



PACK LIGHTLY

FROM THE GULF TO THE ANDAMAN

Thailand

What a day really costs, which sights are worth the queue, and what to book before you fly.

p. 31 The 8-path route picker: find your trip in one look

p. 39 What a day really costs, printed as a till receipt

p. 46 The 3 scams that still work after fifteen years

54 PAGES

USD PRICES

VISA-FREE ARRIVAL

EDITION 2026.06

Start here

the shape of a Thailand trip, what it costs, what to sort first



THE ANDAMAN COAST

Thailand splits into a familiar arc: Bangkok, the northern hills around Chiang Mai, and the islands on two different seas. This guide is built around that arc: what each stretch costs, which famous sights are worth the queue and which are a tourist tax, and the handful of things to lock in before you fly. All of it offline, in your pocket.

The shape of a trip

The classic loop runs Bangkok to Chiang Mai to the Andaman coast over two weeks. Bangkok for the energy, the north for temples and slow food, the south for the sea. Fly or night-train the long legs.

What a day costs

Backpacking runs about 23 EUR a day, mid-range around 55, captured May 2026. The full receipt, bed to nightcap, is itemised on page 39.

Sort before you fly

Most passports enter visa-free, now a 30-day window after the 2026 cut, so check yours. Add travel insurance and an eSIM. Page 41 lists the four bookings worth doing early.



DINNER, MOST NIGHTS



GETTING AROUND

HOW THE LINKS WORK

Some booking links earn Pack Lightly a commission, at no extra cost to you. Full disclosure is on the last page.

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Your trip on one page

14 days · 22 to 100 EUR/day · best Nov to Mar

If you read nothing else, this page is the trip. The classic first-timer loop runs Bangkok to Chiang Mai to the Andaman coast, two weeks, dry season. Budget from the bars below, not from resort rack rates. Book the three things at the bottom right before you fly; everything else is cheaper and easier to arrange once you are in the country.

THE ROUTE



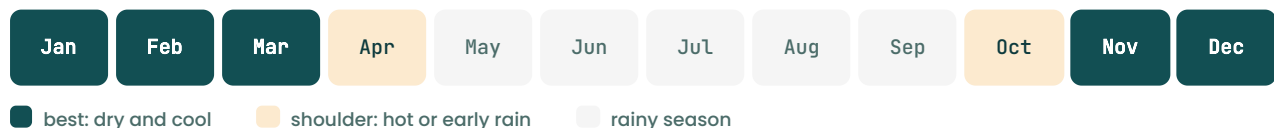
BUDGET PER DAY

Backpacker		22 EUR
Standard		55 EUR
Comfort		100 EUR

BOOK FIRST

- 01 International flights, 6 to 8 weeks out **Aviasales**
- 02 Night train and ferry legs, 2 weeks out **12Go**
- 03 eSIM, install before departure **Saily**

BEST MONTHS



Thailand at a glance

scores 0-100 · pack-lightly country-comparison data

SCORECARD

Tourist infrastructure

90

Safety

75

Budget friendly

85

Nature

80

Food and drinks

95

Culture

85

Budget travel

30 USD/day

Mid-range

75 USD/day

Luxury

150 USD/day

BEACH

CULTURE

CITY

NIGHTLIFE

WELLNESS

source: country-comparison tool, 2026-06

SIX FRAMES OF THE TRIP



01

The country

What Thailand is, what it is not, who goes, and the four regions you actually need to know before you pick dates.

IN THIS CHAPTER

One country, four regions, four readers

07

What Thailand is

70M people • 4 regions • the easiest SE-Asia entry

A constitutional monarchy of 70 million people, wedged between Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, and Malaysia. Bangkok is the capital and the gravitational center: 11 million people, the airport hub, and where most trips start or end. Thailand is the easiest Southeast Asia destination to travel. The infrastructure is mature, English signage exists in every tourist city, the food economy works at every price point, and the flight plus ferry network connects almost everything in under a day. The flip side: it has been touristed for forty years. The famous places are crowded and the famous prices have risen sharply since 2022. This guide shows you the version that still works in 2026.

CAPITAL

Bangkok

~11M people

POPULATION

70M

95% Buddhist

CURRENCY

THB

1 USD = ~36 baht

BEST MONTHS

Nov-Feb

cool and dry

FOUR REGIONS, FOUR CHARACTERS



Central: Bangkok and the plains

hub • river • hot year-round

Where every trip starts. Bangkok plus day-trip range to Ayutthaya and Kanchanaburi. Restaurant economy unmatched anywhere in the region.



North: Chiang Mai, Pai

mountains • cool Nov-Feb • nomad hub

Cooler and calmer than the south. December nights drop to 15°C. Burning season Feb-Apr spoils the air; plan around it.



Andaman coast: Phuket, Krabi

karst islands • dry Nov-Apr • wet May-Oct

The picture-postcard Thailand: limestone cliffs out of jade water. Ferries thin out half the year, so plan around the wet season.



Gulf coast: Tao, Phangan, Samui

diving • dry Jan-Aug • party + chill

Opposite climate from the Andaman: open when the west is closed. Koh Tao is the cheapest dive certification on earth.

WHO THIS GUIDE IS WRITTEN FOR

First-time SE-Asia

14 days, mid-range, the Bangkok to Chiang Mai to island combo.

Long-stay nomad

Chiang Mai base, DTV visa, 1,500 to 1,800 USD a month all-in.

Solo backpacker

35 USD a day, hostels, 3 to 4 weeks before Laos or Cambodia.

Couple or family

2-week winter escape. Bangkok plus one island. Khao Lak for kids.

02

Where to go

Four regions, very different trips. Pick your region before you pick your dates: Andaman in October and the Gulf in October are two different countries.

IN THIS CHAPTER

Bangkok	09
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Bangkok

capital • 3 nights minimum • year-round



The first night in Bangkok is supposed to overwhelm you. The plan of record: land, hate it for an hour, then fall in. An MRT that works, a Skytrain that also works, and the best food economy in Southeast Asia at every price point, from a one-dollar pad krapow on a plastic stool to a serious Isaan tasting menu.

Three nights makes the city click. Day one is the temple triangle: Wat Pho at opening, Wat Arun across the river, the Grand Palace if you tolerate queues. Day two is Chinatown after dark, when Yaowarat turns into a four-kilometre walking food court. Day three is what locals do: Lumpini Park at six in the morning, Or Tor Kor market at ten, Jim Thompson House in the air-conditioned afternoon.

Riverside (Bang Rak)

First-time base: temple triangle on foot, river-taxis as a free highway.

Sukhumvit (Soi 11, Asok)

Rooftop bars and big hotels; the worst traffic in the country comes free.

Phra Nakhon (Old City)

Shophouse boutiques, walking distance to every temple in the canon.

Ari (Phaya Thai)

Specialty coffee, almost no tourists. The expat neighborhood; visit two.



Air quality dips January through March in burn season. Check the AQI before you fly if you are sensitive.



A driver near a major temple saying "Wat is closed today" is a gem-shop loop. Temples are open. Walk on, take a Grab.

GO DEEPER

The full [Bangkok city guide](#) ranks ten picks with quick tips, the [Grand Palace visit plan](#) beats the queues, and the [Chatuchak market page](#) tells you where to start among fifteen thousand stalls.

Chiang Mai

north • 3-4 nights • best Nov-Feb



Chiang Mai is the slow half of the classic Thailand trip and the better half for most people. The walled Old City packs thirty working temples into one square mile, the food is northern Thai (khao soi, sai ua sausage) rather than tourist-menu pad thai, and a serious coffee scene has grown up around the university crowd in Nimman. Prices run noticeably below Bangkok: a guesthouse double for 18 USD, street dinners under 3.

Three nights covers the city itself; add a fourth for Doi Inthanon or an ethical elephant sanctuary. Skip the tiger parks entirely. The one timing rule that matters: avoid late February through April, when crop burning smothers the valley in smoke.



Red songthaew trucks run a 30 baht flat rate inside the moat. Agree the price before you climb in, pay when you hop off.



Burning season runs late February into April. Air quality drops hard; point your trip at the islands instead in those weeks.

Old City temples

Wat Chedi Luang and Wat Phra Singh first; go before 9am, dress covered.

Nimman

Cafe and coworking quarter; where digital nomads actually spend their days.

Night markets

Sunday Walking Street beats the nightly Night Bazaar on food and price.

