

Welcome to Thailand

"Lots of people travel to Thailand in search of paradise... I wanted to do more than travel. Frontier enabled me to experience true Thai culture, make a difference, and have the adventure of a lifetime!"

Thailand lies in the heart of Southeast Asia, surrounded by ancient cultures and impressive wildlife. In the dense and richly biodiverse forests of Thailand there is an amazing range of animals, from the magnificent Asian Elephant to the world's smallest mammal: the Kitti's Hog-nosed Bat. Roam deeper into the Thai jungle and you can find bears and nine of the big cats, including the most dramatic of all: the tiger. You will find Thai culture to be equally enthralling, with many traditional ethnic groups adding to the patchwork of Buddhist and Muslim beliefs. Once you discover the white sandy beaches washed by clear azure waters, you will never want to leave this beautiful country!

Know your History

Bordered by Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos, and Malaysia, Thailand is the only Southeast Asian country never to have been colonised by a European country throughout its history. As such, Thailand has found itself to be a buffer zone between colonised countries and a sanctuary for the peoples of the region, including the Chinese, Malay, and Khmer. Having experienced the rise and fall of many kingdoms in its culturally rich history, the absolute monarchy was overthrown in 1932, and the country has remained a constitutional monarchy to this day.

Early history

The history of Thailand begins in southern China, in a region called Yunnan; the ancestral home of the earliest known Thai speaking people. During the 10th Century, Thai people migrated into the area now known as Thailand in various waves, the largest group settling during China's Sung period, roughly 960 C.E. The original inhabitants of the area were already advanced cultures with established kingdoms, mainly the Mon, Khmer and Malay kingdoms, but these populations were largely displaced as the Thai began to establish themselves as a regional power.

During the 13th Century, several Thai states emerged, the first of which were the Lanna, Phayao, Chiang Saen and the Sukhotai. Although these states were established around the same time, Thai tradition states that the first Thai nation state was the Buddhist kingdom of Sukhothai, founded in 1238. Before this, the city of Sukhothai was part of the great Khmer empire; however Thai chieftains, Pho Khun Pha Muang and Pho Khun Bang Klang Hao, declared independence from this empire. Pho Khun Bang Klang Hao later became the first king of Sukhothai, calling himself Pho Khun Si Indrathit (or Intradit). This event traditionally marks the founding of the modern Thai nation.

The early Thai brought with them Buddhist and Chinese traditions, however much of the native Khmer and Mon culture of Southeast Asia was also assimilated into Thailand, resulting in a country rich in tradition and culture. A unique and interesting political feature called "father governs children" existed during the Sukhothai rule, whereby everyone could bring their problems directly to the King. There was even a bell in front of the palace for this purpose! The city briefly dominated the area under King Ramkhamhaeng, who established the Thai alphabet, but after his death in 1365 it fell into decline and became subject to another emerging Thai state known as the Ayutthaya kingdom, which dominated southern and central Thailand until the 1700s.

1700s

The Kingdom of Ayutthaya expanded the Thai kingdom, and established important international relations, making the "Kingdom of Siam", as Thailand was known, an important kingdom both culturally and globally. The first ruler of the Kingdom of Ayutthaya, King Ramathibodi I, made two important contributions to Thai history: the establishment and promotion of Theravada Buddhism as the official religion – to differentiate his kingdom from the neighbouring Hindu kingdom of Angkor – and the compilation of the Dharmashastra, a legal code based on Hindu sources and traditional Thai custom. The Dharmashastra remained a tool of Thai law until late in the 19th Century. Ayutthaya dominated a considerable area, ranging from the Islamic states on the Malay Peninsula to states in northern Thailand, and by the end of the 14th Century, was regarded as the strongest power in Southeast Asia. Nonetheless, the Burmese, who had control of Lanna and had also unified their kingdom under a powerful dynasty, launched several invasion attempts during the 18th Century.

