Welcome to Thailand
Thailand is blessed: exotic and mysterious yet approachable and hospitable, it has the looks and personality to entice the world to its shores.

Bangkok, the kingdom’s capital, is an adrenaline rush. The pace is fast, the spaces cramped and the sights and smells dizzying. It is disorienting but addictive for urban junkies. In contrast, the tranquil southern coast will soothe modern nerves. The waters are clear, the diving is spectacular and the pace is oh-so sleepy. Thailand’s famous islands and beaches specialise in fun, from beach parties to casual dining. Along the Andaman Coast dramatic limestone mountains cluster like prehistoric monuments.

Beyond the beach scene, Thailand’s culture trail educates and enlightens. Intense displays of religious devotion and tangible history unfold in Bangkok, the seat of religion and monarchy. Further north, the ancient capitals of Ayuthaya and Sukhothai are peppered with gravity-ravaged ruins and serene Buddha figures. Northern Thailand is lush mountains, historic cities and border intrigue. The gateway to the region, Chiang Mai, has a well-preserved old city and university atmosphere. In higher altitudes, minority hill tribes cling to a distinct cultural identity.

In every corner of the kingdom, Thais concoct flavourful feasts from simple ingredients. Travelling from region to region becomes an edible buffet, from fiery coconut milk curries in southern Thailand to steamy bowls of noodles in Bangkok and hearty stews in Chiang Mai.
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Detail in Buddhist artwork
MATT MUNRO / LONELY PLANET ©
Plan Your Trip

Thailand’s Top 12

Bangkok

Bangkok has it all in super-sized portions

This high-energy city (p34) loves neon and noise, chaos and concrete, fashion and the future. It’s an urban connoisseur’s dream: a city where the past, present and future are jammed into a steamy pressure cooker. Zip around town in the sleek, elevated BTS; watch the sun sink into the muddy Chao Phraya River on a commuter ferry; or get stuck in one of the city’s famous traffic jams. Then reward your adventurousness with top-notch pampering.
Chiang Mai

The cultural capital of the north

Chiang Mai (p74) is a cultural darling wearing its Lanna heritage with pride. Its old walled city is crowded with temples dating to the days of the teak boom. Bookshops and ethnic-chic stores outnumber glitzy shopping centres. The dining scene celebrates the fresh and local produce of the region. Great country escapes are just an hour’s journey outside the city. Nowhere else in Thailand has such a delightful mixture of big-city attractions with a provincial pace.
Ko Samui

Synonymous with sun, fun and, of course, comfort

Eager to please, Ko Samui (p110) is a civilised resort island that boasts a thriving health scene with yoga, massage, detoxing and other yins to the island’s partying yang. Chaweng is a luxurious stretch of sand where sun-worshippers come to see and be seen, but beyond the brassy beaches are reminders of Samui’s old moniker, ‘Coconut Island’, and a few gentle coves for families.
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Chiang Rai

*Ethnic diversity and dramatic mountain scenery*

The days of the Golden Triangle opium trade are over, but Chiang Rai (p126) still packs intrigue in the form of fresh-air fun such as hiking and self-guided exploration. It is also a great destination for unique cultural experiences, ranging from a visit to a hill-tribe village to a stay at the Yunnanese hamlet of Doi Mae Salong. From the Mekong River to the mountains, Chiang Rai is arguably Thailand’s most beautiful province. Mae Fah Luang Art & Culture Park (p136)

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Railay

*Dramatic karst towers are the main event*

You’d never know that you were still on the mainland when you wade from a long-tail boat to the shore of this limestone-studded peninsula (p142). Towering karst peaks hem in all sides, creating the illusion of a rocky fortress. Rock climbers have transformed the cliffs into vertical challenges, scrambling high enough for a view of the karst-studded bay. Kayakers and snorkellers take to the sea to explore low-tide caves and peek at the marine life sheltered by hulking missile-shaped islands. Tham Phra Nang (p148)
Sukhothai

*Crumbling temples and picturesque countryside*

Hop on a bicycle and explore Thailand’s most impressive historical park, winding past crumbling temple ruins, graceful Buddha statues and fish-filled ponds. Worthwhile museums and good-value accommodation round out the package. Despite its popularity, Sukhothai (p152) rarely feels crowded, but nearby Si Satchanalai-Chaliang Historical Park attracts only a few history adventurers willing to scale its ancient stairways. Wat Si Chum (p159)
Kanchanaburi

One of the country’s easiest – and best – getaways

Given the jaw-dropping natural beauty of Kanchanaburi (p168), it seems paradoxical that the region is best known for the horrors of WWII’s Death Railway. The provincial capital’s war memorials are a mandatory stop before heading deeper into the parks and preserves that comprise the Western Forest Complex, one of Asia’s largest protected areas. The area is home to numerous waterfalls and caves as well as an array of lush riverside resorts.
Ko Pha-Ngan

Party hard, or take it easy

Famous for its sloppy Full Moon Parties, Ko Pha-Ngan (p180) has graduated from a sleepy bohemian island to a stop on the party-people circuit. In between the lunar festivities, it excels in laid-back island life accessible to everybody. Backpackers can still find rustic, kick-back spots, and comfort seekers are attracted by Ko Pha-Ngan as an alternative to too comfortable Ko Samui. Divers will be rewarded with easy access to some of the Gulf of Thailand’s best dive sites.