

Northwestern Gulf Coast



Thai vacationers have been flocking to Thailand's northwestern gulf coast for decades, yet somehow foreign tourists never got the memo. This thin isthmus connecting the Asian continent to the Malay Peninsula offers sleepy seaside towns and rugged shell-strewn sand dunes, making it a great place to slough off Bangkok's urban smog.

Most tourists will only experience the region through the window of a speeding train destined for the kingdom's southern treasures. Those who decide to stop will enjoy a unique vacationing experience steeped in local tradition.

Quiet Phetchaburi makes for a pleasant afternoon of temple gazing. Stop in Cha-am to master the lyrics of your favourite Thai pop-rock song as it blares along the beach during the usual weekend bustle. Countless guesthouses and resorts are crammed along the beachfront thoroughfare, much like in Hua Hin, further south, which is the favoured resort destination of the royal family.

The dramatic crags of Khao Sam Roi Yot National Park are definitely worth a visit, especially for wildlife enthusiasts. And at the southernmost point of the region, Chumphon earns its spot on the map as the official gateway to southern Thailand and the obligatory transfer point for the diving-centric Ko Tao.

While transport between major destinations is a cinch, navigating the quieter regions requires a little ingenuity and may put your independent travel spirit to the test.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Smiling at the sea while lounging in the shade of myriad beachside umbrellas in **Cha-am** (p169)
- Living like royalty in one of the swish seaside hotels around **Hua Hin** (p172)
- Ogling crumbling temples scattered around **Phetchaburi** (opposite)
- Listening for rustling leaves while trying to spot a furry monkey at **Khao Sam Roi Yot National Park** (p180)
- Pressing binoculars against your face while anticipating the arrival of a rare bird in **Kaeng Krachan National Park** (p168)



■ DRY SEASON: NOVEMBER-MAY

■ WET SEASON: JUNE-OCTOBER

Climate

The northwestern gulf coast shares its weather patterns with the rest of central Thailand. Temperatures peak in the March to May hot season, followed by monsoon rains falling in the June to October wet season. November through February is known as the 'cool' season and is the best time to visit. The afternoon temperatures seem to hover around 32°C throughout the year, but evenings tend to be cooler and there is little rain.

National Parks

Kaeng Krachan (p168) is the largest national park in Thailand, covering nearly half of Phetchaburi Province. This unending expanse of jungle is known for the Pala-U waterfall and excellent bird-watching. The undulating hills of Khao Sam Roi Yot (p180) offer breathtaking views of the gulf amid limestone cliffs. This is another spot bird fanatics can check off their lists.

PHETCHABURI (PHETBURI)

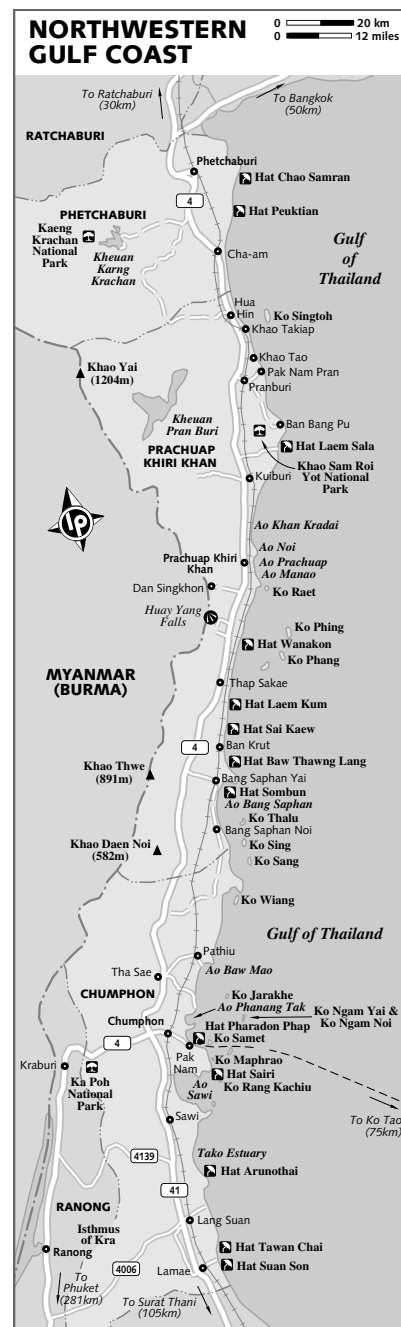
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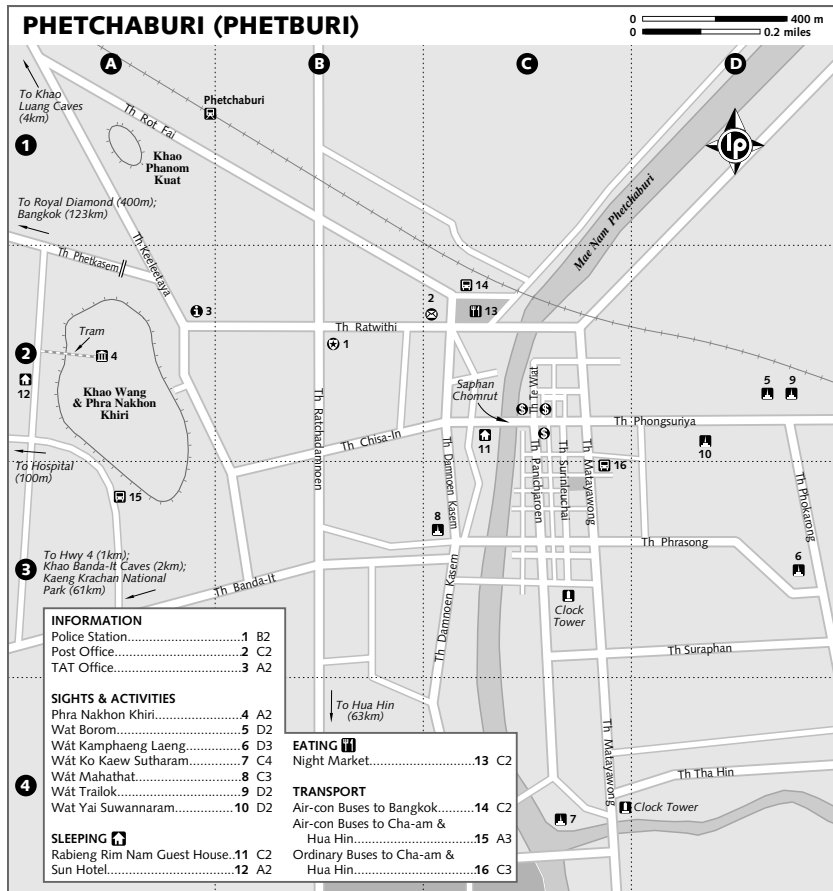
Unlike many other centres of worship around the world, quiet Phetchaburi (also called Phetburi) feels surprisingly devoid of tourist traffic. Dozens of temples lie frozen within the city's slowly paced quotidian life, each one a relic reflecting the achievements of empires that flourished long ago. The Khmer first settled here in the 11th century, and since then the town has seen a steady stream of inhabitants that have used the convenient riverside location as a central trading post. Today, the town has barely changed, and a stroll through the city centre will reveal a burg teeming with crumbling wát mixed with old teak houses and misplaced concrete indicators of a modern future.

If you're light on time, the sleepy religious town can be tackled in an afternoon visit – glimpse the diverse array of wát along the eastern riverbank during a half-day walking tour (see the boxed text, p167). The underground Buddhist shrine at the Khao Luang caves is also worth a visit.

Orientation & Information

If you've come by bus, you'll be getting off close to Khao Wang and will have to take a motorcycle taxi into the centre of town. Train users should follow the road southeast of the





tracks until you come to Th Ratchadamnoen, then turn right and follow the main boulevard to the second major intersection (Th Chisa-In). The city centre is actually quite spread out, and there is very little shade on sunny days. Wear sunscreen and bring water if you plan to tour the temples.

There are three banks at the corner of Th Phongsuriya and Th Panichjaroen.

Police station (☎ 0 3242 5500; Th Ratwathi) Near the intersection of Th Ratchadamnoen.

Post office (cnr Th Ratwathi & Th Damnoen Kasem) There's a telephone centre upstairs.