In 1767, after dominating Southeast Asia for almost 400 years, the Ayutthaya kingdom was brought down by invading Burmese armies, its capital burned, and its territory occupied by the invaders. Despite its complete defeat and occupation by Burma, Siam made a rapid recovery. The resistance to Burmese rule was led by a noble of Chinese descent, Taksin, a capable military leader. Initially based at Chanthaburi in the southeast, within a year he had defeated the Burmese occupation army and re-established a Siamese state with its capital at Thonburi on the west bank of the Chao Phraya, 20 km from the sea. In 1768 he was crowned as King Taksin (now officially known as Taksin the Great). Having secured his base in Siam, Taksin attacked the Burmese in the north in 1774 and captured Chiang Mai in 1776, permanently uniting Siam and Lanna.

Despite these successes, Taksin allegedly became mad, and he was deposed, taken prisoner, and executed in 1782. General Chakri succeeded him in 1782 as Rama I, the first king of the Chakri dynasty. In the same year he founded the new capital city at Bangkok, across the Chao Phraya River from Thonburi, Taksin's capital. Rama I restored most of the social and political system of the Ayutthaya kingdom, promulgating new law codes, reinstating court ceremonies and imposing discipline on the Buddhist monkhood. By the time of his death in 1809, Rama I had created a Siamese Empire dominating an area considerably larger than modern Thailand, incorporating most of Cambodia.

1800 – 1950

The heirs of Rama I became increasingly concerned with the threat of European colonialism after British victories in neighbouring Burma in 1826. The first Thai recognition of Western power in the region was the Treaty of Amity and Commerce with the United Kingdom in 1826. In 1833, the United States began diplomatic exchanges with Siam (as Thailand was called until 1939) and again between 1945 and 1949. However, it was during the later reigns of King Chulalongkorn, and his father King Mongkut, that Thailand established firm rapprochement with Western powers. It is a widely held view in Thailand that the diplomatic skills of these monarchs, combined with the modernising reforms of the Thai Government, made Siam the only country in South and Southeast Asia to avoid European colonisation. This is reflected in the country's modern name, Prathet Thai or Thai-land, used unofficially between 1939 and 1945 and officially declared on 11th May 1949, in which prathet means "nation" and thai means "free".

The military came to power in the bloodless Siamese coup d'état of 1932, which transformed the government of Thailand from an absolute to a constitutional monarchy. King Prajadhipok initially accepted this change but later abdicated due to his strained relations with the government. Upon his abdication, King Prajadhipok said that the duty of a ruler was to reign for the good of the whole people, not for a select few, a phrase since often quoted by critics of Thailand's slow political development. He was succeeded by his brother Bhumibol Adulyadej, the longest reigning king of Thailand, and possibly the most popular.

1950 – Present

Although nominally a constitutional monarchy, Thailand has been ruled by a series of military governments, most prominently led by Luang Phibunsongkhram and Sarit Dhanarajata, interspersed with brief periods of democracy. In 1992 the last military ruler, Suchinda Kraprayoon, gave up power in the face of massive popular protests, supported by the King. From 1992 to September 2006, Thailand was a functioning democracy with constitutional changes of government.

A military junta overthrew the elected government of Thaksin Shinawatra on 19th September 2006. The junta abrogated the constitution, dissolved Parliament and the Constitutional Court, detained and later removed several members of the government, declared martial law, and appointed General Surayud Chulanont as Prime Minister.

Martial law was partially revoked in January 2007, and in July the same year, the ban on political activities was lifted following the dissolution of the Thai Rak Thai party on 30th May. Democratic elections were held on 23rd December 2007, over a year after the coup.

The People's Power Party (PPP), led Samak Sundaravej, formed a government with five smaller parties, but had to battle several court rulings against him in a variety of scandals, survive a vote of no confidence, and deal with protesters blockading government buildings and airports. In September 2008 the Constitutional Court of Thailand found him guilty of a conflict of interest, due to being a host on a TV cooking programme, and he resigned his post. Sumchai Wongsawat of the PPP succeeded him, but was unable to gain access to his offices, which had been occupied by People's Alliance for Democracy protesters. On 2nd December that year, the PPP were found guilty of electoral fraud and were dissolved.

Abhisit Vejjajiva was sworn in as the 27th prime minister, on the 17th December 2008. A member of the Democratic Party, this was the first victory for the party since 2001.