Doi Suthep

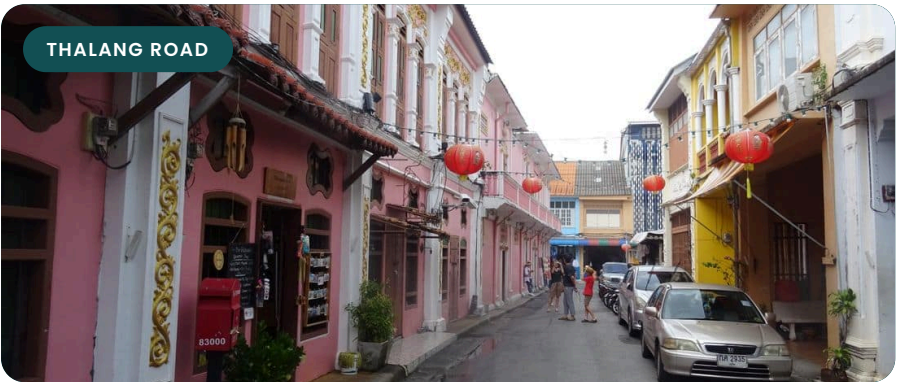
The mountain temple above town; 306 steps, go for the late-afternoon light.

READ ON

City picks in the [Chiang Mai write-up](#), the climb itself in the [Doi Suthep visit plan](#), and what to order in the [food and drinks breakdown](#).

Phuket Old Town

Andaman • 2 nights • year-round



Phuket island has a reputation. It is mostly Patong's reputation, and Patong is twenty kilometres from where you actually want to be. The Old Town is the trading-port heart of the island: Sino-Portuguese shophouses in mango and pistachio pastels, pinned between Chinese temples and Muslim graveyards. You walk it in a long morning.

The reason to come is the food. Phuket has its own Peranakan cuisine, a Chinese-Malay-Thai fusion that exists nowhere else in the country at this concentration: Hokkien noodles from a generations-old stall, kanom jeen at six in the morning, shaved ice for the afternoon. Stay here, not Patong, and tuk-tuk to a beach when you want one.



Boutique hotels in restored shophouses run around 90 USD and beat any Patong resort at the price.



Sunday Walking Street closes Thalang Road to cars and turns it into a kilometre of food stalls.

Thalang and Dibuk roads

The shophouse core. Photograph it early, then stay for the kopi shops.

Big Buddha

The 45-metre marble statue above Chalong; clear-day views over both coasts.

Promthep Cape

The island's sunset point. Come 45 minutes early for a spot on the rail.

Beach access

Karon and Kata over Patong; quieter sand, same water, fewer touts.

MORE ON THE SITE The [Old Town walking route](#) maps the Peranakan food stops, the [Phuket island rundown](#) covers the beaches, and the [Promthep Cape page](#) has the sunset timing.

Krabi and Railay

Andaman • 4-6 nights base • Nov-Apr



Krabi Town is not the postcard. The postcard is Railay, twenty minutes by long-tail from a pier you can walk to from your hotel. The trick most travelers miss: the postcard charges resort prices and Krabi Town does not. A four-star room in town runs 40 to 70 USD in high season; the same hotel moved to Railay starts at 180. The boats leave every hour.

Railay itself is boat-access only, closed off by cliffs that turn the peninsula into an accidental island. Walk the five-minute trail to Phra Nang Cave Beach before the first day-tour boats land and you get the brochure Thailand with one percent of the brochure's people in frame.



Railay lands wet at low tide. Pack light, keep electronics in a dry bag, wear sandals you can wade in.



Climbers: the east-wall outfits run half-day intros from 35 USD, gear included. Book one day ahead in high season.

Four Islands tour

Poda, Chicken, Tup, Phra Nang in one day, around 25 USD in a group boat.

Hong Islands lagoon

The emerald lagoon day-trip; calmer water and fewer boats than Phi Phi.

Tiger Cave Temple

1,237 steps to a summit Buddha; go at 7am, carry a litre of water.

Emerald Pool

Inland spring an hour out; swimmable, clearest before the tour vans arrive.

KEEP READING

Ferry timing and day-trips in the [Krabi page](#), the cave beach walk in the [Phra Nang page](#), and routes up the cliffs in the [Railay climbing page](#).

Ayutthaya

central • day-trip or 1 night • year-round



Ayutthaya was the capital of Siam for four hundred years until the Burmese sacked it in 1767. What is left is a UNESCO ruin field on an island made by three rivers, ninety minutes from Bangkok by third-class train. The ticket costs a dollar; you ride with the windows open, buying dried squid from the basket vendor who walks the carriage.

Rent a bicycle on arrival, five dollars for the day, and ride a five-temple loop in about four hours with lunch. The crowds turn around at four when the tour buses leave for Bangkok. Stay the night if you can: the temples are lit after dark and the old island empties out.



Guesthouses near the station rent bikes for about 5 USD a day. Helmet quality varies; ride the quiet island roads.



Day-trip timing: the 7am train out, the 6pm back. You will see more Thai history in a day than the rest of the trip combined.

Wat Mahathat

The Buddha head in the tree roots. Kneel for the photo; never stand higher than the head.

Wat Phra Si Sanphet

The three iconic chedis, the old royal temple of the capital.

Wat Chaiwatthanaram

Across the river, best at golden hour on the way back to the train.

Sukhothai, the sequel

Older, quieter ruins six hours north; for second trips and history readers.

THE LONG VERSION

The bike loop and opening hours in the [Ayutthaya write-up](#), the ruin field itself in the [historical park page](#), and the older sister city in the [Sukhothai breakdown](#).

The islands, mapped to what you want

two coasts • opposite weather • 9 islands that cover every trip

Thailand has two island coasts with opposite weather. The Andaman side (west) is dry November to April and monsoonal May to October; the Gulf side (east) runs roughly the reverse. There is no month when both are equally good, and there is always one that is the right answer. The matrix below replaces three pages of island prose: pick the column you care about, read down.

ISLAND	COAST	BEACH	PARTY	QUIET	BUDGET
Koh Phi Phi	Andaman	● ● ●	● ● ●	● ○ ○	● ○ ○
Koh Lanta	Andaman	● ● ○	● ○ ○	● ● ●	● ● ○
Koh Yao Noi	Andaman	● ● ○	○ ○ ○	● ● ●	● ● ○
Koh Lipe	Andaman	● ● ●	● ○ ○	● ● ○	● ○ ○
Phuket	Andaman	● ● ○	● ● ●	○ ○ ○	● ○ ○
Koh Tao	Gulf	● ● ○	● ● ○	● ○ ○	● ● ●
Koh Phangan	Gulf	● ● ○	● ● ●	● ● ○	● ● ○
Koh Samui	Gulf	● ● ○	● ● ○	● ○ ○	○ ○ ○
Koh Chang	Gulf (east)	● ● ○	● ○ ○	● ● ○	● ● ○

● filled dots = stronger fit (3 = built for it)
assessment: pack-lightly islands cluster, 2026-06



Two weeks or less, November to February: Andaman. February to August: either coast, Gulf if you dive. Longer: do both; the Phuket to Surat Thani flight costs less than the bus.



Sleep on Phi Phi rather than day-tripping it, scooter the length of Lanta, and use Samui only if you want direct flights and mid-range comfort.

ON THE WEBSITE Season, ferry routes and this-not-that pairings for every island in the [islands rundown](#); the twelve sand-level picks in the [beaches ranking](#).

Khao Sok and the parks worth a day

156 national parks · 2 are tourist-ready and on your route



CHEOW LAN LAKE, KHAO SOK



Khao Sok sits between Surat Thani and Khao Lak; it slots into the route on the way south, not as a detour.



Khao Yai entry is about 9 USD. Go Nov-Feb for cool air or Jun-Aug for the post-monsoon waterfalls.

The rainforest in Khao Sok has been continuous primary jungle for one hundred and sixty million years; it is older than the Himalayas. Cheow Lan Lake, formed by a dam in the eighties, drowned a valley and left limestone karsts rising out of jade-green water. You sleep on raft houses tethered to the cliffs and wake to gibbons.

The two-day, one-night package runs around 110 USD per person all-in. Book direct rather than through hotel resellers; the resellers double the price for the same boats. The other park that earns a day is Khao Yai, three hours from Bangkok: waterfalls, hornbills, wild gaur, and a real chance of elephants on the access road at dawn if you stay at the campsite.

Khao Sok raft houses

The overnight on the lake is the point; the day-tour version misses the dawn.

Khao Sok night safari

Guided night walk from the village; civets, snakes, and the jungle sound-track.

Khao Yai day-trip

Reliable from Bangkok; the overnight in a park lodge is the upgrade.

Erawan Falls

Seven tiers near Kanchanaburi; swim the third, climb to the seventh.

MORE DETAIL

All fifteen tourist-ready parks in the [national parks write-up](#), the lake overnight in the [Cheow Lan page](#), and the safari plan in the [Khao Yai page](#).

Temples that stay with you

after the first six they blur • these three do not



You will walk into many temples in Thailand. After the first six they begin to blur: the same naga staircases, the same gold lacquer over the same red columns. Three stand outside the pattern. They are not the most famous and not the easiest to reach; they are the ones that give you a story to take home.

Pair any temple morning with the dress rule (shoulders and knees covered, sarongs rent for a dollar at major sites) and the timing rule: before nine or after four, when the light is better and the bus tours are elsewhere.

Wat Pho, Bangkok

The 46-metre reclining Buddha is the headline; the courtyard quiet at eight in the morning is the better reason. Go before the first tour bus at half past nine.

