

The Best of Thailand

Beaches, bargains, palaces, and stunning temples. Thailand has much to offer anyone, from the burned-out corporate executive in search of ultraluxurious respite to the intrepid backpacker hoping to explore beyond the beaten track. What brings visitors back here time and time again is undoubtedly the warmth of the Thai people, their laid-back attitude, the kingdom's at-times incomprehensible yet beguiling customs, feverish festivals, and amazing culinary adventures. For many, Thailand's most notable draws are its opulent royal palaces, ancient ruins, and ornate temples housing skillfully crafted figures of Buddha, a revered symbol that underscores a fervent and widespread devotion. In madcap Bangkok, you'll find an ultramodern cityscape muscling in on quiet canal and riverside communities. Mercantile hubs, such as historic Chinatown, consist of scores of labyrinthine alleys crammed with narrow shophouses, markets, and diners, all evoking a heady mix of sights, sounds, and smells. Beyond Bangkok, rice paddies carpet endless flat plains in a landscape dotted by tiny villages and mountains. White sandy beaches and acres of coconut palms and rubber plantations lace the southern and eastern gulf provinces. Wherever you go, expect contradictions and oxymorons: Witness all-permeating Buddhist pacifism coexisting with popular pugilism in Muay Thai boxing. Inscrutable Thailand will incessantly intrigue and confound the curious traveler.

There is also adventure of all kinds here: extreme sports on land and sea, trekking to hill-tribe villages, and abseiling down sheer limestone cliffs. The country's infrastructure allows travel by bus, train, car, boat, or even hot-air balloon, as well as via a network of budget airlines serving many regional cities. Gorgeous tropical islands play host to low-end guesthouses or stylish and contemporary five-star resorts. Regional cuisines differ greatly and offer a breadth of flavors in varying blends of sweet, sour, and salty variations—not always ignited by fiery spice. In this chapter, I list the best restaurants and hotels, as well as give hints on where to find what you're looking for in this dazzling kingdom.

1 THE BEST CULTURAL EXPERIENCES

- **Celebrate Loy Krathong:** Late October or early November (depending on the moon) marks this delightful festival, when Thais congregate along the rivers to release handmade floats, or *krathongs*, symbolically casting away troubles. The small lotus-shaped *krathong* is made of a cross-section of banana stem decorated with garlands and topped by a candle. In Bangkok, over the Royal Palaces and the Chao Phraya River (near Saphan Taksin BTS), there are magnificent pyrotechnics. In the north, in Chiang Mai, hundreds gather by the Ping River and open spaces to launch *khom loy* (meter-high paper lanterns) into the heavens. As the night goes on, the sky above the city is filled with thousands of orange stars as these giant lanterns drift ever upward.
- **A Night at the Patravadi Theatre:** In the Bangkok suburb of Thonburi, the

doyenne of Bangkok's art and theater scene holds court in a funky little arts center by the river. Patravadi Mejudhon is the woman behind some of the most creative dance performances in Thailand. Her passion for perfection and her unremitting support for classical Thai and contemporary dance have brought this former film and theater star much praise. Her latest venture is **Studio 9** (p. 108), a riverside venue offering dinner-dance evenings, just opposite Patravadi Theatre. Studio 9 provides a platform for emerging talent and gives diners a heart-stopping display of undiscovered Thai talent of all ages and artistic genres. Call ahead for information and reservations (☎ 02412-7287), or consult the useful site www.patravadi-theatre.com.

- **Visit a Market:** Upcountry or downtown, Thailand's markets are always colorful and, depending on the prevailing heat or your levels of curiosity, are worthy of an early-morning meander. Visiting one is a great chance to see authentic Thai life firsthand. Everything is on sale, from fragrant flower garlands to tropical fruits to the fresh ocean catch of the day—all piled upon simple trestle tables. Meat or live poultry is also available straight from local farms, as are endless varieties of exotic spices, chilies, curry pastes, and freshly prepared treats. It's a serious, sensory experience, best undertaken as early as possible and on a light stomach. See chapters throughout this book.
- **Take a Ride Along the River:** Whether it's just for an hour, or on an overnight trip to Ayutthaya, traveling by boat along Thailand's Chao Phraya River is truly memorable. In Bangkok, you can choose from a cacophonous longtail boat, a small motor launch, or a restored rice barge to float upstream. Some hotels offer dinner shows on restored vessels or sunset cruises on a huge floating

discotheque. At several points along the Chao Phraya River, you'll see the concrete jungle of urban Bangkok meet verdant mango and litchi orchards, and you'll see the city's historic quality truly reveal itself. You'll also pass by multicultural communities boasting 200-year-old Portuguese and French churches, Islamic mosques, and elaborate Chinese temples. The city's *klongs* (canals) are worth exploring at any time of day, but, at sunset, the gilded spires of the palaces and tall *prangs* (towers) of the city's temples are reminiscent of mythical castles. See chapter 7.