TAT office (☎ 0 3240 2220; Th Ratwathi; 🕒 8.30am-4.30pm) Set in a wát-like structure, it doesn't have loads of brochures, but the smiley staff can point you in the direction of temples, cheap food and lodging.

Sights & Activities

Looming west of the city, **Khao Wang** is studded with wát and topped by various components of King Mongkut's 1860 palace, **Phra Nakhon Khiri** (Holy City Hill; ☎ 0 3240 1006; admission 40B; 🕒 9am-4pm). You can make the strenuous upward climb along the cobblestone paths or head to the west side of the hill and take a funicular straight to the peak (adult one way 40B). The views here are great, especially at sunset, and the entire hill teems with meandering monkeys looking for attention. The ticket office will sell you an information pamphlet (5B) that includes a map of the palace grounds.

The cave sanctuary of **Khao Luang** (donation encouraged; 🕒 8am-6pm) is 5km north of Phetchaburi. The caverns here are filled with

WALKING TOUR: WÁT TO SEE IN PHETCHABURI

Sleepy Phetchaburi is known throughout Thailand for its collection of varied wát. The following town ambles through some of the town's most striking relics from previous empires.

Start Wat Yai Suwannaram

Finish Wat Mahathat

Distance 2.7km

Duration 1½ hours

Wat Yai Suwannaram (1)

After crossing Mae Nam Phetchaburi (Phetchaburi River), walk about 300m along Th Phongsuriya until you come to a big temple on the right. This is Wat Yai Suwannaram, originally built during the 17th century and renovated during the reign of King Rama V (r 1868-1910). Legend has it that the gash in the ornately carved wooden doors dates to the Burmese attack of Ayuthaya. The main *bòht* (central sanctuary) is surrounded by a cloister filled with sombre Buddha images. The murals inside the *bòht* date back to the 1730s and are in good condition. Next to the *bòht*, set on a murky pond, is a beautifully designed old *hōr drai* (Tripitaka library).

Wat Borom (2) & Wat Trailok (3)

These wát are next to each other opposite Wat Yai Suwannaram on Th Phongsuriya, a little to the east. They aren't especially attractive, but they do have distinctive monastic halls and long, graceful wooden 'dormitories' on stilts.

Wat Kamphaeng Laeng (4)

South of the two wáts, on Th Phokarong, is this pleasant, 13th-century Khmer site. It has five *brahng* (Khmer-style chimney-like towers) and part of the original *kamphaeng laeng* (laterite wall) is still standing. The front *brahng* contains a Buddha footprint. Two others contain images dedicated to famous *lōo-ang pōr* (venerated monks), and two have been restored. If you're feeling peckish, there's a decent on-site restaurant that serves up the usual assortment of Thai treats.

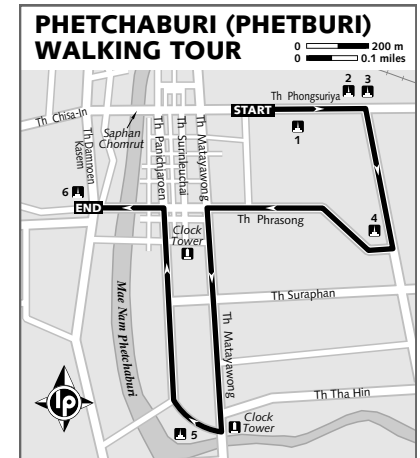
Wat Ko Kaew Sutharam (5)

Follow Th Phrasong back towards the town centre, turning left onto Th Matayawong. After about 800m turn right at the clock tower and look for signs to the Ayuthaya-period Wat Ko Kaew Sutharam (Wat Ko). The *bòht* features early-18th-century murals that are among the best in Thailand. One panel depicts what appears to be a Jesuit priest wearing the robes of a Buddhist monk, while another shows other foreigners undergoing Buddhist conversion. There is also a large wooden monastic hall on stilts – similar to the ones at Wats Borom and Trailok but in much better condition.

Wat Mahathat (6)

Follow Th Panichjaroen in front of Wat Ko towards central Phetchaburi and turn left onto Th Phrasong; soon you'll reach Wat Mahathat. Its large white *brahng* can be seen from a distance – a typical late Ayuthaya-early Ratanakosin adaptation of the *brahng* of Lopburi and Phimai.

If you have extra time, continue along Th Phrasong, turn left on Th Ratchadamnoen, a quick right on Th Banda-It, and make a right at Th Keeleetaaya. You'll find the cobbled staircase up to the top of Khao Wang, which provides stunning views of all the temples you've just visited.



DETOUR: KAENG KRACHAN NATIONAL PARK

The largest national park in Thailand and home to the gorgeous Nam Tok Pala-U, **Kaeng Krachan** (adult/child 400/200B) is easily reached from Phetchaburi. There are caves to explore, mountains, a huge lake and excellent bird-watching opportunities (see the boxed text, p182) to be had in the evergreen forest that blankets the park. Kaeng Krachan has fantastic trekking, and it is one of the few places to see elephants roaming wild. To reach the park by car, drive south on Hwy 4 about 20km from Phetchaburi, and at the Kern Pet Junction, turn right and go 38km to Pet Dam, then 3km more to the park headquarters. Alternatively you can arrange a tour in Hua Hin (see p175). In Phetchaburi, contact Rabieng Rim Nam Guest House (below), which arranges day trips (2000B per person, minimum four people, or 6000B for a group of two) and overnight visits in rustic bungalows (2400B per person, minimum four people).

ageing Buddha images in various stances, many of them originally placed by King Rama IV. The best time to visit is around 5pm, when evening light pierces the ceiling, surrounding artefacts below with an ethereal glow. There are multiple chambers to wander through, which feature easily anthropomorphised rock formations, and showers of stalactites.

Another cave sanctuary – perhaps even more magical than Khao Luang – is at **Khao Banda-It** (donation encouraged; ☎ 9am-4pm), 2km west of town. English-speaking guides will lead you through the caves and answer your questions. A *sáhm-lór* (also spelt *sáamláw*; three-wheeled pedicab) from the city centre to either site costs about 55B; a motorcycle taxi is 40B.

Festivals & Events

The **Phra Nakhon Khiri Fair** (☎ early Feb) centres on Khao Wang and the city's historic temples. Festivities include a sound-and-light show held at the Phra Nakhon Khiri palace, temples festooned with lights, and performances of *lá-kon chah-áree* (classical Thai dance-drama), *lí-gair Báh* (folk dance-drama) and modern-style historical dramas. A twist on the usual beauty contest provides a showcase for Phetchaburi widows.

Sleeping & Eating

Phetchaburi is a popular stop for temple oglers, so it's surprising that such a small collection of lodging and dining options exists. Western tourists have yet to make their mark, so most chow houses are hidden in the urban fray. Try the night market on Monday evenings for cheap, tasty treats.

The town is famous for its local cuisine, which includes *ków cháa pét-bù-ree* (moist, chilled rice served with sweetmeats – a hot-

season speciality) and the widely known *mòr gaang* (egg custard).

Rabieng Rim Nam Guest House (☎ 0 3242 5707; 1 Th Shesrain; s/d 120/240B) Set in a large, creaky teak structure sitting along the lazy river, this popular backpacker choice has simple rooms that are nothing fancier than a wooden closet with a mattress. If you aren't impressed with the rooms, the owner will point across the bridge to the Jomklow Hotel, which is the same price. Don't bother walking over there; the place feels like a prison. Rabieng's riverside restaurant is open for all three meals, serving an enormous selection of Thai staples. Go for a *yam* (spicy salad) – it's yum. The wafting '70s music matches the record jackets glued to the walls (think ABBA and Elvis). Extras include laundry service (5B per piece) and motorcycle rental (250B). Trips to Kaeng Krachan National Park (above) can be organised from here.

Sun Hotel (☎ 0 3240 0000; 43/33 Soi Phetkasem 1; r 800-1500B, ste 1700B; ☎) Located opposite the funicular to Phra Nakhon Khiri, Sun Hotel is backcountry Thailand's attempt at boutique sophistication. The enormous rooms are mostly painted in cool greys and browns, with one brightly coloured accent wall. There's a restaurant in the open-air lobby that's quite popular with the Thai guests. The professional staff will turn your food order into room service for an extra 5B. Discounted room rates are usually given.