Wat Rong Khun, Chiang Rai

A contemporary art-temple in white plaster and mirror glass, still being built since 1997. Half-day from Chiang Mai, entry around 3 USD.

Wat Phra That Lampang Luang

Fourteenth-century Lanna teak, ninety minutes from Chiang Mai, almost no tour buses. Locals come for merit-making, not selfies. Free entry.



Wat Pho entry is 7 USD and includes the massage school, the original training ground. Book a slot on arrival.



Photography rule that matters: never stand higher than a Buddha image, and never pose with your back to one.

WORTH A READ

All 25 landmarks with visiting hours in the [religious landmarks page](#), the reclining Buddha in the [Wat Pho page](#), and the White Temple in the [Chiang Rai page](#).

Beaches, by what you want from the day

four moods • one pick per coast where possible



The islands matrix on page 12 handled where to base. What matters at beach level is what you want from the day: silence, snorkeling, party, or a calm sea your kids can stand in. One pick per mood below, with the runner-up where the coasts differ.

FOR SILENCE

Bottle Beach, Koh Phangan

No road in, boat access only, hammock hostels and one restaurant on the sand. Andaman alternative: the low-tide sandbars of Koh Yao Noi.

FOR SWIM AND SNORKEL

Railay West, Krabi

The postcard backdrop with shallow calm water. Gulf alternative: Sairee on Koh Tao, with a sunset bar that stays a bar.

FOR PARTY

Haad Rin, Koh Phangan

During a full moon, full stop. Outside that week, Chaweng on Samui delivers the adult version with quiet hotels 200 metres off the beach.

FOR FAMILY

Khao Lak, mainland Andaman

Calm sea, gentle slope, no nightlife. Hua Hin if you would rather drive three hours from Bangkok than fly.



Reef-safe SPF only on snorkel days; regular sunscreen is banned in marine parks and checked on some boats.



Red flag means rip current, not bureaucracy. Andaman beaches in wet season drown a handful of strong swimmers every year.

SEE ALSO All twelve rated beaches with reef status in the [beaches write-up](#), and the clearest water by month in the [snorkeling breakdown](#).

Off the beaten path

for trips of two weeks plus • one place no friend ever mentioned



If your trip is two weeks or longer, you have room for one place that no friend ever mentioned. These are not secret; locals know them, and so does the small percentage of repeat visitors. They are the Thailand most tourists never see because the first two trips go to the obvious circuit.

Nan Province in the far north touches Laos: hilly, riverside, almost empty in December when cool air settles in the valleys. Isaan, the northeastern plateau, is the spicy-food capital and the least-touristed region, with Khmer ruins at Phimai older than Angkor's.



Isaan logistics: fly into Khon Kaen or Ubon, trains and buses link the Khmer ruin towns from there.



The Mae Hong Son loop has 1,864 corners by official count. Skip it if you have never ridden a scooter.

Nan Province

Tai Lue heritage villages, a 150-year-old temple with the better stories, river roads you remember by smell.

Isaan and Phimai

Khmer ruins, border markets, and food engineered to make you sweat through your shirt.

Mae Hong Son loop

Four to seven days by scooter out of Chiang Mai: hill-tribe villages, viewpoint cafes, hot springs at altitude.

DIG IN

Seven off-route picks with maps and timing in the [off the beaten path rundown](#), and the Khmer temple field in the [Phimai breakdown](#).

Pai and Chiang Rai

the slow north • two bases past Chiang Mai



The road to Pai has 762 marked curves and a minibus that needs three hours to cover 130 kilometers. People come for a weekend and rebook for a week. The town is one walking street of cafes and slow bars, ringed by hot springs, a canyon you watch the sun drop into, and rice valleys that stay green into the cool season.

Chiang Rai runs the other direction, four hours northeast, and trades the hammock pace for temples built by people with a point to prove. The White Temple is a working artwork, not an antique. The Blue Temple glows after dark. North of town the Golden Triangle meets Laos and Myanmar across the Mekong, with tea hills climbing to Doi Tung.



Pai minibuses are the curviest ride in the north. Sit up front, skip the big breakfast, take the tablet.



Chiang Rai's night bazaar is calmer than Chiang Mai's and the food courts are better value.

Pai

Canyon sunsets, hot springs, valley cafes, and a walking street that empties by midnight.

Chiang Rai temples

The White Temple and the Blue Temple, both modern, both built to be looked at twice.

Golden Triangle

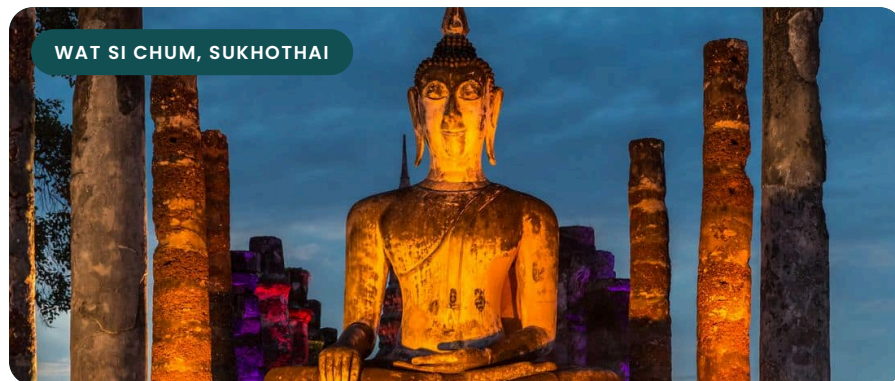
Where the Mekong meets two borders, plus Doi Tung's tea hills and royal gardens.

THE FULL PICTURE

Timing, routes and where to sleep in the [Pai page](#) and the [Chiang Rai write-up](#).

Sukhothai and the first kingdom

the 13th-century capital • cycle the ruins at opening time



WAT SI CHUM, SUKHOTHAI



The park opens at 6:30. The first hour is cool, empty, and the only decent light for photos.



Three zones, separate tickets. Ride the central zone if you only have a morning.

Sukhothai was the capital almost eight hundred years ago, more than a century before Ayutthaya took the title, and the ruins it left are calmer and greener than anything near Bangkok. Rent a bicycle at the gate and ride the historical park at opening time, before the heat and the buses. The central zone holds the set pieces: lotus-bud spires, lily ponds that mirror the brick, and a seated Buddha at Wat Si Chum you meet through a slot in the wall.

Most travelers treat it as a one-night stop between Chiang Mai and Bangkok, and that is the right call. New Sukhothai has the buses and the cheap rooms twelve kilometers east. Old Sukhothai puts you at the park gate for the early ride. Add Si Satchanalai, an hour north and almost empty, if temple ruins are your thing.

Wat Mahathat

The royal temple at the center, a forest of spires around a seated Buddha.

Wat Si Chum

The giant seated Buddha you glimpse through a tall slot, then meet face to face.

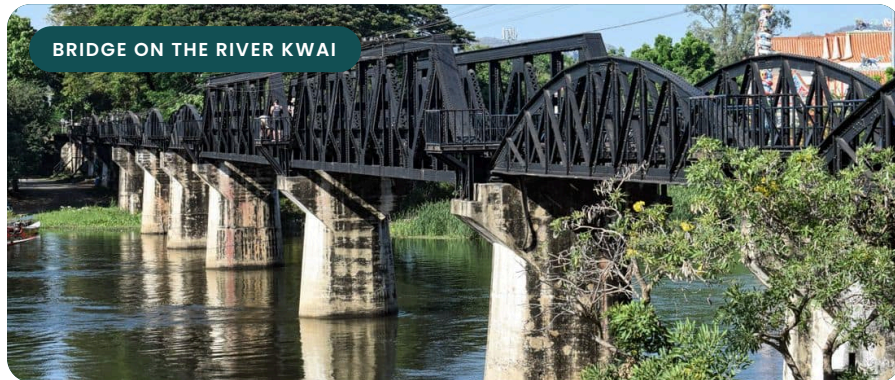
Si Satchanalai

The quiet sister site an hour north, where you ride the ruins almost alone.

GO DEEPER Cycling routes and opening times in the [Sukhothai breakdown](#), and how it compares to the later capital in the [Ayutthaya rundown](#).

Kanchanaburi: falls and the war railway

two hours west of Bangkok • history in the morning, water in the afternoon



Two hours west of Bangkok the country turns to limestone hills, and the river through Kanchanaburi carries one of the heaviest stories in the region. The Death Railway was built by Allied prisoners and conscripted laborers in 1943. The bridge still stands, the museum at Hellfire Pass tells the history without flinching, and the war cemeteries are kept immaculate.

The same province holds Erawan Falls, seven turquoise tiers you can swim between in the national park, plus caves, river raft-house guesthouses, and Sai Yok. Do the history in the cool of the morning, the water in the afternoon. Two nights is the right length. One is a rush.



Trains run the surviving Death Railway daily to Nam Tok. Slow and cheap, and the viaduct stretch is the point.