- **Observe Elephants:** The elephant is the symbol of the monarchy in Thailand and is highly respected for its intelligence, grace, and majesty. All elephants deemed "white" belong to the king; only after strict inspections—to check for albino pigmentation in the animal's ears, toenails, tongue, genitals, and tail—will an elephant be declared as such. A number of tourism-focused elephant camps have been created in and around Chiang Mai, Lampang, and Chiang Rai. Listed below are some camps respected for their humane environments. Near Lampang, at Tung Kwian, the **Thai Elephant Conservation Center** (☎ 05424-7875) educates and entertains visitors as well as rehabilitates sick or injured elephants. Luxury resorts, such as the **Four Seasons' Tented Camp** (☎ 05391-0200) and the **Anantara Golden Triangle** (☎ 05378-4084), both near Chiang Rai, have put together pachyderm-friendly activities for guests, including *mabout* (elephant handling) classes. See p. 342 and 368.
- **Discover Lanna Architecture:** The country's northern towns and cities embrace not just a different pace of life, but also a unique culture, language, and cuisine. Known as the Lanna kingdom ("Kingdom of a Million Rice Fields"), this area was home to five consecutive

Lanna periods that bloomed and ebbed from the 12th to the 16th century. Lanna influence can be seen among Chiang Mai's 121 *wats* (temples), the most stunning of which are **Wat Phra Singh** and **Wat Phra That Doi Suthep** (the latter is near the summit of the city's guardian mountain). In tranquil Lampang, a wander around the atmospheric enclaves of **Wat Phra That Lampang Luang** will transport you

centuries back in time. At Lamphun, the rare and delightful stupas of **Wat Chamadevi** (also known as Wat Kukut) show off the nation's earliest achievements—dating from 1218 and highlighting relics of the Hariphunchai (Mon) era. But these are just a brief introduction to the spectacular ancient temples of this area. See chapters 13 and 14 for more recommendations.

2 THE BEST LUXURY RESORTS & SPAS

- **Banyan Tree Phuket** (Phuket; ☎ 07632-4374): It's chic, it's private, and it's (supposed to be) paparazzi-proof. Maybe that's why the likes of pop singer Kylie Minogue and British sports star David Beckham book the Banyan Tree. This self-contained resort boasts luxurious Thai-style villas and some of the island's best spa treatments; expect pools, palms, and lots of panache. Plus, this prestigious hotel chain prides itself on its environmental awareness schemes, which benefit different communities all over the region. It appeals to celebs and jet-setters with a conscience. See p. 243.
- **JW Marriott Phuket Resort & Spa** (Phuket; ☎ 07633-8000): This distinctive haven is set amid acres of spectacular gardens, featuring ponds, flowerbeds, and landscaped lawns leading to a glistening beach; though the strong riptides make ocean swimming unsafe, two stylish pools make up for this. Balconies offer expansive sea views and guests have endless dining options, from Italian to Japanese and traditional Thai—all top quality. The Mandara Spa, hidden behind giant ocher walls and copper doors, is reminiscent of a Marrakech palace. The hotel's environmental efforts mean that staff and keen guests are actively involved in turtle conservation groups such as Naucrates. See p. 245.
- **Rayavadee** (Krabi; ☎ 07562-0740): Two-story cottages are scattered over this expansive coconut grove, facing two of Thailand's best white-sand beaches. Many villas have Jacuzzis or hammocks, with breezy views of some of the most magnificent cliffs in the country. The luxurious spa and the secluded location make it a dream hideaway. A trip to the nearby *hongs* (hidden lagoons) here is unforgettable. See p. 265.
- **Chiva-Som International Health Resort** (Hua Hin; ☎ 03253-6536): Unashamedly sleek and swanky Thai-style accommodations, enhanced by personalized healthcare, make this wellness retreat a popular choice for visiting celebrities in need of a body-and-soul detox. Prices are some of the highest in the country, but the trade-offs are tangible. After you've experienced any of Chiva-Som's careful, healing therapies or invigorating health regimes, nowhere else will seem quite the same. See p. 178.
- **Six Senses Hideaway** (Ko Samui; ☎ 07632-4333): Private villas hidden behind whitewashed adobe walls, gorgeous sunken poolside *salas*, (pavilions) and bright, modern living spaces make this resort a delight. Close enough to