Royal Diamond (☎ 0 3241 1061; www.royaldiamondhotel.com; 555 Moo 1, Th Phetkasem; r 1200-2000B; ☎) It's a bit of a hike to get there, but Royal Diamond has a good selection of comfortable lodging. The rates are pretty good value, especially for the roomy cheaper (standard) rooms, which come with wall-to-wall carpeting. The attached karaoke bar is a good

place to make some noise during your visit to quiet Phetchaburi.

Getting There & Away

Buses pulling into town make several stops depending on travellers' requests. Most buses stop at the Big C (a multistorey shopping centre) and a large lime-coloured hospital. It is best to get off at the hospital (just west of Khao Wang), as it is closer to the town's sites. There are frequent air-con bus services to/from Bangkok's Southern bus station (120B, 2½ hours). The bus terminal for air-con buses to/from Bangkok is across from the night market. Figure on around 1B per kilometre to reach nearby destinations such as Cha-am (35B) and Hua Hin (50B).

Trains are less convenient than buses, unless you factor in the time taken to get to or from Bangkok's bus terminals. There are frequent services to/from Bangkok's Hualamphong train station. Fares vary depending on the train and class (2nd class around 200B, 3rd class around 100B, three hours).

Getting Around

Sáhm-lór and motorcycle taxis go anywhere in the town centre for 30B; you can also charter them for the whole day (from 300B). Sòrng-táa-ou (small pickup trucks) cost 10B to 20B around town. Rabieng Rim Nam Guest House rents out motorcycles (250B per day).

CHA-AM

อำเภอชะอำ
pop 65,500

After Hua Hin struck it big when the king moved in, the quiet fishing town was transformed into a cosmopolitan beach destination. Little Cha-am, just 20km up the coast, has managed to escape a similar fate – this sandy stretch of casuarinas and umbrellas caters mostly to weekenders Thais. It can be a great alternative to a beach vacation further south: the prices are cheaper, the cuisine is geared towards Thai tastebuds and you'll have the chance to practise your bargaining skills.

Each weekend a stream of tour buses expels giddy revellers who grab a shaded spot under the millions of beachside parasols for days filled with picnics and frenzied chatter. On weekdays, Cha-am is virtually deserted, making it a great time to cash in on the lowered room rates and quiet sands.

Lately, Cha-am has become a popular stop for touring Scandinavians – you'll find countless restaurants and guesthouses proudly waving Nordic flags at the entrance.

Orientation

On the west side of Phetkasem Hwy (the 'highway') you'll find all of the civic facilities: the main post office, the train station, the police station and government offices. The road that fronts the beach, Th Ruamjit, about 2km from the train station, is a long string crammed with hotels, restaurants, souvenir stalls and public bathhouses.

Information

There are large clusters of banks and ATMs at the intersections of Th Phetkasem and Th Narathip, and Th Narathip and Th Ruamjit. **Cha-am Hospital** (☎ 0 3247 1808; Th Leapkhlong) Northwest of the beach.

CV.Net (Th Ruamjit; per hr 40B; ☎ 9am-10pm) An internet café on the main drag.

Post office (Th Ruamjit) This small branch is on the main beach strip; the main office is near the train station.

TAT office (☎ 0 3247 1005; tatphet@tat.or.th; 500/51 Th Phetkasem; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm) Has English-speaking staff and information on Cha-am, Phetchaburi, Hua Hin and Prachuap Khiri Khan.

Tourist police (☎ 0 3251 5995, emergency 1155; cnr Th Ruamjit & Th Narathip)

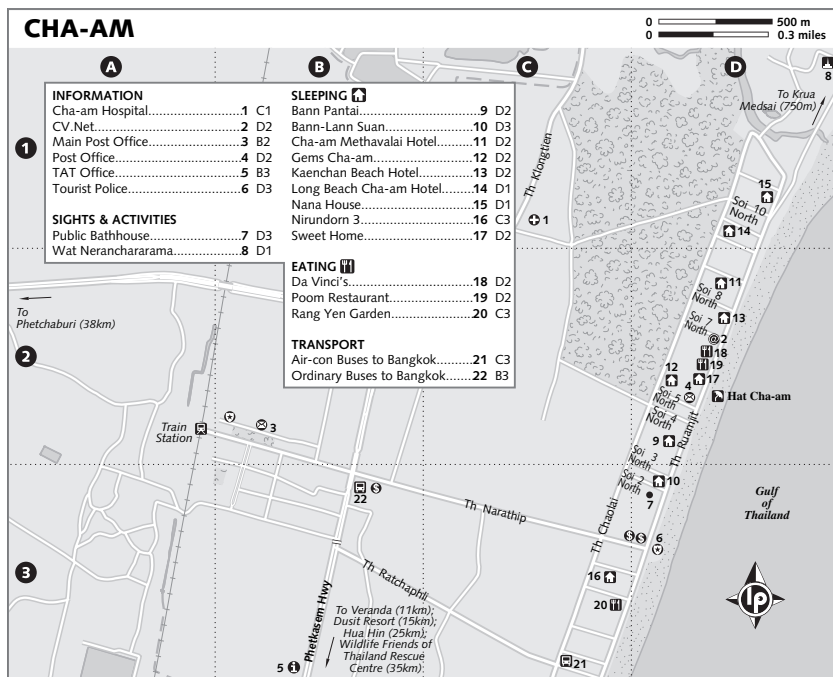
Sights & Activities

The beautiful **Wat Nerancharama**, on Th Chaolai, features an unusual six-armed Buddha statue. Each hand covers a sensory organ in a symbolic gesture denying the senses – kinda like 'see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil'.

Colourful Cha-am is largely the domain of Thai tourists who spend their holidays under giant parasols along the beach. If you abide by the 'when in Rome...' philosophy, you can hire a beach chair anywhere along the sand. At the end of the day, follow your fellow travellers to one of the many **public bathhouses** along the main strip (5B to 10B).

Volunteering

If you love animals and aren't afraid of a bit of hard work, then consider a stint at the **Wildlife Friends of Thailand Rescue Centre** (☎ 0 3245 8135; rescue centre www.wfft.org, volunteering www.wildlifevolunteer.org). Based 35km northwest of Cha-am, the centre cares for an entire menagerie of creatures



rescued from animal shows and exploitative owners. An average day could involve feeding sun bears, building enclosures for macaques and establishing island refuges for gibbons. Volunteering costs US\$140 per week, including all accommodation and meals. Volunteers are expected to stay for two to three months.

Sleeping

Sleeping options run from hovel-like guesthouses to futuristic boutique hotels. The seaside lodging in central Cha-am is tightly packed and generally in need of renovation (some exceptions to the rule are listed following). Consider booking ahead on the weekend, and expect prices to increase or decrease for any number of seemingly illogical reasons.

BUDGET

Nirundorn 3 (☎ 0 3247 1038, 0 3243 3450; www.nirundorn.com; 247/7 Th Ruamjit; r 300-1000B; 🏠) Nirundorn is an endearing spot with clean cottages, friendly managers and cute décor details that play with positive and negative space. Fan accommodation is rather lacklustre – go for an upper-floor room for the best views.

Nana House (☎ 0 3243 3632, 0 3247 1357; www.nanahouse.net; 203/3-4 Th Ruamjit; r 700-800B; 🏠) Seems like pink and purple paint was on sale when this place was under construction. But don't let the cutesy pastels put you off; inside you'll find the best budget rooms in town. Nana House has spread across several buildings at the northern end of the strip, but all of the accommodation is comfy and sparkling clean.

MIDRANGE

Bann-Lann Suan (☎ 0 3243 3171, 0 3247 1893; www.bannlannsuan.com; 261/2 Th Ruamjit; r 800-1500B; 🏠) This trendy address is easily the most stylish midrange option squished along Cha-am's beachside road. Remember to keep your curtains shut in the evening as the rooms face one another along a narrow scrap of synthetic jungle.

Gems Cha-am (☎ 0 3243 4060-79; www.gemscha-am.com; 251 Th Chaolai; d 1400-2260B; 🏠 🍷) A large billboard at the entrance gate boldly announces that Gems was awarded a silver medal for being a 'healthy and nice hotel'. The owners seem a little too proud of their

second-place finish, especially since we have a hunch that they won the title quite a while ago (it's the excessive use of speckled turquoise carpeting that clued us in). The 17th floor, also known as the 'health floor', features a comprehensive fitness centre, a sauna and an egg-shaped swimming pool.