Money Talks

Thailand's export-dependent economy is considered an emerging economy, with exports accounting for more than two thirds of GDP (Gross Domestic Product). The country is classified as the 2nd largest economy in Southeast Asia, after Indonesia, but is only the 4th richest nation according to GDP per capita, after Singapore, Brunei, and Malaysia. It also works as an "anchor economy" for the neighbouring Laos, Burma and Cambodia and their developing economies.

The majority of Thailand's labour force works in agriculture. However, the contribution to GDP from agriculture has fallen behind the exports of goods and services. Due to the political uncertainty, GDP growth has fallen from 5-7% to 4-5%, though tourism revenues are on the rise.

Exports

Thailand's recovery after the 1997-1998 Asian financial crisis was mainly due to its exports. The country ranks high among the world's automotive export industries, as well as the manufacturing of electronic goods. It also exports textiles and footwear, fishery products, rice, rubber, jewellery, and computers.

Money

ATM machines are widespread in Thailand and withdrawals may have a small surplus charge although this is likely to be similar to traveller's cheque commission rates. Credit and debit cards (MasterCard and Visa) are accepted for cash withdrawal at most banks but rarely for general payments. However a credit card will come in useful in the event of an emergency. The currency is the Thai baht (THB), which is also accepted across the border in Laos.

Get Culture Savvy

The Culture of Thailand is heavily influenced by Buddhism. Other influences have included Hinduism, conflict and trade with Southeast Asian neighbours such as Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar, and repeated influxes of Chinese immigrants. As the country has never been colonised by a European country, it has found itself to be a buffer zone between colonised countries and a sanctuary for the peoples of the region, including Chinese, Malay, and Khmer.

Religion

95% of Thailand's 65 million people are Theravada Buddhist and the blend of spiritual temples and shrines coupled with the beautiful beaches, forests, and colourful markets, make Thailand a wonderful assault on the senses. While Theravada Buddhism is central to modern Thai identity and belief, in practice it has evolved over time to include many regional beliefs, including animism and ancestor worship. Like most Asian cultures, respect towards ancestors is an essential part of Thai spiritual practice. The Thai people have a strong sense of hospitality and generosity, but also a strong sense of social hierarchy. Seniority is an important concept in Thai culture. The Thai people will bow to the feet of their parents or grandparents to honour them.

Several different ethnic groups, many of which are marginalised, populate Thailand. Some of these groups overlap into Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, and Malaysia and have maintained a distinctly traditional way-of-life despite strong Thai cultural influence. Ethnic Chinese also form a significant part of Thai society, particularly in and around Bangkok, while further south, Islam becomes prevalent.

Beliefs

The standard greeting in Thailand is a prayer-like gesture called the wai. Taboos include touching someone's head or pointing with the feet, as the head is considered the most sacred and the foot the dirtiest part of the body. Stepping over someone, or over food, is considered insulting. Books and other documents are the most revered of secular objects – therefore one should not slide a book across a table or place it on the floor. However, Thai culture as in many other Asian cultures, is succumbing to the influence of westernisation and some of the traditional taboos are slowly fading away with time.

Food

Thai cuisine blends five fundamental tastes: sweet, spicy, sour, bitter, and salty. Some common ingredients used in Thai cuisine include garlic, chillies, lime juice, lemon grass, and fish sauce. The staple food in Thailand is rice, particularly jasmine variety rice (also known as Hom Mali rice) which is included in almost every meal. Thailand is the world's largest exporter of rice and Thais domestically consume over 100 kg of milled rice per person per year. Over 5,000 varieties of rice from Thailand are preserved in the rice gene bank of the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI), based in the Philippines.

Holidays

1st January New Year's Day
Varies Magha Bucha Day*
6th April Chakri Day
15th April Songkran (Thai New Year)
28th April Visakha Bucha
1st May Labour Day
5th May Coronation Day
Varies Khao Phansa Day (Buddhist Lent)*
1st July Mid Year Bank Holiday
12th August HM The Queen's Birthday
23rd October Chulalongkorn Day
5th December HM The King's Birthday
10th December Constitution Day
31st December New Year's Eve
*Days are decided by the Buddhist Lunar calendar

Learn the Lingo

Thai is one of the oldest languages in East and Southeast Asia. Other languages spoken in Thailand are Chinese, Lao, Malay and Mon-Khmer, while English use is becoming more prevalent in government and commerce. English is also being taught as a second language in secondary school and universities, which enables the English speaking visitor in Thailand to have little trouble conversing.