Bridge and Hellfire Pass

The railway history, the memorial walk, and a museum that does the story justice.

Erawan Falls

Seven tiers of turquoise pools you climb and swim. Tier two is the one if you skip the rest.

Sai Yok and caves

Floating raft-house rooms, river kayaking, and a quieter national park upstream.

READ ON

Day-trip timing and where to stay in the [Kanchanaburi rundown](#), and the wider park network in the [national parks page](#).

The quieter southern islands

past Phuket and Phi Phi • Lanta, Lipe, Koh Yao



Phuket and Phi Phi take the crowds, which leaves the better water to the islands one ferry further out. Koh Lanta is the easy one: long flat beaches down the west coast, an Old Town of stilted Chinese shophouses, and a pace that suits families and long-stayers more than party-seekers. It links to Krabi by road and boat, so you can fold it into the Andaman without flying.

Koh Lipe is the reward for going almost to Malaysia. It sits inside Tarutao marine park, the water runs the clearest in the country, and the whole island is three beaches and one walking street. You reach it by speedboat from Pak Bara, and it closes to most boats in the May to October monsoon. Koh Yao Noi, back in Phang Nga Bay, is the in-between: rice fields, rubber farms, and karst views without a single beach club.

Koh Lanta
Long west-coast beaches, a stilted Old Town, and a family-and-long-stay pace.

Koh Lipe
Tarutao marine park, water clear to the seabed, three beaches and a walking street.

Koh Yao Noi
Rice and rubber in Phang Nga Bay, karst views, and no resorts to speak of.


Lipe runs on island time and cash. The ATM network is unreliable. Bring baht from the mainland.


Koh Yao Noi sits between Phuket and Krabi. Cheap ferries from both make it an easy two-night detour.

MORE ON THE SITE
Ferries and beaches in the [Koh Lanta write-up](#) and the [Koh Lipe breakdown](#), or pick by mood in the [island rundown](#).

03

What to do

Activities ranked by signal per baht: diving, food, markets, wellness. Plus where to sleep in each region and which tours are worth paying for.

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What Thailand asks you to do with your days

slow north • water south • one threshold activity per trip



RAJADAMNERN STADIUM, BANGKOK



Muay Thai at Rajadamnern: ringside is 25 USD; the second-floor gambling section is half that and three times the energy.



The 5am monk alms round: buy from a temple-side vendor, give quietly, do not photograph up close.

The country arranges activities by climate and coast. The north is built for slow days: cooking classes, temple loops, hill-tribe treks. The Andaman coast is built for water: climbing the limestone, island-hopping on long-tails. The Gulf does diving and partying, sometimes in the same week.

If one activity defines the trip, it is usually the one that crosses a threshold: an Open Water certificate on Koh Tao, a first multi-pitch on Railay, a cooking class that ends with you understanding what fish sauce is supposed to taste like. The rest of the calendar is glue between those moments.

Cooking class, Chiang Mai

Charcoal not induction, market visit included, four hours from about 30 USD. [Book an evening class.](#)

Rock climbing, Railay

The limestone is world-class and the intro courses assume nothing.

Ethical elephants

Pick a sanctuary that lets you bathe and feed, never ride. A vetted Chiang Mai day with rainforest and a waterfall runs about 69 USD. [Book a sanctuary day.](#)

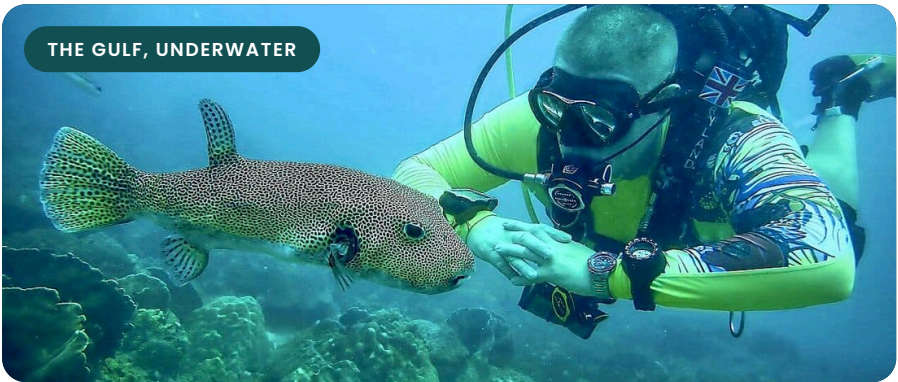
Thai massage

8 to 12 USD at a walk-in shop with a Wat Pho certificate on the wall.

KEEP READING Etiquette and the cultural calendar in the [culture page](#), the sanctuary visit in the [Elephant Nature Park page](#), and wildlife ethics in the [wildlife page](#).

Diving: the cheapest place on earth to start

Koh Tao Open Water ~320 USD • Similans closed May-Nov



Thailand certified more new divers last year than any other country. The economics are simple: a PADI Open Water course runs 500 to 700 USD in most of the world and four days. On Koh Tao it is about 320 USD and three days, with dive schools that have competed on quality and instructor ratios for thirty years. [Book a 3-day Open Water course](#) if you want the slot locked before you land.

Already certified? Two sites earn a special trip. Sail Rock on the Gulf side holds barracuda and the occasional whale shark from March to May. The Similan Islands on the Andaman side are the better photograph, when the park is open between mid-October and mid-May. Walk-up beats pre-booking outside high season.

Koh Tao

The certification island. Every fourth person at the hostel bar is mid-course; the conversation is your safety stop.

Sail Rock

Vertical pinnacle, the year-round option. Whale shark odds peak March to May.

Similan Islands

Granite-and-coral national park, liveaboard country. Closed in monsoon.



No flying for 18 to 24 hours after your last dive. Plan the certificate at the start of the island leg, not the end.



Check your travel insurance covers diving to 18 metres before the course, not after the incident.

THE LONG VERSION

Thirteen sites by level in the [diving write-up](#), the course itself in the [Koh Tao PADI page](#), and mask-only options in the [snorkeling breakdown](#).

Food: the four calibration dishes

street economy • blue plastic chairs • 1 to 4 USD a plate

The shorthand most westerners arrive with is sweet, salty, sour, spicy in the same bite. Accurate, but the architecture underneath matters more: a balance system that varies by region, so the same som tam is rounder in Bangkok than in Isaan, where it is engineered to make you sweat. The tourist mistake is eating in restaurants that look like restaurants. Locals eat where the chairs are blue plastic and the menu is whatever is in the wok. Order these four dishes early; they are your bar for everything after.



Pad krapow moo phat kaphrao

USD 2 • everywhere

The Thai diner default: pork, holy basil, rice, runny-yolk fried egg. If the egg is crispy at the edges, the wok was hot enough. That is the test.



Khao soi khao soi

USD 3 • Chiang Mai

Northern curry-noodle, half soft half crispy, Burmese-Yunnanese roots. The famous shop has a 40-minute queue; the one across town serves an equal bowl with none.



Som tam som tam

USD 1-2 • everywhere

Green papaya salad pounded in a clay mortar. Say "mai phet" if you cannot handle heat. The market-stall version always beats the restaurant version.



Massaman curry matsaman

USD 4 • south

Persian-influenced southern curry with cardamom and peanuts. Mild by Thai standards, the gateway curry. Best in Krabi and Phuket where it originated.



Tourists queue at Khao San stalls; locals eat Or Tor Kor at lunch and Soi Ari in the evening. Pick the second list.



A busy stall is a safe stall: turnover is the food-safety system. The empty one with the laminated photos is the risk.

ON THE WEBSITE

Fifty-plus dishes with regional notes in the [food and drinks rundown](#); what the same plate costs at street and restaurant level in the [budget breakdown](#).

Markets, wellness, and local nights

three threads that round out the chapter



CHATUCHAK, BANGKOK

Chatuchak is the weekend monster: fifteen thousand stalls, Saturday and Sunday, divided into thematic sections nobody navigates on the first visit. Show up at nine, eat as you walk. The northern equivalent is Chiang Mai's Sunday Walking Street; the newest Bangkok night market is Jodd Fairs, cocktails and Thai barbecue without the Khao San noise tax.

Thai massage is intense by design: stretching, pressure points, almost too hard for first-timers. An hour at a walk-in shop runs 8 to 12 USD and beats the resort spa on technique. Oil massage is the gentler upgrade; yoga retreats cluster on Phangan, in Pai, and in Chiang Mai.



Negotiate at markets, never at 7-Elevens or restaurants. Half the asking price is a fair opening at Chatuchak.



Muay Thai fight nights at Rajadamnern run Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Sunday. Buy at the door.

Markets

Chatuchak Saturday or Sunday, Sunday Walking Street in Chiang Mai, Jodd Fairs for the night version.

Wellness

Walk-in massage with a Wat Pho certificate on the wall; weekly yoga drop-ins from about 200 USD.

Culture as event

Muay Thai over any dinner-show; the Khantoke dinner in Chiang Mai is touristy but legitimately local.