Sweet Home (☎ 0 3241 1039; 279/1 Th Ruamjit; bungalows 1500B; 🏠) It must have taken an entire forest to build Sweet Home – everything's been constructed from beautiful burnished teak. The bathrooms are surprisingly basic, but everything else oozes rustic charm, including the shaded picnic table contraptions in front of each bungalow.

Kaenchan Beach Hotel (☎ 0 3247 0777; www.kaenchanbeach.com; Th Ruamjit; bungalows 1500B, r 2150-3300B, ste 5700B; 🏠 🍷) This tangerine tower is a popular midrange choice for vacationing Thais and expats. Kaenchan's spacious rooms boast loads of lacquered cherry wood furnishings and windows that face the sea. Additional bungalow-style accommodation sits behind the hotel for those who aren't too fussed about ocean views. The complimentary breakfast feels a bit like an anthropological study – it's a Thai interpretation of a Western buffet. Walk-ins can usually score 50% discounts even on the busiest weekends of the year.

Long Beach Cha-am Hotel (☎ 0 3247 2444; www.longbeach-chaam.com; 225/75 Th Ruamjit; r from 2600B; 🏠 🍷 🍷) This towering, Miami-style hotel is smothered in pastels. Guests can worship the sun at the 3rd-floor outdoor pool or on the rooftop garden 11 storeys up. Long Beach is the first resort in Phetchaburi Province to be recognized as a 'green hotel' by the Green Leaf Foundation, which promotes eco-friendly tourism.

TOP END

There are numerous top-end options around Cha-am, but the most lavish resorts are located several kilometres south. Most of the pricey places in the area offer taxi shuttles to and from Hua Hin nearby.

Cha-am Methavalai Hotel (☎ 0 3243 3250-3; www.methavalai.com; 220 Th Ruamjit; r 3200-4200B, ste 6500-10,400B; 🏠 🍷 🍷) Methavalai doesn't compete with the armada of sleek boutique resorts popping up along the king's coast, but there's something very charming about this older stalwart. Flowers spill from the white, terraced balconies like green pom-poms, and Thai-

style cottages hide throughout the campus of manicured foliage.

Bann Pantai (☎ 0 3243 3111; www.bannpantai.com; Th Ruamjit; r 4000-8000B; 🏠 🍷 🍷) The sexiest option in the heart of Cha-am, Bann Pantai is a chic village oozing trendy décor details yanked straight out of a magazine. Sleek hotel pods sit on the edge of the amoeba-like pool, which drips a refreshing turquoise tint.

Dusit Resort (☎ 0 3252 0009; http://huahin.dusit.com; 1349 Th Phetkasem; r 7000-8000B, ste 14,000-58,000B; 🏠 🍷 🍷) This stunning, colonial-style resort pretends to be in Hua Hin, however, it's technically within Cha-am's city limit, despite being several kilometres south of town. Dusit is one of the most respected names in Thai vacation luxury, and this beachside avatar is probably the flagship. Amenities include a fitness centre, minigolf course, horse-riding facilities, a pool, tennis and squash courts and polo grounds.

Veranda (☎ 0 3270 9000-99; www.verandaresortandspa.com; 737/12 Th Mung Talay; r 8400-9800B, villa 35,000-45,000B; 🏠 🍷 🍷) If the Starship Enterprise were disassembled and turned into a beachside resort, it would probably look a bit like sleek Veranda. Muted tones and trendsetting details permeate the plush oasis, while Speedo-clad jetsetters lounge around the pool absorbing sunrays and the chic ambiance in equal measure.

Eating

There are loads of options along the main coastal drag – some are affiliated with hotels, while others are stand-alone venues and beachside food stalls.

Rang Yen Garden (☎ 0 3247 1267; 259/40 Th Ruamjit; dishes 50-180B; 🍷 lunch & dinner Nov-Apr) This lovely patio-style restaurant serves up Thai favourites under the stars. It's only open in the high season.

Krua Medsai (☎ 08 1763 6070, 0 3243 0196; dishes 60-280B; 🍷 dinner) This fantastic local haunt rarely registers on Cha-am's tourism radar because it sits just north of the beachside burg. Try succulent 'boo nim' (soft-shell crab) and order a bowl of spicy *dôm yam gûng* (prawn and lemongrass soup) with coconut. To find Krua Medsai, go north along the main ocean road until the rows of accommodation end; you'll pass over a small bridge and a few hundred metres later there's a large blue billboard pointing to the restaurant on the right-hand side of the road.

DETOUR: THE SUMMER PALACE

Midway between Cha-am and Hua Hin stands **Phra Ratchaniwet Marukhathayawan** (☎ 0 3247 2482; Th Phetkasem; admission 90B; 🕒 8.30am-4pm Mon-Fri, to 5pm Sat & Sun), a summer palace built during the reign of King Rama VI. The one- and two-storey buildings are constructed of prime golden teak and interlinked by covered boardwalks, all raised high above the ground on stilts. Along with the high, tiled roofs and tall, shuttered windows, this design allows for maximum air circulation – a tropical building design sorely missing in most modern Thai architecture. It's now surrounded by the grounds of Camp Rama VI, a military post, but with proper check-in at the gate you should have no trouble receiving permission to tour the palace during opening hours. If you take one of the half-hourly Cha-am-Hua Hin buses, ask to be dropped at the road to this place; it's a couple of kilometres from there.

If you don't have time to visit the summer palace, check out the train station in Hua Hin. It was designed to be the royal waiting room for the king, and features a similar flamboyant design.

The beachfront is completely obscured by tourism enterprises – the best stretch of sand can be found by the Sofitel resort. This pleasant stretch of peach-coloured beach is broken up by round, smooth boulders (Hua Hin means 'stone head') and is ideal for year-round swimming. The train station lies at the western end of town, and its beautifully restored royal waiting room is a great spot to get snap-happy.

Information
BOOKSHOPS

Bookazine (☎ 0 3253 2071; 166 Th Naresdamri; 🕒 9am-10pm) Has tons of maps, books in English and travel books, including Lonely Planet guides.

EMERGENCY

Tourist police (☎ 0 3251 5995, emergency 1155; Th Damnoen Kasem)

INTERNET ACCESS

Internet access is available all over Hua Hin. **World News Coffee** (Th Naresdamri; per hr 40B; 🕒 8am-11pm; 📶) This café has fast internet connection in air-con comfort (see p177 for more information).

INTERNET RESOURCES

Hua Hin After Dark (www.huahinafterdark.com) A good resource for night-time shenanigans.

MEDIA

Hua Hin Observer (www.observergroup.net) A free, home-grown magazine with short features in English (and a few in German). Available at most hotels around town, it contains snippets on eating out, culture and entertainment.

MEDICAL SERVICES

Hospital San Paolo (☎ 0 3253 2576; 222 Th Phetkasem) For basic and emergency care.

MONEY

There are currency exchange booths and ATMs up and down Th Naresdamri, as well as on several side streets. Nearer to the bus stations are a couple of banks on the northern part of Th Phetkasem.

Bank of Ayudhya (Th Naresdamri; 🕒 10am-8pm) Exchange window conveniently located close to the beach.

POST

Post office (☎ 0 3251 1350; Th Damnoen Kasem)

TOURIST INFORMATION

Free maps, pamphlets and brochures – almost everything you'll need – can be found in most restaurants and hotels.

Tourist information office (☎ 0 3253 2433; cnr Th Phetkasem & Th Damnoen Kasem; 🕒 8.30am-8pm) Has lots of info on Hua Hin and the surrounding areas, and gives out loads of brochures. There is a handy, second location right beside the Starbucks near the central clock tower.

Activities & Courses

Hua Hin has long been a favourite golfing holiday destination for Thais and royalty, and has recently begun receiving attention from international golfers. There are several companies in town that rent out golfing equipment and arrange golf tours. **Hua Hin Golf Centre** (☎ 0 3253 1096; www.huahingolf.com; Th Naresdamri; 🕒 noon-10pm), opposite the Hilton, can tailor a package to any of the courses in the area and arrange accommodation, equipment, a caddy and transfers.

Horse riding (per hr 450B) on the beach is very common around these parts. Horses and their owners can usually be found at the beach at the end of Th Damnoen Kasem.