Thai

The Thai language has some unusual practices which are useful to know when attempting to speak the language:

- There are many ways to answer a question in Thai, and "yes" and "no" are not used as commonly as they are in English: many questions are answered by repeating the verb in the question. i.e. "Do you want?" would usually be answered with "want" or "don't want"
- Agreement can also be indicated with krap for men and ka for women. Krap and ka are also added onto the end of sentences to be polite

ENGLISH	THAI	ENGLISH	THAI
Greetings		Numbers	
Hello/Goodbye	Sa- wàt dee	1	Neung
Good morning	a roon sa was	2	Song
Good evening	sa yan sa was	3	Sam
Goodbye	la korn	4	See
Pleased to meet you	yin-dee têe dai róa-jàk	5	Ha
6	Hok		
About Yourself		7	Jed
What's your name?	kun chee rai?	8	Paed
My name is...	pm chêu... (m)	9	Gao

dì-chn chêu... (f)	10	Sib	
Where are you from?	kun maa jàak tee ni?	20	Yee-Sib
I'm from...	pm maa jàak... (m)	50	Ha-Sib
dì-chn maa jàak... (f)	100	Neung-Roi	
How are you?	sa-bai dee réu	1000	Nueng-Pun
I'm fine thanks	sa-bai dee kòrp khun	1 million	Nueng-Laan
And you?	láew khun lâ		
Speaking the Language		Useful Phrases	
What is this called in Thai?	nêe pah-sh tai rîak wâh arai	You're welcome	mâi bpen rai
What does that mean?	nân bplae wâh aria	Please	ga-ru-nah
I don't understand	mâi kao jâi	Thank you (very much)	korp khun (mâhk)
Do you speak English?	kun pôot paa-sa ang-grít?	No	(mâi) châi
Please speak more slowly	pôot cháa long nòi?	Yes	châi/kráp/kâ
Sorry/Excuse me	Kar tôht		
I am a vegetarian	chn bpen mang-sà-wí-rát		
How much?	gee baht		
Where is?	yoo tei nai		

Lay of the Land

Thailand's 514,000 km² lie in the middle of mainland Southeast Asia. The nation's axial position influenced many aspects of Thailand's society and culture – it controls the only land route from Asia to Malaysia and Singapore. Landforms and drainage divide the country more or less into four natural regions – the North, the Northeast, Central, and the South. Bangkok geographically is part of the central plain, as the capital and largest city this metropolitan area may be considered in other respects a separate region. Each of the four geographical regions differs from the others in population, basic resources, natural features, and level of social and economic development. The diversity of the regions is in fact the most pronounced attribute of Thailand's physical setting.

North Thailand

During the winter months in the mountainous north, the temperature is cool enough for the cultivation of fruits such as lychees and strawberries. These high mountains are incised by steep river valleys and upland areas that border the central plain. A series of rivers, including the Nan, Ping, Wang, and Yom, unite in the lowlands to form the Chao Phraya watershed. Traditionally, these natural features made several different types of agriculture possible, including wet-rice farming in the valleys and shifting cultivation in the uplands. The forested mountains also promoted a spirit of regional independence. Forests, including stands of Teak and other economically useful hardwoods that once dominated the North and parts of the northeast, had diminished by the 1980s to 130,000 km². In 1961 they covered 56% of the country, but by the mid-1980s forestland had been reduced to less than

30% of Thailand's total area.

Northeast Thailand

The Northeast, with its poor soils, is not favoured agriculturally. The region consists mainly of the dry Khorat Plateau and a few low hills. The short monsoon season brings heavy flooding in the river valleys. Unlike the more fertile areas of Thailand, the Northeast has a long dry season, and much of the land is covered by sparse grasses. Mountains ring the plateau on the west and the south, and the Mekong delineates much of the eastern rim.