the beach for walks, but far enough for tranquility, gourmets and gluttons will revel in the culinary experiences to be had here. The organically inspired mud-built spa has beehive-shaped treatment rooms that appear to float in a lily pad pond. It's run by the sultans of spa, Six Senses, who are renowned for their eco-sensitivity as much as their restorative treatments. See p. 200.

- **The Mandarin Oriental Dhara Dhevi** (Chiang Mai; ☎ 05388-8888): This megaresort was designed to echo a sumptuous Lanna-era palace, with gardens, rice paddies, lawns, and a restored *viharn* (assembly hall). Many of the free-standing villas boast unique luxuries such as pianos, saunas, sun decks with Jacuzzis, and private massage tables. A number of the suites have plunge pools, and the spa is modeled after a stunning

teak Burmese palace. There's mouthwatering cuisine on hand, too; but deep pockets are required for that, as well as the rooms. See p. 314.

- **Anantara Resort and Spa Golden Triangle** (Chiang Saen; ☎ 05378-4084): On the edge of the Burmese jungle, just meters from the Laos border and overlooking the swirling Mekong River, this resort's spectacular spa and fine restaurants are just some of this two-wing property's many pleasures. The landscape is artfully punctuated with a glassy infinity pool overlooking a towering bamboo grove. An amazing museum, dedicated to the history of opium, is just a short walk or bike ride away, as is the hotel's Elephant Camp, where you can sharpen your pachyderm-handling skills with a 2-ton inmate. See p. 368.

3 THE BEST MID- & HIGH-END RESORTS

- **Amari Emerald Cove Resort** (Ko Chang; ☎ 03955-2000): This luxurious place, with a 50m (164-ft.) lap pool as well as children's pool and excellent beach location, makes an ideal spot for a relaxing getaway. It also has a spa, dive shop, fitness room, Wi-Fi access, and a choice of four restaurants. Yet the biggest surprise at this and many other Amari resorts are the affordable rates—there are frequent package offers that bring room rates down to around 50% of published rates. See p. 170.
- **The Sarojin** (Khao Lak; ☎ 07642-7901): The Sarojin is a great escape from nearby Phuket. The superbly styled beach resort is scattered over 4 hectares (10 acres), with delightfully designed pool villas and outstanding suites, all minutes from a pristine beach. Guests can indulge in the outdoor spa and Thai cooking classes. See p. 259.
- **Lipa Lodge Resort** (Ko Samui; ☎ 07748-5616): If you're looking for a relaxing break in a small, inexpensive resort without all the buzzers and bells, you couldn't do better than to head for Lipa Lodge, on Ko Samui's west coast. Well removed from the frantic nightlife of Chaweng Beach, this is the place to sit back and soak up some sunsets. Because it is run by a gifted chef, you can look forward to tasty meals, too. See p. 206.
- **Twin Palms Phuket** (Phuket; ☎ 07631-6500): A stunning Sirin Beach property, the Twin Palms adheres to a clean, contemporary style. Bright guest rooms overlook a leafy garden and expansive lagoon pool; a local golf course is nearby. New residences opened in 2008, including a huge penthouse for the truly indulgent. Opportunities abound for culinary indulgences, and there's a wine list to write home about.

The health conscious can sign up for a breadth of treatments at the Palm Spa. See p. 242.

- **Pimalai Resort and Spa** (Ko Lanta; ☎ 07560-7999): On a remote stretch of beach, on the quiet island of Ko Lanta Yai, this delightfully designed hillside resort blends easily with the island's

unspoiled nature. Its sympathetic Thai architect has thoughtfully built the shady walkways around old trees. An immaculate indigo infinity pool, an excellent spa, and sumptuous villas put it on top of this island's A-list. Direct speedboat connections in dry season make it a perfect upmarket escape. See p. 272.

