THAILAND
COUNTRY OVERVIEW
The Royal Kingdom of Thailand offers something for everyone. Its historic culture, lively arts, beautiful beaches, exciting nightlife, friendly and hospitable people and with one of the best cuisines in the world makes Thailand a fascinating country to visit.

Most visitors get their first introduction to the country in Bangkok, the “City of Angels”. A contrast to its traditional sister cities, Bangkok is a glitzy metropolis with towering skyscrapers, gleaming shopping malls, hip restaurants and international nightclubs. From Bangkok, most visitors head either north or south. Northern destinations include the former capital city of Sukhothai, Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai and Golden Triangle. The north is known for its fantastic trekking possibilities, colourful hill tribes, and peaceful Lanna culture. In recent years, Chiang Mai has become a centre for learning with places offering classes in Thai culture like Thai massage, Thai cooking, fruit carving, meditation, and yoga. Southern Thailand has some of the most beautiful beaches in the world, most notably Krabi, Koh Samui, and Phuket. Luxury resorts along with lively entertainment and international restaurants are a common feature at these beach destinations. Thailand offers an endless array of activities and attractions which is the reason why many travellers make more than one visit to this fascinating country.
LANDSCAPE

About the same size as France, Thailand offers everything from high mountains in the north to tropical islands in the south. The country is divided into four main geographic regions: a fertile central area fed by the Chao Phraya River; a north-eastern plateau; the mountains and fertile valleys of the north; and the rainforests and beaches of the southern peninsula. To the east this peninsula borders the Gulf of Thailand, to the west the Andaman Sea. Hundreds of islands dot both sides of the peninsula.

CLIMATE

Thailand can best be described as tropical and humid for the majority of the country during most of the year. The area of Thailand north of Bangkok has a climate determined by three seasons while the southern peninsular region of Thailand has only two.

- NORTHERN THAILAND (SUZHOTHAI, CHIANG MAI & CHIANG RAI)

In northern Thailand the seasons are clearly defined. Between November and May, the weather is mostly dry, however this is broken up into the periods November to February and March to May. The later of these two periods has higher temperatures. The other northern season is from May to November and is dominated by the southwest monsoon, during which time rainfall in the north is at its heaviest. The average high temperature for this region is 32°C (90°F) and average low is 21°C (70°F), although it can drop down to as low as 8°C (46°F) in the winter months.

Please note: It can sometimes be smoky during February and March (in Northern Thailand) when local people burn the rice fields and forests to prepare for the annual crops. This may affect visibility and result in minor respiratory irritation.

- CENTRAL (BANGKOK, AYUTHAYA)

The central region of Thailand has a hot, tropical climate with daytime temperature reaching the mid-30°C (91°F) throughout the year. November to February is the driest time of year and the most popular with tourists. March, April and May are the hottest months, and the rainy season runs from May to October. During the wet season short showers are likely during the afternoon, though some days it will rain all day.

- SOUTHERN (KOH SAMUI, KRAI, PHUKET)

The southern region of Thailand really has only two seasons - the wet and the dry. These seasons do not run at the same time on the east and west sides of the peninsular. On the west coast the southwest monsoon brings rain from May through to October, whilst on the east coast the most rain falls between September and December. The average high temperature is 33°C (91°F) and average low is 25°C (77°F).

In general, the best time to visit Thailand is from November to February when the northeast monsoon is blowing cool dry air. During this cool season, the temperature ranges from 18°C (64°F) to 32°C (90°F) in Bangkok, while in northern and northeast Thailand, temperatures can get quite cool with morning temperatures as low as 8°C (46°F) to 12°C (54°F) with the occasional 20°C (68°F) day. Nights can be particularly chilly and at high altitudes the temperatures can and do drop below freezing.
PEOPLE
About a third of Thailand’s 65 million people live in urban areas. Seventy-five percent are ethnic Thais, who may be divided into three groups with different dialects: the central Thais of the Chao Phraya Delta; the Thai Lao of the northeast; and the Thai Pak Tai of the south. People of Chinese descent account for about 10 percent of the population, and Malays for about four percent. Some smaller ethnic groups are concentrated in highland regions. Ethnic groups from neighbouring countries, such as the Hmong and Akha groups from southern China, tend to migrate to northern Thailand and are often seen by tourists. Some 95 percent of the population practices Theravada Buddhism. This branch of Buddhism, sometimes called the “Southern School”, is also followed in Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar.