MORE DETAIL Stadium schedules and studio picks in the [culture page](#), the weekend market plan in the [Chatuchak page](#), and the walking street in the [Sunday market page](#).

Where to stay: Chiang Mai and Krabi

prices per night, double room • book 2 nights, decide the rest there

Two rules cover most of Thailand. First: book only your first two nights ahead, then decide on the ground; walk-in rates often beat online ones outside peak weeks. Second: location beats stars. In Chiang Mai sleep inside or just east of the moat, in Krabi base at Ao Nang or Railay rather than Krabi Town.

Chiang Mai

hostel 9 USD mid 24 USD comfort 62 USD

Old City for temples on foot and the night markets, Nimman for cafes and coworking. Both are walkable and a short songthaew apart. [Check what a room costs around the Old City moat](#) before you commit; the dorm crowd sleeps cheap through [Hostelworld](#).

Krabi (Railay)

hostel 9 USD mid 24 USD comfort 62 USD

Railay is boat-access only, so pack light and expect a wet landing at low tide. Ao Nang keeps the bus links and the cheaper plates. Backpackers run the dorm scene on [Hostelworld](#); for a room with walls, [see what the peninsula is charging tonight](#).

Mid-range and up across both cities, with free cancellation while your plans are still moving.

Find Stays on Booking.com

TOURS WORTH PAYING FOR

Chiang Mai evening cooking class with market tour

from 30 USD

5.0 (95 reviews)

4 hours

Krabi jungle zipline adventure

from 44 USD

5.0 (21 reviews)

4 hours

Chiang Mai half-day city bike tour

from 41 USD

5.0 (75 reviews)

3 hours

Live Viator tours, prices captured June 2026, ratings from verified bookings. Tap a card to book.

Where to stay: Bangkok and the Gulf

prices per night, double room • location beats stars

Bangkok rewards picking a neighborhood before a hotel: Riverside for first-timers, Sukhumvit for nightlife, the Old City for temples on foot. On the Gulf islands the calculus is ferry-pier distance. Koh Tao beds fill with dive students; if you are mid-course, sleep within walking distance of your school and skip the taxi mafia entirely.

Bangkok

hostel 12 USD mid 40 USD comfort 95 USD

Riverside (Bang Rak) puts the temple triangle and the river-taxis on your doorstep. Sukhumvit swaps that for rooftop bars and rail interchanges. Rates swing by the week here, so [pull up live Riverside prices](#) before you lock anything in. Dorms cluster on [Hostelworld](#).

Koh Tao (Gulf)

hostel 8 USD mid 22 USD comfort 55 USD

Sairee for the beach-bar evenings, Mae Haad for the ferry pier and the quieter nights. Dive schools throw in discounted rooms for students, so ask your school first and book nothing until you have. Still need a bed? [The live map around Sairee](#) and [Hostelworld](#) fill the gaps.

Hotels and resorts across Bangkok and every Gulf island, cancellable until a few days before check-in.

[Find Stays on Booking.com](#)

TOURS WORTH PAYING FOR

Bangkok street-food evening tour

from 47 USD

5.0 (35 reviews)

3 hours

Koh Tao full-day treasure hunt

from 63 USD

5.0 (88 reviews)

6 hours

Koh Samui sunrise paddleboard tour

from 55 USD

5.0 (33 reviews)

2 hours

Live Viator tours, prices captured June 2026, ratings from verified bookings. Tap a card to book.

04

Routes

Eight paths through the country, the two-week route worth flying for, and the loop drawn as a transit map.

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Pick your trip, 8 paths	31
14 days, day by day	32
The loop as a transit map	34
Solo, family, nomad, vegan	35

Pick your trip

three dimensions, eight paths · find yours, jump to the matching itinerary

Who you travel with, how long you have, and what you spend per night decide the route before any list of sights does. Find your row below; the two-week loop on the next spread covers paths two and three in full.

SOLO · 7D · BACKPACKER Bangkok to Chiang Mai loop USD 380 · hostels + night bus - BKK 3n: old town + Chinatown - Night bus to Chiang Mai - Chiang Mai 4n	SOLO · 14D · BACKPACKER BKK, Pai, Chiang Mai, Koh Tao USD 720 · dive course included - BKK 2 · CM 3 · Pai 3 - Flight to Surat Thani - Koh Tao 6: Open Water
COUPLE · 14D · MID BKK, Chiang Mai, Koh Lanta USD 1,950 for 2 · 3-star hotels - BKK 3: boutique Old Town - CM 4: cooking + Doi Suthep - Lanta 7: beach + 4 Islands	COUPLE · 7D · COMFORT BKK to Krabi, 4-star USD 2,400 for 2 · resorts - BKK 2: river-view hotel - Krabi 5: Railay-side resort - Day trip Hong Islands
FAMILY · 14D · MID BKK, Chiang Mai, Khao Lak USD 4,200 · family of 4 - BKK 3: aquarium + parks - CM 4: elephant sanctuary - Khao Lak 7: calm beach	FAMILY · 7D · COMFORT BKK to Hua Hin, no flights USD 3,100 · family of 4 - BKK 2: Sukhumvit base - Hua Hin 5: 3-hour drive, kid-friendly sea
NOMAD · 30D · MID Chiang Mai base + weekend hops USD 1,600 a month all-in - CM 24: Nimman coworking - Pai weekend · Phangan weekend	RETIREE · 21D · COMFORT BKK, Chiang Mai, Krabi, no buses USD 5,200 per couple - BKK 4: 5-star central - CM 7: boutique courtyard - Krabi 10: beach resort

WORTH A READ

Full day-by-day versions online: the [7-day route](#), the [14-day route](#), the [21-day route](#), and the [28-day route](#).

14 days, the route worth flying for

days 1-7 · Bangkok and the north

The classic loop, refined. Built for first-timers, valid for repeat visitors. Book the night train (day 4) and any high-season ferries through [12Go](#) a few days ahead; everything else can be decided on the day.

- 1

Arrive Bangkok
BKK · day zero

Land. Grab to hotel. Walk Sukhumvit, dinner at a noodle shop you can see from the door. Sleep early.
- 2

Bangkok temples
BKK · 7am start

Wat Pho at opening, Wat Arun across the river. Lunch on Tha Tien pier. Afternoon: Jim Thompson House.
- 3

Ayutthaya + Chinatown
day-trip + 7pm food

Train to Ayutthaya (90 min), bike the ruins, back by 5pm. Yaowarat food crawl from 7pm onward.
- 4

Night train north
BKK to CM · overnight

Special Express 18:10, second-class sleeper. Arrive 7am with a bed already waiting in Chiang Mai.
- 5

Chiang Mai Old City
3 temples · cooking class

Wat Phra Singh and Wat Chedi Luang on foot. Cooking class from 5pm, market visit included.
- 6

Doi Suthep sunset
scooter or songthaew

Bo Sang umbrella village in the morning. Doi Suthep terrace at 5pm for the oil-painting light.
- 7

Van to Pai
3hr · 762 corners

Motion-sickness tablet before you leave. Arrive Pai by 2pm; walking street in the evening.

04



The sleeper berth costs 25 USD, saves a hotel night, and arrives rested. The 40 USD flight saves five hours you spend asleep anyway.



Lower berths are wider and have the window; they sell out first. Book the train as soon as your dates are fixed.

14 days, the south half

days 8-14 • Pai to the Andaman

The second week trades mountains for limestone. One flight, one ferry, and the rest is beach logistics. Keep the last day free of boats: ferries slip, flights do not wait.

8	Pai caves + canyon scooter USD 6/day	Lod Cave in the morning, Pai Canyon at sunset. Hot springs after dark if the night runs cold.
9	Fly south to Krabi van back • CNX to KBV	Van back to Chiang Mai, afternoon flight south. Beach by sunset if the connections behave.
10	Railay rock + beach long-tail 45 min	Long-tail to Railay. Walk to Phra Nang cave beach early; climbing intro in the afternoon if interested.
11	Four Islands tour full day • USD 25 group	Poda, Chicken, Tup, Phra Nang. Pack reef-safe SPF. Skip the cheapest operator on the pier.
12	Koh Lanta transfer ferry 2hr • settle in	Ferry to Lanta, Long Beach base. A quiet evening is the calibration after the Krabi crowds.
13	Lanta scooter loop south cape • low-key	Scooter to the south end, lighthouse view at the national park, sunset back at Long Beach.
14	Home via Krabi ferry + flight via BKK	Morning ferry to Krabi, afternoon flight to Bangkok, long-haul home overnight.



Swap days 12-13 for Phi Phi if you want the louder version, or for Koh Yao Noi if you want the quieter one. The ferry web covers all three.



Three weeks? Insert Koh Tao and the dive course between days 7 and 9, entering the south via Surat Thani instead of Krabi.