4 THE BEST LUXURY HOTELS

- **The Mandarin Oriental** (Bangkok; ☎ 02659-9000): The Mandarin Oriental houses more celebrities per square inch than a tabloid magazine. The hotel's elegant colonial style has made it the paragon of luxury for more than 130 years. Today, two resort-style swimming pools with private *salas*, the refurbished Sala Rim Nam and Verandah restaurants, the remodeled China House, and a stylish Ayurvedic Penthouse, put the final touches on this Thai hallmark of impeccable hospitality. See p. 90.
- **The Peninsula, Bangkok** (Bangkok; ☎ 800/2828-3888 or 02861-2888): This is a shining example of modern high-rise luxury. Expect all the courtesy and efficiency of a Thai five-star hotel

with no pretentiousness. Great dining in a delightfully relaxed atmosphere is accompanied by dazzling riverside views of Bangkok, made memorable by flawless service. Built in a 1900s-style colonial villa, the spa tops off the facilities of this superb hotel. See p. 90.

- **The Chedi** (Chiang Mai; ☎ 05325-3333): The rare combination of colonial and minimalism works exceptionally well for this recent addition to the northern capital. Stark, contemporary rooms complement the historic two-story colonial villa that now houses the hotel's colorful restaurants and terrace, the latter of which offers a terrific high tea. Expect charming service and fantastic views of the river. See p. 314.

5 THE BEST HOTELS WITH CHARACTER

- **Ibrik Resort** (Bangkok; ☎ 02254-8500): Tucked away in the arty quarter of Thonburi district near the historic Wat Rakhang, Ibrik's three airy rooms are decorated in a charming and vivid Thai palette. The vibe is intimate and homey, and the river-life views evoke peaceful contemplation. It's both beautiful and boutiquey. See p. 92.
- **The Eugenia** (Bangkok; ☎ 02259-9011-9): This colonial-style boutique hotel is the place for a trip back in time. Period furnishings and ancient tomes

in the library lend a sophisticated aura to the place, which is only enhanced by the innovative menu in the restaurant and friendly, professional service. See p. 98.

- **Sofitel Centara Grand Resort & Villas** (Hua Hin; ☎ 800/221-4542 or 03251-2021): This historic hotel's vibrant heritage comes alive through spacious rooms; long, cool corridors; and verdant, lush grounds. High tea in the Museum Tea Corner is a definite highlight. See p. 179.

- **The Rachamankha** (Chiang Mai; ☎ 05390-4111): Quite possibly the most delicious bolt-hole in town, this monastic-style complex is a place where Lanna minimalism meets Thai sophistication. Showcasing the region's Lanna art and culture, the quirky property has wowed everyone with its monastic courtyards, velvet lawns, beautiful decor, and exceptionally well-stocked library. See p. 318.
- **Four Seasons Tented Camp** (Golden Triangle; ☎ 05391-0200): Tents were never like this when I was a kid. They might be made of canvas, but those at

the Four Seasons are huge, they are equipped with period furnishings, and they enjoy total privacy on a lush hillside. Such activities as elephant treks and boat trips, as well as gourmet dining and cocktail parties, are all part of the deal at this all-inclusive resort. See p. 368.

- **Fern Resort** (Mae Hong Son; ☎ 05368-0001): You're well off the beaten path at Fern, amid a collection of petite mid-range bungalows, but the setting is lovely, and self-guided hikes are made all the more enjoyable by the resort's resident pets. See p. 354.

6 THE BEST FINE DINING

- **Breeze** (Bangkok; ☎ 02624-9999): The skyscraping seafood experience on offer at Breeze will amaze anyone who braves the giddy heights of this alfresco restaurant in State Tower. The fusion-inspired menu is guaranteed to blow you (and your wallet) away, while the views of Bangkok below are irresistible. Advance reservations are obligatory. See p. 109.
- **Baan Khanitha** (Bangkok; ☎ 02675-4200 and 02258-4128): Authentic Thai cuisine, served up in a cozy and refined ambience, attracts Thai and foreign gourmets alike to sample the extensive menu. Choose from two locations: the original, on Sukhumvit Soi 23, and the other, on South Sathorn Road. See p. 114.
- **Pier 59** (Bangkok; ☎ 02679-1200): High above the glistening city, this new supper-only venue houses vast aquariums and low blue lighting, creating an ambient glow. Seafood is the focus, but carnivores should fear not; the exceptionally long menu includes meat as well as delectable crustaceans. The miniature selection of bite-size desserts is sure to delight all. See p. 113.
- **Biscotti** (Bangkok; ☎ 02126-8866): Few Italian restaurants impress like this Four Seasons favorite. A wonderful open-concept kitchen is surrounded by a fusion of East and West designer decor by New York-style guru Tony Chi. Expect a twist on the traditional, accompanied by an excellent wine list. See p. 114.
- **The Pier** (Ko Samui; ☎ 07743-0681): This sophisticated and romantic spot on the north coast of Ko Samui is the ideal place to indulge in some delectable seafood and a glass of wine while listening to hip sounds and gazing at the stars. See p. 207.
- **The Boathouse Wine & Grill** (Kata Beach, Phuket; ☎ 07633-0015): With a delightful terrace looking over Kata Beach, the Boathouse is the ideal spot to enjoy fine dining beside the sea. The best of French and Thai cuisine is on offer, as is a dizzying range of wines from the cellar. See p. 247.
- **Fujian** (Mandarin Oriental Dhara Dhevi, Chiang Mai; ☎ 05388-8888): It's hard to choose a more upmarket eatery in Chiang Mai. Just before the main gate to this fanciful Lanna-era-styled