Muay thai (Thai boxing; ☎ 0 3251 5269; 8/1 Th Phunsuk; admission 300B) matches take place every Tuesday and Friday at 9pm. The fighters aren't pros by any stretch of the imagination, but they put on a good show. If you're inspired by the *moo-ay tai* (or *muey thai*) matches and feel like partaking in a little kick boxing yourself, there's a **gym** (Th Phetkasem) south of town – just south of the hospital and market – that gives lessons (300B). Daily admission to the gym is 180B.

For some serious pampering, head to the **Barai Spa** (☎ 0 3251 1234; www.thebarai.com; 91 Th Khao Takiap) at the Hyatt Hotel, a couple of kilometres south of the city centre. This stunning, state-of-the-art retreat is so proud of its unique design details that it offers regular free guided tours of the facility.

If you wish to re-create some of the scrumptious dishes you've eaten in Thailand, visit **Buchabun Art & Crafts Collection** (☎ 0 1572 3805; www.siambeing.com/restaurant/cookingcourse; 22 Th Dechanuchit) where you can sign up for a half-day Thai cooking class with Rattreeya Buchabun. Classes cost 1000B and include a market visit and recipe book – but they're only run if several people are interested.

Tours

Hua Hin has loads of travel agencies, most of which offer day trips to nearby places such as Phetchaburi (p165), Khao Sam Roi Yot (p180) and Kaeng Krachan (p168). You may have to wait a day or two before a quorum of tourists signs up for your desired trip.

Hua Hin Adventure Tour (☎ 0 3253 0314; www.huahinadventuretour.com; Th Naep Khehat; 🕒 8.30am-7pm) Runs kayaking trips in the Khao Sam Roi Yot National Park (1900B), amongst several other things. Tours include pick-up from your hotel.

Ken Diamond (☎ 0 3251 3863; www.travel-huahin.com; 4/34 Th Naresdamri) A German-run outfit that has dozens of trips to destinations in the vicinity, including waterfalls, national parks, and diving and snorkelling locations. It also arranges car rentals.

Western Tours (☎ 0 3253 3303; www.western-tours-huahin.com; 11 Th Damnoen Kasem) Has tours to surrounding attractions, golf packages (including equipment rentals), hotel bookings, bus tickets and help with local transportation. It's an authorised agent for Thai Airways. There's another branch on Th Amnuaysin.

Festivals & Events

The annual **Hua Hin Jazz Festival** (http://jazzfestival-huahin.com; 🕒 mid-Jun) is held near the beachfront and showcases Thailand's best jazz talent.

Sleeping

Lodging in Hua Hin generally falls on the extreme ends of the pricing spectrum. There are some great deals around town for the budget traveller, and some of Thailand's best boutique hotels for those who can drop the big bucks. Cha-am and Pranburi lie around 20km north and south respectively, and offer some fantastic sleeping options as well.

Hua Hin's proximity to Bangkok means that rates sometimes skyrocket on weekends (especially holiday weekends), while weekdays are noticeably less expensive.

BUDGET

All Nations Guest House (☎ 0 3251 2747; www.geocities.com/allnationsguesthouse; 10-10/1 Th Dechanuchit; d with shared bathroom 350-600B) All Nation's backpacker lodging is simple, but it gets the job done. The lobby bar is decorated with foreign flags and currencies, and the televisions are conveniently stuck on the sports channel. Single travellers get a 50% discount.

Pattana Guest House (☎ 0 3251 3393; huahinpatana@hotmail.com; 52 Th Naresdamri; r 350-600B) Blink and you'll miss the narrow soi that leads to little Pattana. This charming teak habitat is adorned with a variety of colourful collectibles, including a giant wooden rooster, toy ships and endless stacks of tattered paperbacks.

Bird Guest House (☎ 0 3251 1630; birdguesthouse-huahin@hotmail.com; 31/2 Th Naresdamri; r 400-600B; 📶) Bird doesn't sing like it used to, but it's a decent budget choice if you're seeking out a charming, pier-shanty ambience. It's a bit smaller than some of the other guesthouses nearby, so there's a homely, relaxed atmosphere.

Tong-Mee House (☎ 0 3253 0725; 1 Soi Raumporn; r 550B; 📶) This hidden gem is tucked away along a quiet residential soi. Fresh potted plants cheer the stairwell, and although the rooms are cosy (ie small), they have polished wooden floors and immaculate bathrooms. There's a neat little café, a small library and plenty of genuine smiles.

Pananchai Hotel (☎ 0 3251 1707, 0 3251 1633; 71 Th Naep Khehat; d incl breakfast 650B; 📶) Pananchai feels like a small European hotel with its teeny check-in desk and thin, rickety elevator. The rooms have small windows and are decked out in faded floral patterns.

K Place Guest House (☎ 0 3251 1396; kplaceus@yahoo.com; 116 Th Naresdamri; r 800-1000B; 📶) Smack in the heart of things on Th Naresdamri, but tucked away behind the associated minimart,

LIVE LIKE A KING

The king made Hua Hin his royal summer residence back in 1922, and today, you too can find your very own palace in the form of a stunning, world-class resort. While the following options may break the bank, they are sure worth the splurge.

- **Chiva-Som International Health Resort** (right; Hua Hin)
- **Evasons** (p179; Prانبური)
- **Veranda** (p171; Cha-am)
- **Putahracsa** (right; Hua Hin)
- **Asara** (right; Hua Hin)

K Place's spacious rooms are good value, but not all have natural light.

MIDRANGE

Fulay Guesthouse (☎ 0 3251 3145; www.fulay-huahin.com; 110/1 Th Naresdamri; r 750-1500B; 📶) One of the best pier guesthouses jutting out over the sea, Fulay has charming marine-themed rooms with fresh coats of white and blue paint, and the odd framed portrait of a wooden frigate. Guests fall asleep to the soft crashing of the waves below.

Fulay Hotel (☎ 0 3251 3670, 0 3251 3145; fishshop@hotmail.com; 110/1 Th Naresdamri; r 850-1500B; 📶) Across from Fulay Guesthouse is this narrow, teak-façade hotel right in the thick of things. The hotel is good value, and there's also a romantic, fancy-looking restaurant downstairs.

Chomsin Hotel (☎ 0 3251 5348; www.chomsin.huahin.com; 130/4 Th Chomsin; r 900-1200B; 📶) Friendly Chomsin is a great addition to the spread of low-priced accommodation in Hua Hin. The rooms are immaculate, and feature polished hardwood floors, modern bathrooms and sun-filled picture windows.

All Seasons Guesthouse (☎ 0 3251 5151; Soi 63, 77/18-19 Th Phetkasem; r 1000-1300B; 📶) All Seasons has spacious, sun-soaked rooms with enormous bathrooms befitting a top-end resort. The friendly, UK-born owner rents out DVD players, so you can finally watch any purchases you pirated. The seven rooms can fill up quickly so it's best to call ahead.

Araya (☎ 0 3253 1130, 08 6339 9563; www.araya-residence.com; 15/1 Th Chomsin; r 1200-1700B; 📶) The shiny, tangerine façade is very hard to miss. On the inside, guests will be pleased to find beautiful hardwood floors and modern furni-

ture that feels a bit like 'IKEA meets Thailand'. There's complimentary wi-fi throughout and each room's lavatory sparkles with a different primary colour (we liked the vibrant, radioactive lettuce colour the most).

TOP END

Dune (☎ 0 3251 5051; www.dunehuahin.com; 5/5 Th Naep Kaehat; r incl breakfast from 5800B; 📶) Little Dune has five luxurious suites stocked with a cache of boutique design details. Cool club beats gently waft through the air as guests recline on imported furniture made from handcrafted textiles.

Putahracsa (☎ 0 3253 1470; www.putahracsa.com; 22/65 Th Naep Kaehat; r from 7000B; 📶) How do you say 'swanky' in Thai? It's 'Putahracsa'. This stunning complex features a variety of structures shaped like cubic Tetris pieces, which sit along a beachfront lawn with blades of bright green grass. The design is elegant yet simple, with teak veneers covering smooth white walls. This terrific resort is hard to spell, but definitely easy to love.