The classic loop, as a transit map

north by rail, south by air and ferry

Two lines cover almost every first trip. The north line runs on rails and wheels: cheap, scenic, overnight-able. The south line flies, then floats. Book the night train and the ferries a few days ahead in high season through [12Go](#); everything else can be bought on the day.



train bus / minivan flight ferry

[Plan the legs on 12Go](#)

WHAT EACH LEG COSTS

Bangkok to Ayutthaya 3rd-class train · 1.5h ~1 USD	Bangkok to Chiang Mai 2nd-class sleeper · 11h ~25 USD	Chiang Mai to Pai minivan · 3h ~6 USD
Bangkok to Krabi flight · 1h20 ~35 USD	Krabi to Koh Lanta ferry · 1.5h ~12 USD	Bangkok to Koh Tao bus + catamaran · 8h ~28 USD

fares: 12Go snapshot, high season 2026 · indicative one-way per person

Solo, family, nomad, and vegan in Thailand

the specifics that change the route, one card each

The eight paths assume a generic traveller. If you fit one of these four, a handful of details change the trip, and they fit on one card each.

FOR SOLO TRAVELERS

Solo, especially female-solo

Thailand is among the easiest first-solo destinations in Asia.

- **Safe bases** CM Old City, BKK Phra Nakhon, Krabi Town
- **Hostels** the big chains run female-only dorms in every hub
- **Avoid** Khao San after midnight, Patpong, Bangla Road
- **Apps** Grab verified-driver, live-location sharing at night

FOR FAMILIES

Family with kids 6-12

One of the most kid-friendly long-haul destinations there is.

- **Best base** Khao Lak: calm sea, no nightlife
- **Avoid** Patong and Phangan with children
- **Do** Elephant Nature Park (CM), the Bangkok aquarium
- **Health** Bumrungrad in Bangkok, JCI accredited

FOR NOMADS

Digital nomads and long-stay

Chiang Mai is the SE-Asia hub; the DTV visa changed the math in 2024.

- **Base** CM Nimman, BKK Ari, Phuket Rawai
- **Coworking** a dozen serious spaces in Nimman alone
- **Visa** DTV 5-year multi-entry, 180-day stays
- **Internet** 50-150 Mbps standard, 1 Gbps in Nimman cafes

FOR VEGANS

Vegan and vegetarian

Thailand has a serious Buddhist vegetarian tradition (jay).

- **Phrase** "gin jay" means strictly plant-based
- **Cities** Chiang Mai and Bangkok lead on dedicated kitchens
- **Watch** fish sauce hides in almost everything; say it twice
- **Festival** Phuket Vegetarian Festival, October new moon

SEE ALSO

Safety specifics in the [safety page](#), visa routes in the [visa write-up](#), and hospital quality in the [hospitals and pharmacies page](#).

05

When to go

Three seasons, one obvious answer, one stubborn caveat. Plus the festival calendar that doubles hotel prices and what a day actually costs.

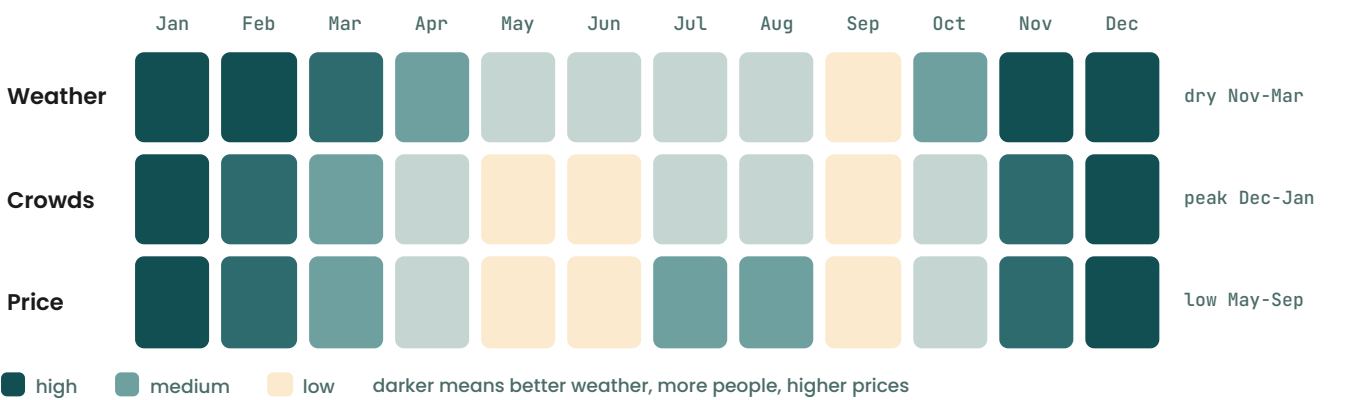
IN THIS CHAPTER

Weather, crowds, price	37
Festivals worth planning around	38
What a day costs	39

Weather, crowds, price

12-month calendar · Andaman-weighted

Thailand's year splits cleanly in two: a dry, cooler season from November through March and a wet season from May through September. Crowds and prices track the weather almost exactly, with a hard peak over Christmas and New Year. The useful gap is the shoulder: late October and April are hotter or wetter on paper, but flights and rooms drop 20 to 40 percent while most days stay perfectly usable.



source: best-travel-time dataset · captured 2026-05-17

WHAT THINGS COST: QUOTED VS PAID

SAMPLE DATA

Airport taxi, Suvarnabhumi to center		15 USD quoted	8 USD via Grab
Pad thai, one plate		6 USD tourist strip	1.50 USD street
Tuk-tuk, short city hop		5 USD quoted	2 USD via Grab
Long-tail boat, 4 islands		60 USD private	12 USD shared

Festivals worth planning around

three to chase, three to plan around

Festivals in Thailand work in both directions: the top row is worth building a trip around, the bottom row mostly raises your hotel bill or closes your bar. Either way, know the dates before you book.

APRIL 13-15

Songkran

Thai New Year. The country shuts down, then gets soaked in a nationwide water fight. Book months ahead or skip the week.

NOV 25, 2026

Loy Krathong + Yi Peng

Floating lanterns on water and in the sky. Chiang Mai's Yi Peng is the photograph; hotels triple-price four months out.

OCTOBER, 9 DAYS

Phuket Vegetarian Festival

Taoist piercing rituals, drums, and the best plant-based street food of the year. October new moon.

JAN / FEB

Chinese New Year

Bangkok's Chinatown explodes and hotels add 20 percent. Great week to be in Yaowarat, expensive week everywhere else.

EVERY FULL MOON

Full Moon Party, Phangan

Twelve a year at Haad Rin. Ferries from Samui run packed. Avoid Phangan two days either side unless you are going.

ROYAL CALENDAR

King's Birthday + Coronation Day

No alcohol sales day-of in many provinces and a stricter dress code at palaces. Check the dates, plan the bar night elsewhere.



Lunar festivals move every year. Verify the exact dates for your travel year before locking hotels.



Songkran in Chiang Mai runs harder and longer than Bangkok's. Phones go in dry bags for three days straight.

DIG IN Exact dates per year in the [public holidays calendar](#), and the monthly weather logic in the [best time to visit breakdown](#).

What a day costs

three travel styles • printed the way the day spends it

Daily budgets hide in averages, so here is the day itemized instead: a bed, three meals, getting around, one thing worth doing, and the drink at the end. Three real versions of the same Tuesday.

A DAY IN THAILAND	A DAY IN THAILAND	A DAY IN THAILAND
* backpacker *	* standard *	* comfort *
hostel dorm9.00	3-star double, half24.00	4-star double, half62.00
street breakfast1.50	cafe breakfast4.00	hotel breakfastincl.
noodle lunch2.00	local restaurant lunch5.00	restaurant lunch9.00
night-market dinner3.00	dinner with drinks10.00	dinner, good table16.00
songthaew + walk1.50	Grab rides5.00	private driver, half day9.00
temple entry2.00	group day-tour, split5.00	spa or private tourincl. above
beer at the hostel bar2.50	massage, 1 hour8.00	rooftop cocktails x210.00
water + snacks1.50		
TOTAL / DAY~23 EUR	TOTAL / DAY~55 EUR	TOTAL / DAY~100 EUR
budget-calculator data • 2026-05-17	budget-calculator data • 2026-05-17	budget-calculator data • 2026-05-17

Run the same numbers for your own dates, group size and currency in the free budget calculator on pack-lightly.com.

Open the Budget Calculator

 The gap between tiers is the room, not the food. Eating well costs roughly the same at every level; the bed is where the budget triples.

 Cash covers the small lines: markets, songthaews, temple entry. Pull 150 USD at a time; the 6 USD ATM fee is flat, not a percentage.

06

Practical

Visa, money, transport, eSIM, health, packing, hotels. The boring parts you only read once. Done right, you never think about them again.

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Money and transport	42
Bed, bag, signal	43
Health basics	44

Book in this order

four things before you fly · everything else on the ground

Thailand punishes over-planning: most hotels, tours and buses are cheaper and easier in the country. Only four things genuinely reward booking ahead, and they have a natural order. Most nationalities enter visa-free, so the visa step here is a five-minute check, not an application.