resort is the hotel's Chinese restaurant, set in a pseudo-colonial mansion at the end of a pretty cobbled lane. Succulent dim sum lunches, or mouthwatering marinated meats, filets of waxy steamed

fish, and fresh seafood complemented by devilish desserts (*warning*: the black sesame ice cream is addictive) make for a rather pricey, but exquisite, dining experience. See p. 322.

7 THE BEST SMALL RESTAURANTS

- **Le Bouchon** (Bangkok; ☎ 02234-9109): A truly precious gem among the rabble, this authentic French bistro is embedded in the thick of seamy Patpong. Fine French food and endless top-notch vintages are worth the intrepid voyage into the depths of this saucy *soi*. See p. 112.
- **Taling Pling** (Bangkok; ☎ 02236-4830): This rustic-styled lunch and supper spot gets filled to bursting at lunchtime with locals craving both its authentic Thai dishes and carb-packed Western desserts. Foreigners are mercifully provided with a photographic catalog of the Thai menu; just point and eat. See p. 113.
- **Crystal Jade** (Bangkok; ☎ 02129-4343): Don't be put off by its clean and sparkly department store location; this tiny Chinese eatery is part of a chain with a huge and loyal fan base. A hearty meal of *xiao long bao* (dumpling soup) or authentic steamy noodles costs a few dollars and is absolutely authentic. See p. 115.
- **Itsara** (Hua Hin; ☎ 03253-0574): Set in a 1920s-inspired seaside villa, this Thai and seafood restaurant is a local favorite that incessantly pulls in crowds who come to savor its simple but elegant locale and cuisine. See p. 181.
- **Betelnut** (Ko Samui; ☎ 07723-0222): This is the perfect place to end a day of sprawling on Samui's soft-sand beaches. Exciting fusion fare blends Thai, Japanese, French, and other influences into unique dishes that linger long on the palate. See p. 206.
- **Ka Jok See** (Phuket Town; ☎ 07621-7903): Eating at this unassuming restaurant is like visiting a friend with great culinary and social skills. First you choose your main course, which is served with a free starter and dessert, and then, after dinner, get ready to jive around the tables with staff and other customers. See p. 250.
- **Baan Rim Pa** (Patong, Phuket; ☎ 07634-0789): Sunset is the best time to enjoy authentic Thai dishes such as *tom yum goong* (hot and sour prawn soup) and *yam tua plu* (winged bean salad), when you can watch the Andaman Sea change color as you appreciate the excellent cuisine. A pianist serenades diners, and there's a cigar and wine bar to retire to after dinner. See p. 248.
- **Dream Café** (Sukhothai; ☎ 05561-2081): With a quiet courtyard out back and cool indoor seating, the Dream Café is reminiscent of an antiques store. It's also a fun find and a great place to relax after a day of temple touring. See p. 291.
- **Khaomao-Khaofang Restaurant** (Mae Sot; ☎ 05553-2483): This saucy spot boasts an organically inspired decor that's almost as much a reason to visit as the food. True, as the restaurant is out in the boonies on the Burmese border, the pseudo-posh design is out of sync with its surroundings. But the food is plain great and the atmosphere laid-back, if a bit surreal. See p. 296.
- **Le Grand Lanna** (Chiang Mai; ☎ 05388-8888): Le Grand Lanna is definitely the most romantic northern

Thai restaurant in Chiang Mai. You'll feast in an old wooden stilt house amid ginger blooms and orchids, and dine on such fare as Burmese *khao soi* (noodle curry) and pomelo salad. Lunch and supper come with awesome views of the resort's lily pond, and, in the evening, you'll get the chance to see a delightful Lanna dance show. See p. 322.