Asara (☎ 0 3254 7555; www.asaravillaandsuite.com; 35 Hua Hin Soi 5; r from 8000B; 📶) Beautiful Asara is a veritable village of modern villas. Located just north of the city centre, this lagoon-filled property boasts ocean vistas, private plunge pools, two restaurants and a vast spa offering world-class spa packages. The friendly staff tend to guests with ear-to-ear smiles.

Sofitel Central Hua Hin Resort (Hua Hin Railway Hotel; ☎ 0 3251 2021-38; www.accorhotels.com/asia; 1 Th Damnoen Kasem; r from 8000B, ste from 12,000B; 📶) In 1922 the State Railway of Thailand (then the Royal Thai Railway) extended the national rail network to Hua Hin to allow easier access to the Hua Hin summer palace. The area proved to be a popular vacation spot with the general population too, so in the following year the Hua Hin Railway Hotel was built – a graceful colonial-style inn by the sea. Today the property is under the management of Accor's Sofitel branch, and it remains a beautiful campus with plenty of beach views, three pools, rolling grounds and first-class spa services. Discounts of up to 40% may be possible during the week and in the low season.

Chiva-Som International Health Resort (☎ 0 3253 6536; www.chivasom.com; 73/4 Phetkasem Hwy; 3-night package US\$1650-4500; 📶) Set along seven acres of beach, Chiva-Som is the ultimate vacation playground for the overworked, overstressed and overpaid. The name means 'haven of life'

in Thai-Sanskrit, and the staff of 200 fuse Eastern and Western approaches to wellness with planned nutrition, step and aqua aerobics, and Thai, Swedish or underwater massage. Rates include three meals per day along with health and fitness consultations, spa treatments and recreational activities. Lengthier packages are also available (up to one month), as are specialized detox and fitness regimes.

Eating

Seafood rules the culinary roost in Hua Hin and fresh delights from the sea are available all over town. You can get seafood snacks on the beach throughout the day; cracked crab and cold Singha beer can be ordered without leaving your deckchair. The best seafood to eat in Hua Hin is *Blah sām-lee* (cotton fish or kingfish), *Blah grā-pong* (perch), *Blah mèuk* (squid), *hōy má-laang pōo* (mussels) and *Too* (crab). The concentration of wharfside outdoor seafood restaurants on Th Naresdamri, at the intersection of Th Dechanuchit, offers the widest choice in ocean fare.

Chao Lay (☎ 0 3251 3436; 15 Th Naresdamri; dishes 60-400B; 📶) breakfast, lunch & dinner) Probably the best of the wharf restaurants, this place certainly manages to fill its two levels of pier seating. There's a veritable fish market out front where you can choose your catch of the day, and a small army of waiters to deliver the end product.

Maha Raja (☎ 0 3253 0347; 25 Th Naresdamri; dishes 80-200B; 📶) lunch & dinner) With gaudy décor fit for a king, this place provides officious service typical of Indian restaurants in Thailand. The dining room has a pink theme throughout with ostentatious chandeliers, and solid Indian cuisine at respectable prices. You'll get a free welcome drink, too.

Baan Itsara (☎ 0 3253 0574; 7 Th Naebkhehars; dishes 90-400B; 📶) lunch & dinner) Baan Itsara is a destination for aficionados of the ocean's produce. Considered by some to be one of the best seafood places in town, this restaurant has tables right on the ocean and a small imported-wine list. The tiger prawns in sweet basil sauce are a perennial favourite.

Monsoon (☎ 0 3253 1062; 62 Th Naresdamri; dishes 100-250B, set menu 390B; 📶) lunch & dinner) Beautiful Monsoon feels like a far-flung railway station deep within IndoChina. There are large leather chairs plucked directly from a posh lodge and the menu offers imported teas and

a mix of regional and foreign cuisine. The 50B water surcharge was the only thing that marred the experience.

World News Coffee (Th Naresdamri; breakfast 150B, coffee 60-120B; 📶) breakfast, lunch & dinner) This Starbucks-esque, popular breakfast venue is run by the nearby Hilton. Breakfasts and bagels are preferred here, as are various coffee drinks. There's an excellent selection of newspapers and magazines to digest with your morning brew. Internet access is available for 40B per hour.

Brasserie de Paris (☎ 0 3253 0637; 3 Th Naresdamri; dishes 180-500B; 📶) breakfast, lunch & dinner) An actual French chef serves up real French food (crab Hua-Hin is a speciality) in this lovely, light and airy restaurant. There's a good view of *la mer* from upstairs.

Hua Hin Thai Show (☎ 08 1400 7030, 0 3251 1423; 67/2 Dechanuchit; set menu 350-450B; 📶) dinner) Just off the main night-market street, this open-air Thai restaurant draws in the crowds with free nightly performances – try to make the Wednesday night classical and folk Thai dance show. The food's not bad either, and there's nice mood lighting with tables set around Thai-style pagodas – it's only mildly cheesy.

Sasi (☎ 08 1880 4004, 0 3251 2488; Th Khao Takiap; set menu 350-450B; 📶) dinner) Located near the Hyatt Regency Hotel, Sasi is another pleasant option for a traditional Thai dinner accompanied by a performance featuring Thai theatre and dance.

Chatchai Market (Th Dechanuchit) This colourful and inexpensive market is one of Hua Hin's major attractions. Vendors gather nightly in the centre of town (off Th Phetkasem) to fry, steam, grill, parboil or bake fresh gulf seafood for hordes of hungry Thais. Don't leave town without trying the famous *roti Hua Hin* (10B) served at this market, a delicious snack made with special dough and filled with sweets such as strawberries, custard or raisins.

Drinking

Countless farang bars can be found at the Hua Hin Bazaar and on the little soi off Th Naresdamri and Th Damnoen Kasem. Some of these offer a Thai-hostess atmosphere, but a few bill themselves as sports bars and have a wide-screen TV tuned to events around the world.

Hua Hin Brewing Company (Th Naresdamri) This maze of barges, decks and masts is one of the most popular entertainment venues around. There's often live music and it attracts a mix of hotel guests, expats, tourists and some

MOO-AY TAI (MUAY THAI)

Moo-ay tai (often spelt as *muay thai*; Thai boxing) is the most popular spectator sport in Thailand. When watching a *moo-ay tai* match, it seems like the only goal is to butcher your opponent. However, this ancient sport is steeped in tradition, and its meaning goes beyond the cacophony of flying limbs.

Moo-ay tai is derived from an early martial art known as *grà-bèe grà-borng* (stick and sword), which originated in Southeast Asia more than 2000 years ago. Thankfully the sticks and swords are left behind in today's popular ring-based version. *Moo-ay tai* is known as the 'science of eight limbs' because fighters can use not only their hands and feet, but elbows and knees as well. In the ring, boxing techniques are used, as well as hard kicking, elbows, knees and stand-up grappling – the low kick to the thigh is a distinguishing technique frequently used in *moo-ay tai*. Points are awarded for every landed blow and even blows below the belt are allowed, though a hit to the groin is not considered a 'valid' target.

Before each bout, opponents will perform the *wai kroo*. Also known as the *ram moo-ay* (boxing dance), these varied performances are elaborate recitals that pay respect to the fighter's instructor, as well as acting as a warm up and often stirring up the crowd. Each *wai kroo* is unique, and if two fighters execute the same *wai kroo*, they will not fight because it is understood that they have the same teacher.

Young Thai men all over the country train as *moo-ay tai* fighters; for many it's their only way out of poverty. The sport of *moo-ay tai* is highly revered and is intertwined with religion and cultural history – championship fighters become instant national heroes.

Moo-ay tai matches take place all over Thailand, particularly during festivals and public holidays. Most Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) agencies have information about upcoming matches and training programs.

local 'ladies of the night'. It's not at all sleazy, however – it's attached to one of the classiest hotels in town.

Bernie's (Hua Hin Bazaar, Th Damnoen Kasem) A British-run sports bar – the owner is a big golf nut with loads of info on swinging a club in the area.

Hua Hin Meeting Point (☎ 0 3253 1132; 3 Th Phunsuk) The corner location ensures this place sees plenty of action. It serves meals but is also a popular place for a few drinks. There's indoor seating around a slick, modern white bar (in the comfort of air-con) or sit on the outside patio, which has a giant projection screen.