HISTORY
The history of Thailand begins with the migration of the Thais from their ancestral home in southern China into mainland Southeast Asia around the 10th century AD. Prior to this, Mon, Khmer and Malay kingdoms ruled the region. Thais consider the Sukhothai Kingdom, which arose in 1238, to be the first true Thai kingdom and a golden age of peace and prosperity. In 1376 Sukhothai was annexed by the Thai kingdom of Ayutthaya, which defeated the Khmer kingdom of Angkor in 1431. These states fought each other and were under constant threat from the Khmers, Burma and Vietnam. Much later, the European colonial powers threatened in the 19th and early 20th centuries, but Thailand survived as the only Southeast Asian state to avoid colonial rule. After the end of the absolute monarchy in 1932, Thailand endured sixty years of almost permanent military rule before the establishment of the current democratic system.

TIME ZONE
Thailand operates on Greenwich meantime +7. Please note that Thailand does not have daylight saving hours.

COUNTRY CODE
Thailand Country Code is +66

MOBILE PHONES
International calling cards for mobile phones come in denominations of 300 Baht and 500 Baht, and are available at airports, post offices and many shops in tourist centres and around town. Thailand has four mobile phone networks: AIS, True and DTAC.
INTERNET

Many hotels have Wi-Fi internet access available in the lobby or business centre and sometimes in the rooms themselves. Public places such as shopping malls, cafes, and restaurants may also have Wi-Fi access. Be careful to not save your password or sensitive information on public computer terminals.

ELECTRICITY

Thailand has 220V, 50Hz electricity. Wall outlets are usually the round, two-pin type, although some fit two flat blades. In all countries protect sensitive electronic equipment like laptops from power fluctuations by using a surge-protector.
BANGKOK
With towering skyscrapers pressed up against Chinese shop-houses and brand-new Mercedes squeezing past vendors with pushcarts, this is a city of sharp contrasts. Culture fiends will delight in the dazzling Royal Palace and the city’s countless pagodas, while shoppers could spend weeks sifting through Bangkok’s modern malls and traditional open-air markets. Entertainment ranges from highbrow (classical Thai music concerts) to low end (go go bars) with everything in between. Dining options are equally varied. Whether you’re eating French cuisine in a plush hotel restaurant or sampling fried crickets on the side of the road, prepare to have all of your senses engaged. This is the place to eat, drink and be merry.

AYUTTHAYA
Set in central Thail and at the confluence of the Lopburi, Prasak and Chao Phraya Rivers, the beautiful city of Ayutthaya was the capital of what was then known as Siam from the 14th to 18th centuries. At its height, Ayutthaya was surrounded by a 12-kilometre-long wall which was five meters thick, six meters high and boasted 99 gates, brick and clay roads and canals to transport water into the city. This World Heritage Historical Site was one of the most important trading centres in the region, hosting guests from Portugal, France, Holland and England. In size and wealth, it rivalled most European capitals of the time. Portions of this grandiose past can be re-experienced through its ruins which are mostly gigantic Buddhist temples built in different styles during the long history. But for the relics and records from this period, the Burmese obliterated almost everything in 1767 - even melting Buddha images down for their gold. Some outstanding temples worth seeing are Wat Chaiwattanaram, an excellent example of Khmer architecture in the Ayutthaya period; Wat Na Phra Meru, the only original surviving temple; and Wat Yai with a large reclining Buddha.

Getting here: Located 86km north of Bangkok, it is a 1-1½ hour drive or a 4-hour boat cruise to Ayutthaya.