- **The House** (Chiang Mai; ☎ 05341-9011): Only supper is served at this vintage villa at the edge of the Old City of Chiang Mai. In cool, candlelit surroundings, Danish expat Hans Christensen's

carefully trained kitchen staff serves up dynamic Pacific Rim cuisine. See p. 322.

- **Fern Restaurant and Bar** (Mae Hong Son; ☎ 05361-1374): There's a touch of class about the antiques and potted-plant decor that makes this place the top choice near the Myanmar border. The menu is extensive, including tempting dishes such as fried Pai River fish with pepper and garlic. Food presentation is very attractive and service is extremely attentive, plus there's often live music in the bar out back. See p. 356.

8 THE BEST PARTY BEACHES

- **Pattaya** (Pattaya, Eastern Seaboard): The once-infamous red-light capital of Thailand, promiscuous Pattaya invites adulation as much as disdain with the dubious flavor of some of its late-night shenanigans. However, it's cleaning up slowly, and outwardly obscene "attractions" are making way for cleverer, cleaner entertainment. The clubs and bars attract a motley range of characters, giving it an air of a human zoo. Go to watch, and to be watched. See chapter 8.
- **Chaweng Beaches** (Ko Samui): If you like the beach, and love to be social, Chaweng has all the action you want. With countless dining and nightlife choices, plus endless vendors and beach boutiques, you'll never walk alone here. See chapter 9.
- **Had Rin** (Ko Phangan): The now-infamous Full Moon parties on Ko Phangan's Had Rin have been attracting

crowds of raving revelers for years, but they are not the hippy-trippy events of yore, as parties are taking on a more "packaged" experience. Drug busts are on the rise and, despite the warnings, plenty of over-chilled partygoers continue to come undone, with serious consequences. See chapter 9.

- **Patong Beach** (Phuket): This busy beachside strip is not sophisticated by any means, but for many young, first-timers in Asia looking to party, it is seen as *the* place for shopping, dining, and naughty nightlife. If you want to avoid the sordid stuff, the most upmarket area is the JungCeylon mall, with great late-night dining and famous fast food and coffee outlets. Beyond this, there's a shantytown of small bars and concrete bunker clubs, where it's a lot seedier but where the younger frat-party crowd will get their kicks. See chapter 10.

9 THE BEST OUTDOOR ADVENTURES

- **Scuba Diving:** Thailand is a great place to do a PADI course, whether you're a total beginner or just in need of a

refresher course. Most courses are affordable and staffed by experienced expatriate dive pros. Always check first

that the vessels used by these outfits have valid marine safety documentation such as IMO, SOLAS, ISM, and the more recent ISPS certificates. The most popular centers—around Ko Chang, Ko Tao, and Phuket—have a large concentration of beautiful coral with an abundance of marine life. The best time of year for visibility is between December and February. See chapters 8, 9, and 10.

- **Ballooning:** From November to March, Thailand's cool north offers one of the few places in Asia to experience hot-air ballooning. The tour operator Earth Wind and Fire has been based in Chiang Mai for some years now and is the only certified ballooning outfit in Thailand. They offer predawn flights over the emerald rice paddies; as the sun rises, the beauty of the land will open up below you. See chapter 13.
- **Rock Climbing:** The imposing cliffs at Railay Beach, near Krabi, make for some of the best rock climbing in the

world. And you don't have to be an expert; beginners are welcome to sign up for an intro course and enjoy both the challenge and breathtaking views. There's a similar setup near Chiang Mai in the north. See chapters 10 and 13.

- **White-Water Rafting (Pai):** On a white-water rafting tour, you can paddle through conservation areas and pass by canyon walls encrusted with fossils. Check locally for outfits that organize exciting yet safe tours from the laid-back center of Pai. See chapter 14.
- **Trekking (Northern Thailand):** Trekking is a perfect way to explore the country's great outdoors; it's definitely one of the best ways to get out and up into lush jungle terrain. Many worthy not-for-profit organizations are now involved in helping hill-tribe villagers build sustainable tourism initiatives, and it is well worth your time to visit and support these commendable causes. See chapters 12 through 14.