Crawford's (☎ 0 3251 1517; 5 Th Phunsuk) Hua Hin's favourite Irish bar has imported everything directly from the motherland (minus the cold weather). There are two wood-finished levels of air-conditioned, Guinness-drinking comfort. It's not too rowdy and there's a friendly expat 'drink with your mates' mood here, as well as the occasional sports match on one of its many televisions.

Getting There & Away

SGA (☎ in Hua Hin 0 3252 2300, in Bangkok 0 2134 3233; www.sga.aero) flies a 12-seat shuttle three times a day (one-way 3100B, 40 minutes,

11.45am, 3pm and 6.30pm) from Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi airport to Hua Hin.

There are air-con buses to/from Bangkok's Southern bus station (171B, 3½ hours, every half hour). These leave Hua Hin 70m north of Rajana Garden House on Th Sasong (outside the Siripetchkasem Hotel).

The main government bus station, on Th Liap Thang Rot Fai, has air-con buses to many destinations throughout the country. Be sure to ignore the touts here and go to the window for assistance and ticket purchase. There is at least one air-con bus per day to each destination: Phetchaburi (80B, 1½ hours), Cha-am (40B, 30 minutes), Prachuap Khiri Khan (80B, 1½ hours), Chumphon (160B, four hours), Phuket (378B, eight hours), Krabi (389B, eight hours), Koh Samui (320B, nine hours) and Songkhla (457B, 11 hours). Frequent non-air-con buses to Phetchaburi (50B, 1½ hours) and Cha-am (25B, 30 minutes) leave from near the intersection of Th Chomsin and Th Phetkasem.

There are frequent trains running to/from Bangkok's Hualamphong train station (2nd class 292B to 382B, 3rd class 234B to 294B, four hours) and other stations on the southern railway line.

Getting Around

The airport is 6km north of town – about a 150B taxi ride away.

Local buses (10B) and *sörng-tää-ou* (10B) to Ao Takiap, for resorts south of Hua Hin, leave from the corner of Th Sasong and Th Dechanuchit.

Even though *sähm-lór* fares in Hua Hin have been set by the municipal authorities, haggling is still often required. Some sample fares: from the train station to the beach, 20B; from the air-con bus terminal to Th Naresdamri, 30B to 40B (depending on the size of your bags); and from Chatchai Market to Tha Thiap Reua Pramong, 20B. Most drivers will ask for at least twice this much.

Motorcycles and bicycles can be rented from a couple of places on Th Damnoen Kasem near the Sofitel Central Hua Hin Resort. Motorcycle rates are reasonable: 200B to 250B per day for 100cc to 125cc bikes. Occasionally, larger bikes (400cc to 750cc) are available for 600B to 700B a day. Car and 4WD rental can also be arranged at most travel agencies, including Ken Diamond (p175) and Western Tours (p175). Expect to pay around 1300B to 1500B for a small Suzuki 4WD. Bicycle rental costs 50B to 100B per day.

PRANBURI

ปรับุรี

75,000

Pranburi, about 35km south of Hua Hin, is quickly becoming the choice destination for high-end travellers heading along the king's coast. Flanked by verdant pineapple orchards and creamy brown sands, this little hamlet has caught the eye of cinematogra-

MANAGING MANGROVES

In 1996 the king and queen visited the quiet region of Pranburi and were shocked to find that extensive shrimp farming had marred the land. The ground conditions were inhospitable, turning this once thriving estuary into a veritable desert. A reclamation project was immediately implemented to restore the coastal forest and, after 12 long years, the **mangrove park** (☎ 0 3263 2255; Rte 4, Pranburi Estuary; admission free; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm) has finally opened its doors to visitors.

Local environmentalists have now taken on a new role – they have become guides who lead informal tours through the state-of-the-art interpretive centre and then continue along the raised boardwalk that winds through the forest of gnarled branches. On our tour, the guide offered personal stories detailing the reclamation of sullied land. He was raised in a nearby town and worked on a shrimp farm as a youth. When the land became exhausted many people lost their jobs, which prompted him to become interested in sustainable endeavours. 'It's important', he said, 'for Thailand to develop better habits when harvesting the kingdom's natural products. If we continue to disrespect the land, we will soon have nothing left to reap.'

phers capitalising on the area's natural beauty and seclusion.

The region of Pranburi sits slightly inland from the ocean, while the beach area is commonly known as Pak Nam Pran. A long, sandy road snakes directly along the coast cutting a path between the seaside resorts and the cool, crashing tides.

Pranburi Hospital (☎ 0 3262 1757, 0 3262 1767)

Tourist Police (☎ 0 3251 5995, emergency 1155)

Sleeping & Eating

As the region continues to increase in popularity, several new hotels are popping up. There are a few independent restaurants and bars along the main beach street, but most guests tend to dine at the fantastic resort restaurants.

Huaplee Lazy Beach (☎ 0 3263 0555; www.huaplee-lazybeach.com; 163 Moo 4; r 3500-7000B; ☎) Charming, sun-drenched rooms line a miniature pasture by the sea. The interiors are white-on-white with an occasional blue accent that feels distinctly Mediterranean. Handcrafted furniture and little knick-knacks such as seashell mobiles and colourful teapots give the Lazy Beach an extra pinch of *je ne sais quoi*.

Evasons (☎ 0 3262 2111; www.sixsenses.com/evason-huahin; 9 Moo 5, Pak Nam Pran; r & bungalows 5500-18,000B; ☎) This stunning resort is actually made up of two different properties: one section offers charming hotel-style lodging and the other zone features ultraprivate villas, some with exquisite plunge pools. The super-smiley staff don pastel uniforms while catering to guests' every whim and shuttling them around the campus and beyond. Several fantastic adventure activities can be

arranged, including biking, hiking, diving and other water sports. There are two on-site spas offering an eclectic assortment of treatments in a garden setting that blends in with the naturally occurring foliage. The resort has an entire department dedicated to environmental management and conversation; the primary focus is limiting the impact of tourism and fishing on the surrounding nature.

Aleenta (☎ 0 2508 5333; www.aleenta.com; 183 Moo 4; r 5700-20,000B; ♿) Delicate Aleenta offers villas and suites set within an adobe-and-thatch fortress. Rambling staircases cross the sandy grounds like an Escher print, and the quiet rooms fuse modern amenities and natural textiles. This place prides itself on providing a secluded getaway – almost to the point of snootiness.

Getting There & Away

There are two **minivan services** (☎ 08 6007 4742, 08 5242 5268) that transport passengers between Bangkok and Pranburi (220B). The communication might be a little tricky over the phone since the operators speak very little English. The pick-up and drop-off site is Pranburi's sole 7-Eleven, and in Bangkok, plan to get out at the Victory Monument. It is best to book ahead as these shuttles can fill up rather quickly. If you are trying to connect to a city between Pranburi and Bangkok, simply inform the driver of your intended destination. Taxis from Hua Hin cost 400B, or 500B from Hua Hin airport.

KHAO SAM ROI YOT NATIONAL PARK

อุทยานแห่งชาติเขาสามร้อยยอด
Long ago, a wooden merchant ship was trolling the coast, and when it reached this region it sprang a leak and rapidly began to sink. Miraculously, all 300 individuals aboard swam to shore escaping a watery grave. From then on, the area became known as Khao Sam Roi Rot, which roughly means 'land of the 300 saved'. After many retellings, this nickname started to change – the memory of the ancient ship became overshadowed by the region's natural virtues, which include myriad skyscraping mountains. The 'rot' ('saved') changed to 'yot' and today this jagged jungle is known as the land of the 300 peaks.

Recently, this tropical realm was given a national park status preserving the stunning

mounds, caves and trails from developers' hands. The area is home to a vibrant ecosystem that includes friendly dusky langur monkeys, barking deer, Javan mongooses, otters and palm civets. Bird-watchers also hold the park in high esteem, since over 300 species of migratory birds descend on the region's ponds and mangroves each year (see the boxed text, p182).

Other wildlife you may be able to spot around Khao Sam Roi Yot includes the crab-eating macaque, slow lorises, Malayan pangolins, fishing cats, serows and monitor lizards. Unfortunately, as is the case with many of Thailand's natural resources, the encroachment of industry (in this case shrimp farms) is taking its toll on the natural habitat of the park's varied fauna.

