THE RAILROAD LESS TRAVELLED

Take the slow train from Bangkok to Chiang Mai and unlock ‘old Thailand’: a land of misty temples, golden Buddhas and epic history...

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHS ALEX ROBINSON
VITAL STATISTICS

Capital: Bangkok
Population: 67,959,359
Languages: Thai; various tribal dialects
Time: GMT+7
International dialling code: +66
Visas: Not required by UK nationals for stays of up to 30 days
Money: Thai Baht (THB), currently THB44 to the UK £.
ATMs are found across the country; credit cards widely accepted.

When to go

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Jan</th>
<th>Feb</th>
<th>Mar</th>
<th>Apr</th>
<th>May</th>
<th>Jun</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- High season: These are the driest months, and cooler than the rest of the year. Temperatures can drop to the low 20s (°C) in Bangkok and mid-teens in Chiang Mai. Shoulder-month November sees fewer tourists and cheaper air fares.
- Peak heat: The hottest months. As temperatures hit the mid 30s (°C) in Bangkok and higher in Chiang Mai, Songkran water festival (13–16 April 2017) kicks in. Everyone gets a soaking.
- Low season: The monsoon bursts across central and northern Thailand, finally tailing off in mid-October.

Health & safety

Visit your local GP or travel health centre (travelhealth.co.uk) for advice on what to do if you require medical care. There is some risk of malaria and dengue fever so use plenty of anti-mosquito prophylactics. The sun is strong so avoid excessive exposure. Always drink bottled water and ensure any ice is purified.

Further reading & information

A History of Thailand (Cambridge UP, 2005) by Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker — a useful primer on Thai history
Thailand (Footprint, 2015) — handy guide
thaitravelguide.co.uk — travel board
thai.npo.th — Thai national parks services

More online

Visit www.wanderlust.co.uk/173 for links to more content

ARCHIVE ARTICLES

- Eco tourism in Thailand — Issue 166
- Highlights of Southern Thailand — Issue 101
- 10 things to do for free in Bangkok — online exclusive

PLANNING GUIDES

- Thailand travel guide

THE TRIP

The author travelled with Revealed Travel (southeastasia.revealed.co.uk, 01932 424252), who offer a bespoke trip including train travel from Bangkok to Chiang Mai, stopping at Ayutthaya, Sukhothai, Lampang, and other cities on request. Prices from £1,642pp, including flights, transfers, B&Bs and guided excursions. Ask for Ancha Thakham (facebook.com/ancha.3497804) — a superb guide of Lan Na heritage.

Getting there

Thai Airways (thailaunices.co.uk) fly direct from London Heathrow to Bangkok and other Thai cities from £519 return, taking around 11 hours.

Getting around

The railway is run by the State Railway of Thailand, with timetables online (railway.co.th) in English. First-class fares from Bangkok to Chiang Mai cost from £3.20. Bookings can be made in advance at stations.

Cost of travel

Thailand can cost as little as £15 a day if you stay in guest houses and eat in street markets. Beer is from THB10 (315p); a bottle of wine is just THB20 (22p). Budget between £50 and £120 a day for a more touristy stay.

Accommodation

In Bangkok, opt for theusher hotels along the Skytrain route, with online deals making them competitive. The Bannasanta Hotel (bannasanta.com) is one of the best-value semi-luxury picks in the centrally-located Sukhothai area; doubles from THB250 (€45). Stay more modest outside the big cities. Ayutthaya’s well-located Krungthai River Hotel (krungthainriver.com) has B&B doubles from THB1,000 (€69). The Treasure (sukhothai-treasure.com) has a decent spa and B&B doubles from THB3,800 (€490), while Lampang’s Will Hotel (lampangwillhotel.com) is only a stroll from the town’s fine temples, with B&B doubles from THB1,200 (€72). In Chiang Mai, splash out at the Ananta (chiang-mai.ananta.com) for one of the best spas in the country, as well as river views and decent online rates. Doubles from THB1,040 (€158).

Food and drink

Try spicy salads such as som tam, made with green papaya, glass noodles, prawns and lime juice, or a Laos-inspired Khao Soi (chicken curry noodles). Learn to cook these and more in a class at Thai Garden Farm Cookery School (Chiang Mai: +66 89 950 4919, sonc2919@gmail.com).

HIGHLIGHTS

1 Bangkok — South East Asia’s most exciting metropolis. Be sure to visit the Grand Palace (ticketed, Wat Pho and at least one of its rooftop bars at sunset — Long Table is the best (longtablebangkok.com) — for Blender Bar’s style city views.

2 Ayutthaya

3 Sukhothai & Si Satchanalai

4 Lamphun & Lampang

5 The old capital of the ancient Lan Na kingdom is dotted with glittering temples and criss-crossed by streets lined with arts shops and craft markets.

6 Doi Inthanon National Park

7 Thailand’s highest peak is set in a grand forested park, and best reached by trails that run through a series of rice paddies and tribal villages.