10 THE BEST OF NATURAL THAILAND

- **Khao Yai National Park (Northeast):** Thailand's oldest and most visited World Heritage Site supports an abundance of wildlife, from elephants and 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 7.
- **Ko Hong (near Krabi):** Few can remain unmoved when they enter this seemingly unassailable limestone rock mid-ocean. At its center is a vivid green pool completely surrounded by what seems like a limestone donut. Majestic sea eagles hover above while tropical fish flounder about in the clear waters below. See chapter 10.
- **Ti Lor Su Waterfall (western edge of Central Plains):** Thailand's biggest and most beautiful waterfall is hidden away near the Myanmar border, but it's well worth the trek to see it, especially at the end of the rainy season, in October/November. See chapter 11.
- **Doi Inthanon National Park (North):** Drive to the top of Thailand (2,565m/8,415 ft.) and experience the odd sensation of shivering in the tropics. Go walking on well-marked nature trails, and look out for rare birds twittering in the trees. Hire a tent or a log cabin, and breathe deeply of the pine-scented air. See chapter 13.

11 THE BEST CULTURAL VACATION ACTIVITIES

- **Fasting and Wellness Programs:** While you're on holiday in Thailand, it is now possible to address the damage that years of overindulgence have caused. Wellness centers, often close to beach resorts, have made a name for themselves by offering an alternative to the fast lane. Health programs may include yoga, tai chi, monitored fasting, and even colonic irrigation, but, best of all, they serve carefully prepared fresh food. A wide variety of options ensures there is something to satisfy everyone's search for his or her soul. One center to try is **The Spa, Ko Chang** (p. 172).
- **Meditation Programs:** Almost every Thai man enters the *sangha*, or monkhood, for some period of time, usually for 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 1980s, many temples opened their doors to resident foreigners interested in practicing meditation. Courses in varying lengths and intensity exist; most follow the Theravada Buddhist tradition of Vipassana, or "Insight" meditation. In the south, try **Suan Mokkhabalarama** (near Surat Thani; p. 189). In the north, there's **Wat Ram-poeng** (p. 331). Courses are held in Bangkok at **Wat Mahathat**, or The House of Dhamma (p. 135).

- **Learn Thai Massage** (nationwide): It is now easy to find massage schools all over Thailand. However, big-name spa **Chiva-Som**, in Hua Hin, has set up an academy in Bangkok's Sukhumvit Soi 63, where, unlike most places, a huge range of wellness techniques are at last being taught *in English* by bona fide therapists. See www.chivasomacademy.com, as well as p. 134.

12 THE BEST SHOPPING

- **Chatuchak Weekend Market** (Bangkok): This never-ending labyrinthine warren of stalls sells everything from commercial art to imitation designer-label gear. Whole sections are devoted to pets (including the selling of live reptiles), and there's a huge swath reserved for home-furnishing stalls. Get there early to ensure you can escape before the heat becomes oppressive. This is a great place to see Thailand's rising designer scene. See chapter 7.
- **Siam Paragon** (Bangkok): Hailed as *the* trendiest retail experience around, nothing in Asia quite beats Siam Paragon for its ostentatious glitz, designer brands, plush cinemas, and endless

eateries—and I haven't even mentioned the vast underground oceanarium, Siam Ocean World. It outshines the city's other malls (Emporium, Gaysorn, and Erawan), though CentralWorld, just along the road, is newer and bigger still. There's easy access via Siam BTS. See chapter 7.

- **Thong Lor** (Bangkok): Head up to Sukhumvit Soi 55 for the latest in designer chic, upscale spas and cafes, and superb home-furnishing stores. Big boutiques, such as J Avenue—selling clothes and designer decor—as well as the delicious Greyhound Café attract Thailand's yuppies on weekends. See chapter 7.

- **Pak Klong Talad** (Bangkok): This old riverside flower market is open 24/7, and though its narrow lanes are sometimes hard to get down, it showcases the best of Thailand's botanical offerings. Go late at night, when the blossoms are fresh; or, if your home country's Customs regulations allow, pop in before heading home and purchase bouquets of orchids, perfumed ginger flowers, Strelitzia, or unscented roses, all for just a few dollars. See chapter 7.
- **Jung Ceylon** (Phuket): This is the latest shopping magnet to draw the hordes away from the older, tout-riddled beach strips. Swanky and bright (and air-conditioned), it's got not just fast-food

diners and coffee shops, but also young brand fashion and sports stores, plus a whole basement crammed with some great Thai handicraft stalls. See chapter 10.