SUKHOTHAI
Located in north-central of the country, the ancient Thai capital of Sukhothai, a name meaning “dawn of happiness”, was founded in the 13th century and became the kingdom’s first capital. Under the reign of eight Sukhothai kings, Thai arts and culture prospered during this “golden age”. Although this kingdom had a short life for just around 150 years, Sukhothai was able to produce art which is considered as one of the most unique and beautiful Buddhist art in Asian history. Set in a 45-square kilometre World Heritage-listed historical park, the ruins are spread out and easily explored by bicycle. The key monuments to visit include Wat Mahathat with its royal temple and cemetery and Wat Sra Si with its two stupas, their graceful lines reflected in the water of the town’s biggest reservoir.

Getting here: There are daily flights from Bangkok.
CHIANG MAI

The northern capital, Chiang Mai is a dynamic and modern city which has successfully managed to combine its rich history and traditions with its increasingly modern side. Surrounded by a ring of mountains, Chiang Mai offers both fascinating architecture and stunning surroundings. An important Buddhist centre since the 14th century, Chiang Mai is home to more than 300 temples. Many visitors come here to attend meditation retreats, massage classes or yoga lessons. However, for active travellers, the main interest in Chiang Mai is exploring the hill tribe villages. Visitors can trek on foot or by elephant through the lush countryside, raft down jungle rivers, and meet the residents of isolated ethnic minority villages. Those interested in handicrafts will enjoy visiting centres specializing in silverwork, woodcarving, pottery making and weaving. The Night Bazaar, a series of covered markets, is worth visiting for the bustling atmosphere and to see the variety of hand made products.

Getting here: There are daily flights from Bangkok and direct international flights from Yangon, Luong Prabang, Singapore, Kunming and Tokyo.

CHIANG RAI

Considered by many as a smaller and quieter version of Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai is both of these, retaining the feel of a small provincial Thai capital without the number of tourists you may see in other provincial centres. Chiang Rai, is a good base to explore the hill tribe villages near the Golden Triangle, the remote area where Myanmar, Thailand and Laos meet. The ethnic villages of the Karen (long neck), Akha and Yao are some of the popular hill tribe groups to visit. Every house in each village sells hand-made products, particularly textile weaving, since tourism has replaced agriculture as their main source of income.

Getting here: There are daily flights from Bangkok. From Chiang Mai to Chiang Rai is 190 km and takes about 3 hours by road.

KOH SAMUI

Lying off Thailand's east coast in the Gulf of Thailand, Koh Samui offers everything you could want in a beach retreat: white sand beaches, coconut palms, fresh seafood and clear water. With an area of 247 square kilometres, Koh Samui is the largest island in an archipelago of around 80 islands. The nearby Koh Phangan and Koh Tao also offer many beach resorts and great diving. Like Phuket, Koh Samui attracts many visitors yet has plenty of out of the way places for those wishing to get away from it all.

Getting here: There are daily flights from Bangkok to Koh Samui.

PHUKET

Located off Thailand's west coast in the Andaman Sea, Phuket is the largest island in Thailand with an area of 810 square kilometres. The coastal scenery is magnificent, with tropical rainforests, steep limestone cliffs, sandy beaches and picture-postcard beaches of soft golden sand. Inland lay coconut, pineapple, cashew nut and rubber plantations. Clear water and colourful coral reefs make this area the most popular spot to dive in Thailand.
Getting here: There are daily flights from Bangkok to Phuket. There are also several direct flights from international destinations e.g., Kuala Lumpur, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Sydney.

KRABI

Krabi province, comprised of 130 islands, has grown hugely popular as a resort destination in recent years for its white-sand beaches and spectacular limestone karsts creating postcard perfect scenery. The most notable beaches are Phi Phi, most famous as the set for the movie the Beach, and Railay Beach for its rock climbing. Krabi is also home to the well-known primary rainforest Than Bokkharani National Park, just 30 minutes north of Krabi town.

