

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**





Thailand Footnotes

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

Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun
Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec

■ **High season:** These are the driest months, and far 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 Apr 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 jabs you might require. There is some risk of malaria and dengue fever so use plenty of anti-mosquito prophylaxis. 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
tourismthailand.co.uk – tourism board
dnp.go.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 109
- ◆ 10 things to do for free in Bangkok – online exclusive

PLANNING GUIDES

- ◆ Thailand travel guide

THE TRIP

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

Getting there

Thai Airways (thaairways.co.uk) fly direct from London Heathrow to Bangkok and other Thai cities from £520 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 £13.20. 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 THB70 (£1.50); a bottle of water is just THB20 (22p). Budget between £60 and £120 a day for a more luxurious stay.

Accommodation

In Bangkok, opt for the plusher hotels along the Skytrain route, with online deals making them competitive. **The Rembrandt** (rembrandtbkk.com) is one of the best-value semi-luxury picks in the centrally-located Asok area; doubles from THB2,434 (£55). Stays are more modest outside the big cities. Ayutthaya's well-located **Krungsri River Hotel** (krungsrihotel.com) has B&B doubles from THB3,000 (£68). **The Treasure** (sukhothaitreasure.com) has a decent spa and B&B doubles from THB1,800 (£40), while Lamphun's **Will Hotel** (lamphunwillhotel.com) is only a stroll from the town's fine temples, with B&B doubles from THB1,200 (£27).

In Chiang Mai, splash out at the **Anantara** (chiang-mai.anantara.com) for one of the best spas in the country, as well as river views and decent online rates. Doubles from THB7,040 (£158).

Food and drink

Try spicy salads such as *som tam*, made with green papaya, glass noodles, prawns and lime juice, or a Lan Na dish like *kaow soi kai* (chicken curry and noodles). Learn to cook these and more in a class at **Thai Garden Farm Cookery School** (Chiang Mai; +66 89 850 4919, son2919@gmail.com).



HIGHLIGHTS

- Bangkok**
South-East Asia's most exciting metropolis. Be sure to visit the Grand Palace (pictured), Wat Pho and at least one of its rooftop bars at sunset – Long Table is the best (longtablebangkok.com) – for *Blade Runner*-style city views.
- Ayutthaya**
These UNESCO-listed city ruins are utterly packed with stupas, temples and palaces, all next to the Chao Phraya river.
- Sukhothai & Si Satchanalai**
See giant buddhas, stunning Khmer carvings and old temples, all set in a beautiful monkey-filled forest park.
- Lamphun & Lampang**
Little-visited old university towns redolent with history and surrounded by forest-covered hills. Welcoming locals make any visit here a treat.
- Chiang Mai**
The old capital of the ancient Lan Na kingdom is dotted with glittering temples and criss-crossed by streets lined with arty shops and craft markets.
- Doi Inthanon National Park**
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.