- **Nimmanhaemin Road** (Chiang Mai): This long stretch of road, starting at Amari Rincome Hotel, is now chock-full of designer boutiques, bespoke tailors, and chic art galleries. Here you can check out some of the nation's best traditional and new-age handicrafts, jewelry, lacquer, ceramics, wood, art, candles, and luxury items. I particularly like the funky furniture at **Wit's Collection**. See chapter 13.

13 THE BEST ARCHAEOLOGICAL SIGHTS & MUSEUMS

- **The National Museum** (Bangkok): Simply the biggest and best repository of the nation's treasures. Objects from Thailand's long and varied history include beautiful stone carvings of Hindu deities, exquisite Buddha images, gold jewelry, ceramics, royal costumes, wood carvings, musical instruments, and more. See p. 127.
- **Ayutthaya**: The former capital of Siam was one of the world's largest and most sophisticated cities before it was ransacked by the Burmese in 1767. Today it remains one of Thailand's greatest historical treasures, with abundant evidence of its former majesty. It is easily reached in a day from Bangkok. See chapter 11.
- **Sukhothai**: Founded in 1238, Sukhothai (The Dawn of Happiness) was the capital of an early Thai kingdom. Many of the ruins of this religious and cultural center are skillfully preserved and well maintained in an idyllic setting. See chapter 11.
- **The Hall of Opium** (Near Chiang Saen at the Golden Triangle): This gargantuan edifice, entered by a subterranean tunnel, is a pleasure for visitors of all ages. Its exhibits explain the cultivation process and history of opium growth in the Golden Triangle region. Supported by the royal family, the modern complex is a stone's throw from the Mekong, and displays are highly informative and even shocking. See p. 367.

14 THE BEST SMALL TOWNS

- **Lamphun**: This charming town, close to Chiang Mai, is on the Kuang River, in a part of the country where few

travelers visit. Its quiet temples echo times past; trishaws still meander through the sleepy town center. Just

outside are the relics of the early Hariphunchai era that preceded the 12th-century Lanna kingdom. See chapter 13.

- **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, the many bungalows are cheap, and the restaurants are good.

You'll want to stay longer than you planned. See chapter 14.

- **Chiang Rai:** Blessed with some lovely attractions, such as the Mae Kok River, and some delightful *wats*, this much-overlooked town also offers local crafts, such as silver, cotton, and hill-tribe crafts. See chapter 14.

15 THE MOST FASCINATING TEMPLES

- **Wat Phra Kaew** (Bangkok): With its flamboyant colors and rich details, this temple is a magnificent setting for Thailand's most revered image, the Emerald Buddha. Inside the main temple building, a profusion of offerings surround the pedestal that supports the tiny image. See p. 124.
- **Wat Po** (Bangkok): With schoolchildren racing around, masseuses practicing in sheltered *salas* and monks going about their business, this is a great example of a working temple, which functions as the hub of the community. The main attraction for tourists is the 43m (141-ft.) reclining Buddha image. See p. 126.
- **Wat Arun** (Bangkok): The Temple of Dawn shimmers in the sunrise across the Chao Phraya River from Bangkok, but viewing it at sunset is better still. As you climb its steep central Khmer-style *prang*, you'll get a close view of the porcelain pieces that make up its floral design. See p. 131.
- **Wat Yai** (Phitsanulok): One of the holiest temples in Thailand, Wat Yai is home to the Phra Buddha Chinarat image, cast in bronze. A classic example

of a Sukhothai image, the Buddha here is the prototype for many replicas throughout the country. Outside, the temple complex hums with activity, as many Thais make the pilgrimage here. See p. 288.

- **Wat Phra Singh** (Chiang Mai): While most Thais head here to see the revered Phra Sihing image, it's the delightful Lanna murals in the *Viharn Lai Kham* that surround the image that catch most people's eyes. Dating to around 1870, these faded illustrations include images of elephants, armies, and even fanciful impressions of early Western travelers. See p. 328.
- **Wat Phra That Lampang Luang** (Lampang): This temple is one of the oldest in North Thailand, and is considered one of the best examples of Lanna temple architecture. The eaves of its temple buildings swoop almost to the ground, and the interior panels are decorated with fading murals. The temple also houses a small but precious image called the Phra Kaew Don Tao, which is kept safely under lock and key. See p. 342.