8 wk
before

International flights
Fares to Bangkok bottom out six to eight weeks ahead for high season. Midweek departures shave another 10 percent.

Compare fares on Aviasales

4 wk
before

Insurance + visa check
Buy travel insurance with 100,000 USD medical and scooter cover. Then confirm your entry rule. Thailand approved cutting visa-free stays from 60 back to 30 days in 2026, so check your nationality's current window before you fly. The TDAC digital arrival card is filed online in the last 72 hours.

Check entry rules per passport

2 wk
before

First nights + long legs
Book your first two hotel nights and the night train or high-season ferries. The rest of the beds can wait until you are there.

Book the train on 12Go

1 wk
before

eSIM
Install before departure, activate on the plane. The welcome text lands before your luggage does. 10 to 15 GB covers two weeks of maps and uploads.

Set up a Saily eSIM



Passport rule: six months validity beyond arrival. Check it now; renewals run slow in peak season.



Tell your bank the dates or bring a second card. Thai ATMs eat one blocked card per tour group.

Money and transport

cash + card · trains for the story, flights for the distance

Cash and card both. Five thousand baht walking-around money is normal; card works at hotels and supermarkets, cash everywhere else. ATMs charge a flat 6 USD per withdrawal, so pull 150 USD or more at a time and skip the airport exchange desks entirely.

ITEM	BACKPACKER	MID	COMFORT
Hostel dorm / private 3-star	USD 9	USD 24	USD 62
Street meal / restaurant	USD 2	USD 12	USD 32
Beer at a bar	USD 2.50	USD 4	USD 7
1 hr Thai massage	USD 8	USD 15	USD 45
Grab across town	USD 3	USD 5	USD 10

verified 2026-05-14 · n=120 listings · per-category numbers in the budget guide

TRANSPORT: WHAT BEATS WHAT

Flights for the distance, trains for the experience, buses for the budget, Grab for the city, scooters for the day-loops. The Bangkok to Chiang Mai night train converts most travelers into train people: 25 USD for a sleeper berth against 40 for the flight, and you save a hotel night by arriving rested at seven. Book combined tickets through [12Go](#). For Bangkok to the Gulf islands, the overnight bus plus morning catamaran runs about 28 USD all-in. Inside cities, Grab replaced the metered-taxi argument; Bolt covers Chiang Mai. Scooters rent for 6 to 10 USD a day: bring an International Driving Permit, refuse passport-as-deposit, check the helmet seriously.



Always pay in baht when a card terminal offers "your" currency; the dynamic-conversion rate costs 4 to 7 percent.



Airlines and ferry firms are named without links in this guide where no partner relation exists; book them direct.

THE FULL PICTURE

Exchange-desk traps in the [currency rundown](#), the full cost model in the [budget breakdown](#), and cheap legs in the [domestic flights write-up](#).

Bed, bag, signal

hotels · packing · eSIM, the three solved problems

BED

For mid-range and above, [Booking.com](#) wins on free-cancellation policy and inventory depth. For dorms and social hostels, [Hostelworld](#) has the deeper review pool. For boutique stays in Chiang Mai Old City or Phuket Old Town, message the hotel directly; small places often pass back a 5 to 10 percent saving on a direct booking.

BAG: THE TWO-WEEK CARRY-ON LIST

- | | |
|---|---|
| ☐ Two quick-dry tops, one long-sleeve (temples + cold buses) | ☐ Type A/C plug adapter |
| ☐ Sandals plus one closed shoe | ☐ 20,000 mAh power bank |
| ☐ Starter med-kit: loperamide, paracetamol, electrolytes | ☐ Two payment cards in separate pockets |
| ☐ 30% DEET and reef-safe SPF 50 | ☐ Passport copies in three places: phone, print, email |
| | ☐ Dry bag for boat days |
| | ☐ Scarf or sarong for temple dress codes |

Signal. Buy the eSIM the day before you fly and activate it on the plane. A 5 GB plan covers a week (~8 USD); 10 to 15 GB covers two working weeks. Stays over a month are cheaper on a local AIS or True SIM from any 7-Eleven (bring your passport).

[Set up a Saily eSIM](#)

GO DEEPER

The season-by-season list with women-specific and diving overlays in the [packing list](#), what to wear where in the [dress code page](#), and data plans compared in the [eSIM write-up](#).

Health basics

six weeks out • most of this list is reassurance

Thailand is a low-drama health destination: tourist areas are malaria-free, pharmacies are everywhere and competent, and Bangkok's private hospitals treat patients who fly in from richer countries on purpose. The list below is everything that actually needs doing, in order.

THE SIX-STEP LIST

- ☐ **Six weeks before:** travel-clinic visit. Confirm routine vaccines (MMR, DPT, flu) are current.
- ☐ **Recommended:** Hepatitis A and typhoid for street-food trips. Hep A is a two-shot series; start early.
- ☐ **Risk-based only:** Japanese Encephalitis for 30+ rural days; rabies pre-exposure only if you will handle animals.
- ☐ **Skip:** malaria pills. All tourist areas are malaria-free.
- ☐ **Pack:** the med-kit from page 37. 7-Eleven restocks all of it, brands rotate.
- ☐ **Insurance:** 100,000 USD medical minimum, scooter riding covered, direct-billing hospitals listed.

IF SOMETHING GOES WRONG

Private beats public for travelers: Bumrungrad and Bangkok Hospital are internationally accredited, English-speaking, and used to insurance paperwork. For small stuff, any green-cross pharmacy handles stomach issues, infected mosquito bites and minor wounds over the counter. Dial 1669 for an ambulance, 1155 for the English-speaking tourist police.



Tap water: no. Ice from bagged commercial cylinders (the ones with the hole): yes, that is what locals use too.



Dengue exists year-round in cities. DEET at dusk is the whole protocol; there is no pill to skip.

READ ON The shot-by-shot schedule in the [vaccinations breakdown](#), hospital picks in the [hospitals page](#), and cover compared in the [travel insurance rundown](#).

07

Safe and smart

The scams that have not changed in fifteen years, the etiquette that is load-bearing, and the language minimum that changes how locals respond.

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Etiquette: do and do not	47
Emergency numbers + phrases	48

The three scams that still work

constant in tourist zones, absent ten kilometres outside them

Thailand is safer than the news cycle suggests and more scammy than the brochures admit. Violent crime against tourists is rare. What is constant is a small set of grifts that have not changed in fifteen years. Knowing three of them protects you from most of the money tourists actually lose.

SCAM 01

The "Wat is closed today" loop

Near every major Bangkok temple a friendly driver explains, in good English, that the temple is closed for a ceremony, and offers a thirty-baht city tour instead. The tour ends at a gem shop or tailor with heavy pressure to buy.

The fix: major temples are never closed to tourists in opening hours. Walk past, no eye contact, take a Grab.

SCAM 02

The jet-ski / scooter damage shakedown

On return, the operator "finds" pre-existing scratches and demands 200 to 800 USD cash. They hold your passport as deposit, which is the whole trick.

The fix: video every panel at pickup with the operator in frame. Never leave the original passport; a photocopy plus cash deposit, or another shop.

SCAM 03

The gem and tailor "investment"

A stranger with excellent English and a story about a government gem promotion steers you to a shop where stones are "resellable at home for double". They are worth a fraction; embassies log complaints monthly.

The fix: there is no gem promotion. There has never been a gem promotion. Walk.

BONUS

The "meter broken" taxi

At the airport, Khao San, or any BTS exit: "meter broken, five hundred baht". The real metered fare is 300 to 400.

The fix: step out, walk twenty metres, open Grab. The next driver is the next driver.

MORE ON THE SITE

The full eight-pattern catalog plus what to do if you got hit in the [safety breakdown](#), and road rules in the [driving page](#).

Etiquette: the short list

first four are load-bearing • last four save you money

Eight things that matter. The first four cause real offense if you ignore them; the last four mostly cost you baht. Everything else is atmosphere.

DO

Stand still for the royal anthem

Cinemas before films, stations at 8am and 6pm. Everyone stops. So do you.

DO

Wai back when waived

Palms together, slight bow. A nod if your hands are full. Do not initiate with servers or children.

DO

Cover shoulders and knees in temples

Sarongs rent for a dollar at major sites; your own scarf skips the queue.

DO

Negotiate at markets, not 7-Elevens

Chatuchak yes, restaurants no. Half the asking price is a fair opening.

DO NOT

Joke about the king

Lèse-majeste carries jail time and foreigners have served it. The third rail is a real rail.

DO NOT

Point feet at Buddhas or people

Feet are the lowest part of the body, literally and culturally. Tuck them under in temples.

DO NOT

Touch anyone's head

The head is sacred, even on kids. Ruffling a child's hair is a real faux pas.

DO NOT

Ride the elephants

Most "sanctuaries" still use bullhooks. The verified exception is Elephant Nature Park near Chiang Mai.



Anger loses every argument in Thailand. The person who raises their voice has already lost the room.