Central Thailand

The "heartland", Central Thailand, is a natural self-contained basin often termed "the rice bowl of Asia." The complex irrigation system developed for wet-rice agriculture in this region provided the necessary economic support to sustain the development of the Thai state from the 13th Century Sukhothai kingdom to contemporary Bangkok. Here the rather flat unchanging landscape facilitated inland water and road transport. The fertile area was able to sustain a dense population, 422 persons per km² in 1987, compared with an average of 98 for the country as a whole. The terrain of the region is dominated by the Chao Phraya and its tributaries and by the cultivated paddy fields. Metropolitan Bangkok, the focal point of trade, transport, and industrial activity, is situated on the southern edge of the region at the head of the Gulf of Thailand and includes part of the delta of the Chao Phraya system.

South Thailand

The South, a narrow peninsula, is distinctive in climate, terrain, and resources. Its economy is based on rice cultivation for subsistence and rubber production for industry. Other sources of income include coconut plantations, tin mining, and tourism, which is particularly lucrative on Phuket Island. Rolling and mountainous terrain and the absence of large rivers are conspicuous features of the South. North-south mountain barriers and impenetrable tropical forest caused the early isolation and separate political development of this region. International access through the Andaman Sea and the Gulf of Thailand made the south a crossroads for both Theravada Buddhism, centred at Nakhon Si Thammarat, and Islam, especially in the former Pattani kingdom on the border with Malaysia.

What's the Weather like?

The tropical climate brings two monsoons to the country, between May and September when the monsoon is warm, cloudy, and wet, and between November and March, which is cooler and drier. Temperatures constantly hover around 30°C in the day, dropping slightly at night. In the north of the country it can become considerably cooler, sometimes approaching 0°C at night.

Biodiversity

Many distinctive forms of plant and animal can be found in Thailand. The forestlands support hardwood (notably Teak), Pine, Bamboo, and Betel and Coconut Palms, and in the coastal lowlands the mangroves and rattan are lush and plentiful. Animals include the bear, otter, and Civet Cat, as well as the gibbon and several species of monkey. There are around 110 national parks in Thailand, encompassing areas of great beauty and biological importance and historical significance – such as the colour paintings at Pha Tam National Park or the prehistoric evidence and dinosaur fossils at

Phu Wiang National Park. They are not only there to protect, but to educate.

Flora

As with the rest of tropical Asia, most of the indigenous flora in Thailand is associated with two basic types of tropical forest. Monsoon forest, with a dry season of three or more months; and rainforest, where rain falls for over nine months a year. Around 25% of Thailand's land mass is covered in natural forest area – defined by crowns of trees covering over 20% of the land. Monsoon forests account for about a quarter of all remaining natural forest cover in Thailand – it is recognisable by the deciduous trees that shed their leaves during the dry season in an attempt to conserve water. These forests are found predominantly in northern, eastern, north-eastern and central Thailand. Rainforests, about half of the country's forest cover, is typically evergreen, and found mainly in southern Thailand. The remaining quarter of forest cover is a mix of freshwater swamp forests in the delta regions, forested crags in the karst topography of both north and south, and Pine forests in the higher altitudes of northern Thailand.

Thailand has an array of over 27,000 species of flowering plants, including the orchid, the country's national symbol. It also boasts a huge variety of fruit trees, Bamboo (more species than any country besides China), and tropical hardwoods.

Fauna

Variation in the animal kingdom connects with the geographic and climatic differences in Thailand, much like the country's flora. The northern half is dominated by species of Indochinese origin, and the southern half by Sundaic origin (i.e. Malaysia, Sumatra, Borneo, and Java). The Isthmus of Kra, halfway down the southern peninsula marks an invisible line between the two varieties.

Thailand's birdlife is particularly impressive – over 1,000 resident and migrating species, which is around 10% of all world bird species. The coastal and inland waterways of the southern peninsula provide ideal habitats, but human intervention is threatening these areas. Shrimp farms along the coast are robbing the waterfowl of their rich diets, and the over-harvesting of swiftlet nests for Bird's Nest Soup jeopardises the survival of the nest's creators.

The dwindling numbers of indigenous mammals can be found in Thailand's national parks and wildlife sanctuaries. Tigers, leopards, elephants, Asiatic Black Bears, Malayan Sun Bears, Gaur (Indian bison), Banteng (wild cattle), Serow (an Asiatic goat-antelope), Sambar Deer, Barking Deer, Mouse Deer, Pangolin, gibbons, Manauques, tapir, dolphins, and Dugongs (sea cows) can be sometimes spotted within the reserves, but rarely beyond their boundaries. The IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature) has identified 40 of Thailand's 300 species as endangered and are on the Red List, including; Clouded Leopard, Malayan Tapir, tiger, Irawaddy Dolphin, Goral, Jungle Cat, Dusky Langur, and Pileated Gibbon.

