ayutthaya, an hour from Bangkok. Once the country's capital but now a rural hinterland, its stupas and chedis crumble in the tropical heat and an antique Buddha head, lovingly carved from stone, has been embraced by the roots of a strangler-fig tree. See p 66.

BEST ACCOMMODATION

Best Resort Hotel

In Thailand's race into the 21st century, most of the best beaches now feature at least one resort hotel. Only one has five. The Laguna Beach Resort on Phuket is the most family-friendly

View from a longtail boat in Bangkok





The ultimate private pad at Karma Sumai

member of the Laguna Resort complex, an ‘integrated resort’ of five leading resort hotels set on a beach and a series of inter-linked lagoons. Guests can shuttle around between all five hotels, and for a small fee make the most of their extensive facilities. This opens up 30 restaurants, 15 swimming pools and three spas. There’s an 18-hole golf course, a ‘Camp Laguna club’ teaching teenagers abseiling, rock climbing, tennis, horse riding and more. Facilities include a water-park, a marine centre with complimentary hobie cats, wind-surfers and instruction, children’s clubs for all ages, and two semi-resident elephants, Ann and baby Sara. See p 146.

Most Stylish Hotel

The Thais’ natural love of beauty and harmony has, in its long recent boom, been celebrated in a number of remarkable hotels

and resorts. The Alila in Cha-am should perhaps be a member of this eclectic group, but that is, to be brutally honest, Balinese – which is not quite the same. For an icon of modern Thailand at its most urbane and sophisticated, the ultimate hotel has to be the soaring capital presence of The Banyan Tree, Bangkok. See p 74.

Best Self-Catering

For families, self-catering is often an attractive and convenient option. Freed from the choice between endless child meals and the dangers of unexpected spices in local dishes, parents can cook up comfort food for the young and make expeditions to explore at their own, unhurried pace. A number of self-catering apartments and villas are inexpensively available throughout the country, but for the ultimate private pad the Karma Samui has



Swimming pool at the Waterfront Hotel, Bophut

the edge. Four-bedroom villas look to the sea over private pools, kitchens are equipped with fridge-freezer, dishwasher, microwave and coffee machine, while laundries feature washing machines and dryers. Add huge flat-screen TVs and DVD players with a children's library of films and you have everything you could need to create your own Thai home. See p 184.

Best Beach Hotels

Thailand's tourism started with its beachfront hotels, the simple wood-and-rattan beach huts of 40 years ago spread around simple restaurants serving local food. You can still find modest establishments like these, but now you have to look further, to the outlying islands. The original pioneers have built on their success by adding sophistication: replacing bamboo with concrete, adding air-conditioning and swimming pools and, increasingly, becoming jostled by neighbours trying to cash in on

their success. A few have managed to resist the urge to expand and maintain their personal welcome, but perhaps the one that best encapsulates the small-scale charm of a great beach hotel is actually expatriate-run, the Waterfront at Bophut on Koh Samui. Family-run by a British couple, this small and idiosyncratic place has just a few rooms built right on the sand, with all the comforts of home in simply-furnished rooms set around a pool packed with floaty toys. The restaurant closes at 6.30pm each evening, so it's just as well that it is at the heart of one of Samui's most restaurant-friendly villages: there is a vast choice within easy walking distance, and babysitting is available. See p 188.

Best Guest House

The guest house culture is strong in Thailand, with simple family homes in busy city centres eking out a living by accommodating foreign visitors. Few do this with

such enthusiasm as King's Home in Hua Hin (see p 194), where a small property within 200m from the Squid Piers and the beach feels rather like Dr Who's Tardis. Enter via a small entrance hall and you are led through a warren of rooms, packed with memorabilia redolent of the owner's native Holland, with huge soft beds, TVs and fridges in every room. For a cultural experience of modern Thailand central Hua Hin is hard to beat, with some of the country's best seafood served in inexpensive market restaurants and a lively, Thai-oriented beach culture.

BEST EATING OPTIONS

Best Day Out

It's rather a hack across Koh Samui from the main beach resorts, but children and their parents love the Babylon

Restaurant on Bang Por Beach, and it's an excellent choice if the sea is too rough to swim. Five bouncy castles are set in a safely fenced and lightly supervised compound and although it's hardly a theme park the atmosphere is pleasant and relaxing. They were digging a swimming pool when I was there and the restaurant serves sensational Thai food at local prices on the water's edge, with distant views of the mainland. Let lunch last until late: while most of Samui's beaches get the sunrise, this one gets the sunset. See p 195.

Best Educational Dining

At almost all major resort areas there are evening dinner shows where sophisticated lighting systems and elaborate special effects showcase Thailand's history and culture. Some put on magnificent performances but miss out on the food: with others it is the other way round. For the perfect combination of fine dining and

Exotic fruit picked in Koh Samui



a genuinely spectacular display of acrobatics, stylised fights and costumed dances, the best is Bangkok's Siam Niramit. See p 83.

Best View

The expansive view over the city of Chiang Mai is just part of the pleasures of dining at the Palaad Tawanron, set above the city's fantastic zoo. There is a separate child menu, highchairs, and a clown often follows families, making balloon animals. As night falls the lights of the city sparkle in the distance, and you can also combine your meal with a twilight safari, meeting nocturnal species you might have overlooked through the day. Live music plays every night: reserve early to make sure of a table with a good view. See p 229.

Best Sunday Lunch

This quintessentially British tradition is recreated at countless British theme pubs across the country, which you'll find in almost all major resort areas. But you don't fly half-way round the world to eat roast beef and Yorkshire pudding in the tropical heat. Instead go to the BBC restaurant on Koh Samui's Great Buddha Beach, where every Sunday lunch is followed by relaxed jazz on the sands as the sun glints from the gold Buddha, out in the bay. See p 195.

Best Active Meal

They serve a seven-course lunch at the Coral Island Beach Club on a small island just off Phuket, but that's not why anyone visits. A simple day-pass opens up a world of watersports including scuba diving, power snorkelling, clear kayaks, banana boating and sea canoe expeditions. The perfect way to build up a healthy appetite in the tropical heat. See p 157.

Best Meal – Ever

I can't tie this down to one actual meal but know where it happened: on a homestay in the village of Ban Talae Nok on the Andaman Coast. A relief programme set up after the 2004 Tsunami arranges for western families to stay with local villagers, and we found a host family who might have been poor but certainly didn't starve. Fresh squid, prawns and tasty village chicken were just the protein highlights amongst a constant selection of seasonal fruits, cashew nuts and rice. Alongside a series of snacks, Thai meals are made up of several shared dishes eaten as a family, something that most visitors miss as they follow western eating patterns and buy food plate by plate. Thanks, then, to our hostess: Nooliha of Ban Talae Nok. See p 127.