Getting here: There are daily flights from Bangkok to Krabi. From Phuket it is 185 km and takes 4 hours by road.
VEHICLES

Motor vehicles are well equipped with air conditioning and modern. Luxury cars such as Mercedes or limousine are available for hire but incur an extra charge. Wearing a seatbelt in Thailand is the law and it is a common practice.

EATING & DRINKING

Thai cuisine is a blend of particular tastes: hot (spicy), sour (piquant), sweet, and always highlighted with citrus (lemon grass and lime). Although Thais generally prefer spicy food, not all dishes are so intense and there are grades of hotness as Thai food can be modulated to suit most tastes. Thailand is also the perfect place for a large choice of tropical fruits such as mangos, pineapple, mangosteen, as well as durian for its very special smell and taste.

SHOPPING

Southeast Asia is still developing, and so its people can be very persistent when trying to make money, especially around tourists whom they may perceive as very wealthy. People will try to overcharge you, but rather than becoming irritated, join the game and bargain hard! It is also recommendable to check prices of the same items in the neighbourhood before reaching a deal. If you being followed by street vendors and do not wish to make a purchase, often the best course of action is say “no” firmly and politely, and continue on your way. Do not hesitate or linger, as this will encourage the seller to try and engage you further. Upscale boutiques and shopping malls in Thailand have set prices. If you choose to ship items home, we highly recommend that you buy shipping insurance and check the policy details. As shops are not responsible for damages incurred en route, it’s better to be safe than sorry.

BUDDHA IMAGES IN THAILAND

According to Thai Law, foreigners are not allowed to take any Buddha images out of the country. However, if you can produce proof of purchase with a certificate and receipt from the shop, customs may allow you to take the image out but this is not guaranteed and Trails of Indochina cannot influence the decision of the Thai Customs Department. Please be aware that if you are travelling through Thailand and have Buddha images from other countries, i.e. Cambodia, Laos or Vietnam, Thai Customs Officials will require the same proof of purchase. Trails of Indochina cannot assist with Thailand Customs department and cannot be held accountable for any confiscated items.

Trails of Indochina and the guide cannot accept responsibility for any misrepresented or faulty goods. We do not take responsibility for following up on merchandise that you choose to ship home. Our guides only make suggestions, not guarantees.
For men and women greeting either men or women of the same approximate age, greeting those of higher social status (monks, teachers, doctors, government big-shots), or greeting someone who is your elder - the “wai” (hands are placed in a prayer position and then touched to somewhere between the chest and top of the head) is used.

In Thailand, revealing clothing is unacceptable off the beach. Shorts are generally fine—as long as they aren’t too short.

When visiting pagodas and temples, shorts and tank-tops are unacceptable. Your knees and shoulders must be covered. Footwear and socks must be removed in religious sites. Shoes are often removed upon entering private homes too. Visitors to the Royal Palace in Bangkok are required to wear closed-toe shoes, long pants (or skirts) and sleeved tops. Some upscale nightclubs and restaurants in Bangkok will refuse entry to men wearing flip-flops.

For women, it is best to avoid touching or sitting next to monks.

The Thais are devoted to their royal family. It is unacceptable to make disparaging comments about the monarchy. Everyone is expected to stand upon hearing the national or royal anthem. If you go to a movie in Thailand, you should stand during the tribute to the king.

Thai people are deeply religious, and that for most of them, Buddhism plays an important role in their lives. Buddhism and traditional values place great importance on family, friends and social harmony.
SAFETY TIPS