Thailand also plays host to around 313 reptiles, and 107 amphibians, including four sea turtle species, six varieties of venomous snake (the Common Cobra, King Cobra, Banded Krait, Malayan Viper, Green Viper, and Russell's Pit Viper). The biggest snake in the country is the Reticulated Python, which can reach an astounding 15 metres, and is surrounded with stories of eating children and goats. The tuk-kae (a large gecko) and jing-jok (a smaller house lizard) are commonly found in homes and older hotels or guesthouses, but are completely harmless, as well as the Black Jungle Monitor.

Thailand also has around 6,000 species of insect, and its lush marine environment is considered to hold tens of thousands of varieties, though exact numbers are not known.

Good Books

Guidebooks

- Thailand. Joe Cumming et al. Lonely Planet, 11th edition, 2005. ISBN 9781740596978
- Thailand's Islands and Beaches. China Williams et al. Lonely Planet, 5th edition, 2006 ISBN 9781740599306
- Thailand: A Guide to Customs and Etiquette (Culture Shock!). Robert Cooper &Nanthapa Cooper. Kuperard, 2000. ISBN 9781870668590
- The Rough Guide to Thailand. Paul Gray &Lucy Ridout. Rough Guides, 6th edition, 2006, ISBN 9781843536772
- To Asia with Love: A Connoisseurs Guide to Cambodia, Laos, Thailand &Vietnam. Kim Fay. Global Directions/ Things Asian Press, 2005. ISBN 9780971594036

Wildlife

- Tropical Wildlife of Southeast Asia (Periplus Action Guides). Jane Whitten. Periplus Editions, 2000. ISBN 9789625930657
- A Photographic Guide to Snakes and Other Reptiles of Thailand, Peninsular Malaysia and Singapore. Merel Cox et al. New Holland Publishers Ltd., 1998. ISBN 9781853684388
- Field Guide to Birds of South-East Asia. Craig Robson. New Holland Publishers Ltd., 2005. ISBN 9781843307464
- Trees and Fruits of Southeast Asia: An Illustrated Field Guide (Orchid Guides). Michael Jensen. Orchid Press, 2002. ISBN 9789748304670
- The Diversity of Life (Penguin Press Science). Edward O. Wilson. Penguin, 2001. ISBN 9780140291612

Fiction/Travel Writing

- Thailand (Travellers' Tales Guides). James O'Reilly &Larry Habegger. Travellers' Tales, US, 2002. ISBN 9781885211750
- Kingdom of Make-Believe: A Novel of Thailand. Dean Barrett. Village East Books, 1999. ISBN 9780966189902
- At Home in Asia: Expatriates in Southeast Asia and Their Stories. Mort Rosenblum &Harold Stephens. Wolenden, 1995. ISBN 9780964252110
- The Beach. Alex Garland. Penguin, 1997. ISBN 9780140258417
- Tigers in Red Weather. Ruth Padel. Abacus, 2006. ISBN 9780349116983

Teaching Guides

- Essential Grammar in Use with Answers: A Self-study Reference and Practice Book for Elementary Students of English 2nd Edition. Raymond Murphy. Cambridge University Press, 2002. ISBN 9780521529327
- Essential Grammar in Use with Answers: A Self-study Reference and Practice Book for Intermediate Students of English 3rd Edition. Raymond Murphy. Cambridge University Press,

2004. ISBN 9780521532891

- Lessons from Nothing: Activities for Language Teaching with Limited Time and Resources (Cambridge Handbooks for Language Teachers). Bruce Marsland. Cambridge University Press, 1998. ISBN 9780521627658
- Games for Children (Resource Books for Teachers). Gordon Lewis & Gunther Benson. Oxford University Press, 1999. ISBN 9780194372244
- Techniques and Principles in Language Teaching 2nd Edition. Diane Larsen-Freeman. Oxford University Press, 2000. ISBN 9780194355742

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