Tipping is not expected; rounding up or leaving coins at street stalls reads as warm, not required.

KEEP READING

Religion, traditions and the full etiquette context in the [culture write-up](#), and the ethical wildlife line in the [wildlife breakdown](#).

Emergency numbers and eight phrases

save the numbers now • the phrases change how locals respond

TOURIST POLICE

1155

English • 24/7

POLICE

191

Thai-first line

AMBULANCE

1669

nationwide

US EMBASSY BKK

+66 2 205 4000

citizen services

BUMRUNGRAD

+66 2 066 8888

Bangkok • JCI

BANGKOK HOSP. PHUKET

+66 76 254 425

Andaman coast

EIGHT PHRASES THAT CHANGE HOW LOCALS RESPOND		
ENGLISH	THAI (PHONETIC)	NOTES
Hello	sa-wat-dee (krap / ka)	krap = male, ka = female speaker
Thank you	khop-khun (krap / ka)	raise pitch on "khun"
Yes / No	chai / mai chai	"mai" is the universal not
How much?	tao-rai?	essential for markets and tuk-tuks
No spice please	mai phet	say it twice if you mean it
Where is the bathroom?	hong nam yu nai?	"hong nam" = water room
Sorry / excuse me	khoh thot	universal apology
Help!	chuay duay!	emergencies only



Save 1155 and your hotel's address in Thai script in your phone before the first night out.



These same phrases print as a wallet card on page 45; cut it out and keep it with your room key.

08

Tools and reference

The live tools this guide was built from, the cut-out cards for your wallet, and the sources behind every number.

IN THIS CHAPTER

Take the live tools with you	50
Print cards: cut, fold, take	51
Sources and methodology	52
A note on the links	53

Take the live tools with you

scan to open · data updates after this PDF was printed

This guide is a snapshot; the tools behind it keep updating. Scan a code or type the short URL. Each one is preloaded with the same Thailand data this guide was built from.



Trip Budget Calculator

Thailand: 22 EUR/day backpacker, 100 EUR/day comfort.

[pack-lightly.com/
tool/budget-calculator/](https://pack-lightly.com/tool/budget-calculator/)



Country Map

60+ Thailand spots mapped, from Pai to Koh Lipe.

[pack-lightly.com/
tool/country-map/](https://pack-lightly.com/tool/country-map/)



Best Time to Travel

Best: Nov-Mar. Month-by-month weather for 140+ countries.

[pack-lightly.com/
tool/best-travel-time-worldmap/](https://pack-lightly.com/tool/best-travel-time-worldmap/)



What to Eat and Drink

Pad Thai from 1.50 USD, plus 40 more dishes with prices.

[pack-lightly.com/
tool/local-food-and-drinks/](https://pack-lightly.com/tool/local-food-and-drinks/)

Print cards: cut, fold, take

print at 100% scale • credit-card size, 85 x 54 mm

Print this page on A4 or US Letter at 100 percent (no fit-to-page), cut along the dashed lines, and the two cards live in your wallet for the trip. The form fields are interactive in Acrobat and iOS Preview if you would rather type than write.

THAI • ESSENTIALS	
Hello	sa-wat-dee (krap/ka)
Thank you	khop-khun (krap/ka)
Yes / No	chai / mai chai
How much?	tao-rai?
No spice please	mai phet, krap/ka
Where is bathroom?	hong nam yu nai?
Help!	chuay duay!
Sorry	khor thot

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EMERGENCY • THAILAND	
Police	191
Tourist Police	1155
Ambulance	1669
US Embassy (BKK)	+66 2 205 4000
Bumrungrad	+66 2 066 8888
My hotel:	_____
Address:	_____
Insurance #:	_____

Left card front, right card back: print double-sided on the short edge and they fold into one.

Lost the guide, kept the card? The QR opens the live Thailand hub with every page this guide links to, plus updates published after this edition went to print.

pack-lightly.com/thailand/



Photograph both cards before you cut. A phone copy of the emergency card still works when the wallet is back at the hotel.



Ask reception to write your hotel name and address in Thai script on the back. Taxi and songthaew drivers read it in one glance.

Sources and methodology

every number traces to a dated source



WRITTEN BY

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Founder of Pack Lightly. Twenty-plus countries on the ground, six trips through Thailand since 2020. Performance-marketing background, data-led travel writing. Every number in this guide is verified against a source listed below; if a price moves more than 15 percent, the next edition flags it.

SOURCES USED IN THIS EDITION

1. Hostel and hotel pricing: Booking and Hostelworld snapshot 2026-05-14, n=120 properties, Bangkok ZIP 10110-10500.
2. Currency rates: ECB reference rates, 2026-05-25.
3. Visa policy: Thai MFA portal and the TDAC arrival-card portal, retrieved 2026-05-15.
4. Community pricing checks: archived r/Thailand threads, 2026-Q1, n=18.
5. Travel advisories: FCDO and US State Department, last update 2026-04-30.
6. Climate: Thai Meteorological Department and Open-Meteo 10-year averages, captured 2026-05-17.
7. Pack Lightly Thailand cluster pages, retrieved 2026-06-10: [visa](#) · [budget](#) · [safety](#) · [best travel time](#) · [eSIM](#)

Methodology. Pack Lightly's country scores aggregate eleven dimensions into the 0-100 scorecard on page 3, re-scored every six months; the last full re-score ran February 2026. Budget figures come from the live budget-calculator dataset, climate verdicts from the best-travel-time dataset, both stamped with their capture date where they appear.

What changed in edition 2026.06: first release on the v2 design standard. Next planned update: November 2026. Not covered here: a diving deep-dive (it has its own [guide](#)), medical tourism, cruises, group tours.

Photo credits. Every photograph is sourced from Wikimedia Commons under a Creative Commons or public-domain license. The full per-image list, with each photographer and license, is on the next page. The cover shows Wat Arun, Bangkok. Tour data and prices come from the Viator Partner API, captured June 2026.

Image credits

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12. **Grand Palace Wat Phra Kaew Bangkok.** Preecha.MJ, CC BY-SA 4.0.

13. **khao soi northern Thai curry noodle.** Chainwit., CC BY-SA 4.0.

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15. **Koh Lipe beach.** VascoPlanet World Photography, CC BY 3.0.

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17. **Koh Tao island bay and pier.** kallerna, CC BY-SA 4.0.

18. **massaman curry bowl.** Takeaway, CC BY-SA 3.0.

19. **Maya Bay Koh Phi Phi.** User:Mikecleggphoto, CC BY-SA 4.0.

20. **Muay Thai boxing match stadium ring.** Gerrit Phil Baumann, CC BY 3.0.

21. **Nan Province terraced rice fields.** Takeaway, CC BY-SA 3.0.

22. **pad krapow with fried egg on.** Iudexvivorum, CC0.

23. **Pai northern Thailand valley view.** Christophe95, CC BY-SA 4.0.

24. **Phang Nga Bay limestone karsts.** Vyacheslav Argenberg, CC BY 4.0.

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29. **Scuba diver with puffer fish over.** Ryland Cairns, CC0.

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31. **Sukhothai Historical Park Wat Mahathat Buddha.** Ninaras, CC BY 4.0.

32. **Tuk-tuks on Ratchadamri Road Bangkok.** S5A-0043, CC BY 2.0.

33. **Wat Arun Bangkok.** Cun Cun, CC BY-SA 4.0.

34. **Wat Arun Temple of Dawn Bangkok.** Cun Cun, CC BY-SA 4.0.

35. **Wat Mahathat Ayutthaya Buddha head in.** Jatoo, CC BY-SA 4.0.

36. **Wat Phra That Doi Suthep golden.** JJ Harrison, CC BY-SA 3.0.

37. **Wat Rong Khun White Temple Chiang.** JJ Harrison, CC BY-SA 3.0.

38. **Yaowarat Road Bangkok Chinatown night street.** kasintorn Ratchorot, CC BY-SA 4.0.

Tour data and prices: Viator Partner API, captured June 2026. Author portrait and brand marks: Pack Lightly.

A note on the links in this guide

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This guide is free because some of the booking links inside it are affiliate links. When a reader books a stay, a transport leg, or an eSIM through one of those links, the merchant pays Pack Lightly. The reader pays the same price either way.

The pick comes before the partner. A hotel area or a transport platform is chosen for the trip it makes, and where a partner link exists for it that link is used; where none does, the plain link still points there. An overrated sight is still called overrated, and a cheaper option that beats the famous one keeps the slot. The commission funds the guide, it does not choose for it.

Questions, corrections, or a place you tested that belongs in the next edition: write to hello@pack-lightly.com.

Partners linked in this edition: **Aviasales · Booking.com · 12Go Asia · Saily · Hostelworld · Stay22 · Viator · via Travelepayouts**



Links can outlive a print run. If one stops working, the live version of every page in this guide sits under pack-lightly.com/thailand.



This file is versioned; the edition is on the cover. The next planned update lands November 2026 and replaces this file at the same download.