- Thailand is quite a safe country. Petty theft is a problem in tourist centres, and violent crime against foreigners, while rare, does occur.
- When possible, secure your valuables in the hotel safe. Remember to record your traveller's cheque numbers and credit card info - just in case.
- Do not leave your wallet or mobile phone in the back pocket of your pants or anywhere else that's easily reached (like an outer zip-up compartment on a backpack). Be especially vigilant in markets and other crowded places like ports and train stations.
- If you take a tuk tuk (motorized three-wheeler) negotiate the price ahead of time. Some taxi drivers will refuse to turn on their car’s meters. If this happens, we recommend that you get out of the taxi and find another driver who charges according to the meter.
- Turn down offers for cheap gemstones. Many travellers have fallen prey to gemstone scams. If a deal sounds too good to be true, it probably is. Tuk tuk drivers who offer very cheap tours will take you on a tour of shops, then collect a commission on your purchases. Thailand’s Tourist Police advises visitors to turn down all offers of free shopping or sightseeing help from strangers.
- As anywhere, use common sense and don’t walk alone after dark. If confronted by a mugger, do not resist. You're always better off skipping tuk tuk at night; ask your hotel or restaurant to call a reputable taxi firm.
- Traffic is chaotic. If you choose to ride a motorcycle or bike, wear a helmet. Remember that traffic drives on the left in Thailand so take extra care when crossing the street.
- A long-running civil disturbance has blighted the far southern provinces of Narathiwat, Yala and Pattani. Foreigners at no stage have been particularly targeted, but these provinces should not be considered as safe for extended touring in remote, rural areas. The area is considered safe to travel through but not to stay overnight.
PACKING ESSENTIALS

What you take will naturally depend upon where you are traveling, and it can often be difficult to decide what to pack, nevertheless the following should act as a useful checklist of essential items worth thinking about taking.

- **Passport** – Ensure that it is valid and in good condition with empty pages available. Make a photocopy as well
- **Copy of visa approval letter** (if visa is to be obtained on arrival)
- **Insurance** – Ensure that it will be valid for the whole journey
- **Passport Photos** – Will invariably be needed for identification passes and certain overseas visas
- **Emergency contact numbers**: Trails of Indochina, Insurance company, friends and family.
- **Debit/credit card cancellation numbers**
- **Air tickets and Itinerary**
- **Money belt** – Ensure that it is discrete and comfortable to wear
- **First Aid kit** - Basic travel kit to cover basic mishaps which may occur along the way
- **Personal Medication** – with international doctors’ note to ensure easy passage of medication across international borders
- **Sun block** – High UVA protection ideally
- **Sunglasses & sunhat**
- **Comfortable walking shoes**
- **Mosquito spray & insect repellent**
- **Long sleeve top and trousers** – Useful to protect against mosquitoes at dawn and dusk and the sun through the day
- **Camera & battery**
- **Security code pad lock**
- **A small amount of currency in USD small notes**

CLOTHING

If your trip to Thailand includes stops at beaches and mountainous areas, you will need clothes for all temperatures. A swimsuit, sunglasses, a hat, t-shirts, shorts that are not too revealing, long trousers, some light-weight, long-sleeved tops and a light jacket that is wind and rain-resistant will get you through most trips, but if you plan to visit northern Thailand in the winter, you’ll need a warm coat. Mountainous areas can get chilly; choose clothes you can layer. If trekking is on your agenda, you will need sturdy footwear with traction plus lots of socks. Slip-on shoes or sandals are useful for visits to pagodas or people’s houses, as you’ll
save time taking your shoes on and off. Bangkok and Phuket offer upscale bars and restaurants, so be sure to pack some clothes and shoes for a nice evening out. Leave your flashy jewellery at home.

**TOILETRIES**

Imported beauty products are readily available in Bangkok and tourist centres. If you plan to venture to remote areas, bring staples like sunscreen, contact lens solution, tampons and mosquito repellent, as well as prescription medication. If you plan to purchase medication, choose a reputable supplier and read the labels carefully, particularly paying attention to expiration date, but they may be out-of-date or of poor quality. In Bangkok, chains like Boots and Watsons are good places to stock up on western toiletries and medicines.

**TRAVEL DOCUMENTS**

You should bring a money-belt to safely carry your travel documents and cash, and ensure that your luggage has a lock. Bring photo-copies of your passport and visa, plus some extra passport-sized photos if you’re applying for visas to other countries. When flying into or within Thailand, you will probably be given baggage claim tags (they will be stuck to the back of your ticket). Keep these, as you will need to show them when leaving the airport.

**CONTACT US**

If you have any questions or encounter any issues, please contact us at our Thailand office so we can provide an immediate solution.

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