Information

There are three park headquarters (Hat Laem Sala, Ban Rong Jai and Ban Khao Daeng) and three visitors centres (Hat Laem Sala, Hat Sam Phraya and Ban Khao Daeng) where you can obtain information on the area. A nature study centre lies at the end of a 1.5km road leading north from Ban Rong Jai. There are a couple of checkpoints – one on the road south from Pranburi and the other on the road east of Hwy 4. You'll have to pay admission (adult/child under 14 years 400/200B) at these checkpoints or, if you've left the park and are returning, show proof that you've already paid.

Sights & Activities

Well worth the steep 45-minute climb, the **Khao Daeng viewpoint** is reached by a well-marked trail beginning 500m from Ban Khao Daeng. The views from the top are breathtaking and the vista spans the length of the park, from the limestone cliffs to the wiggling coastline below.

BEACHES

Both of the park's beaches have plenty of facilities, including food stalls, picnic areas and washrooms.

Hat Laem Sala, a sandy beach flanked on three sides by dry limestone hills and casuarinas, has a small visitors centre, a restaurant, bungalows and a camping area. The trail to Tham Phraya Nakhon starts here. Boats to the beach (250B return), which take up to 10 people, can be hired from Bang Pu. You can

also reach the beach from Bang Pu via a steep trail (20 minutes' walk).

Hat Sam Phraya, 5km south of Hat Laem Sala, is about 1km in length and has a restaurant and washrooms.

CAVES

The three main caves in this park are all worth a detour.

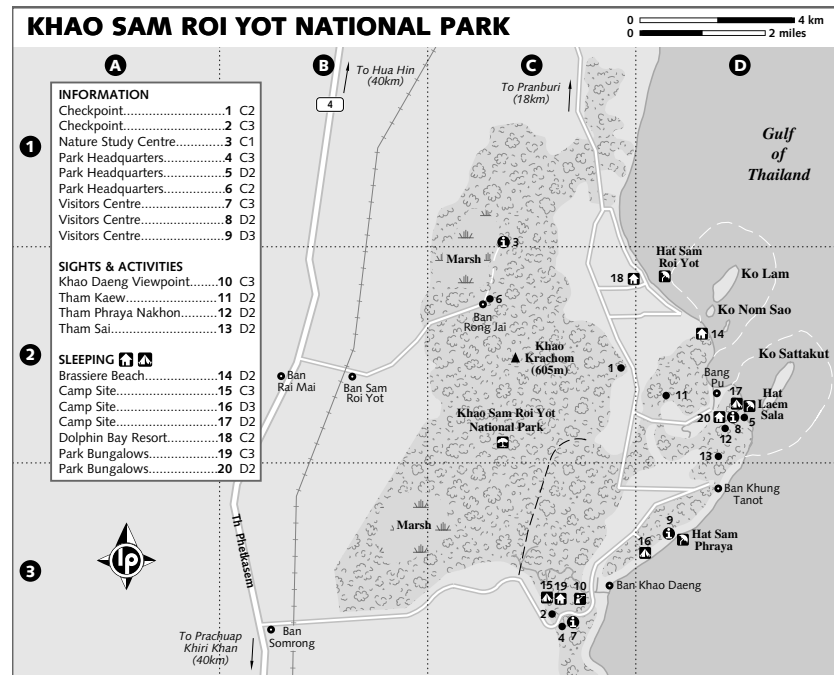
Tham Phraya Nakhon is probably the most photographed cave in Thailand and can be reached by boat or foot. The boat trip takes about 30 minutes there and back, while it's 30 minutes each way by foot along a steep, rocky 430m trail from Hat Laem Sala. The cave is made up of two large sinkholes, and when the sun shines through in the early morning the effect is truly mystical. In one cave there's a royal *sāh-lah* (often spelt *sala*; an 'open room' with a roof but no walls). It was built for King Chulalongkorn, who would stop off here when travelling back and forth between Bangkok and Nakhon Si Thammarat. Check out 'Pagoda Rock', covered with colourful talismans, and 'Crocodile Rock', which actually looks more like an alligator.

Tham Kaew, 2km from the Bang Pu turn-off, features a series of chambers connected by narrow passageways; you enter the first cavern by a ladder. The stalactites and limestone formations glitter with calcite crystals as though they were encrusted with diamonds (hence the cave's name, Jewel Cave). Tham Kaew is best visited in the company of a park guide because of the dangerous footing. Guides can be arranged at Bang Pu.

Tham Sai is a hill cave near Ban Khung Tanot, about 2.3km from the main road between Laem Sala and Sam Phraya beaches. You can rent lamps for a small fee from a shelter near the cave's mouth. A 280m trail leads up the hillside to the cave, which features a large single cavern. Be mindful of steep drop-offs in the cave.

Sleeping & Eating

Just outside the northerly checkpoint, roads turn off towards a long sandy bay and Hat Sam Roi Yot. Here, several private resorts offer midrange to top-end accommodation along the uninterrupted and spotless beach. This bay is supposedly a breeding ground for a school of dolphins.



FOR THE BIRDS

Kaeng Krachan and Khao Sam Roi Yot National Parks both vie for the title of Thailand's top bird-watching spot. We'll leave the battle for that honour to the ornithologists, but there's no denying that these world-renowned birding sites are a feast for avid avian-spotters' eyes.

Kaeng Krachan is so huge it is still largely unexplored. So far, over 250 bird species have been recorded in the tropical, broad-leaved evergreen forests of this national treasure. The best places for bird-watching are in the northern parts of the park, particularly around Huai Nam Yen. With a bit of patience, birds you're likely to see here include the rufous-bellied eagle, oriental hobby, wreath hornbill, silver-breasted broadbill, banded broadbill, yellow-vented pigeon, chestnut-breasted malkoha, great barbet, white-throated laughing thrush, white-hooded babbler, black-thighed falconet, brown fish owl, grey peacock-pheasant, bay woodpecker, grey treepie, large scimitar-babbler, blue pitta, yellow-bellied warbler and narcissus fly-catcher.

In Khao Sam Roi Yot National Park the best locales to look are around marshland areas, both along the coast and near the nature study centre. The park lies at the intersection of the East Asian and Australian fly ways, and as many as 300 migratory and resident bird species have been recorded here. Spotters can see the yellow bittern, cinnamon bittern, purple swamp hen, water rail, ruddy-breasted crane, bronze-winged jacana, grey heron, painted stork, whistling duck, spotted eagle and black-headed ibis. The park has Thailand's largest freshwater marsh, along with mangroves and mudflats, and is one of only three places in the country where the purple heron breeds.

You can pitch your own tent at camp sites near the Khao Daeng Viewpoint, at Hat Laem Sala or at Hat Sam Phraya. There are basic restaurants at all these locations, serving decent food priced between 30B and 120B.

Forestry Department (☎ in Bangkok 0 2562 0760; camp site per person 30B, bungalows per 5-6 people 1200-1400B, per 6-9 people 1600-2200B) The forestry department hires out yellow and green bungalows with metal roofing at Hat Laem Sala and at the visitors centre near the Khao Daeng viewpoint. Two-person tents are available for rent at these spots for 150B per night.

Dolphin Bay Resort (☎ 0 3255 9333; www.dolphinbayresort.com; 227 Moo 4, Phu Noi; r & bungalows 1290-11,000B; 🍷 🍷) This well-priced option is a great place to take the family. There's plenty of space to frolic around and the large swimming pool has a slippery slide. A wide range of trips is on offer to nearby islands and peaks around the national park.

our pick Brassiere Beach (☎ 0 3263 0555, 0 2511 1397; brassierebeach@hotmail.com; 210 Moo 5, Tambol Samroiyoed; villas from 4000B; 🍷 🍷) When you check into Brassiere Beach, the first thing you'll notice are two breastlike islands bobbing just off the coast (hence the name). The second thing you'll notice is the key to your room – it's attached to a colourful miniature bra. Each of the stunning Mediterranean-style villas has loads of personalised charm. When we visited, a Thai pop star was getting ready to shoot a music video on the premises.

Getting There & Away

The park is approximately 40km south of Hua Hin and is best seen by car or motorcycle. From Hua Hin take Hwy 4 (Th Phetkasem) to Pranburi. In Pranburi turn left at the main intersection and 4km later, at the police sub-station, turn right. From there, it's 19km to the park's entrance. If you're trying to reach the park from the south, there's an entrance off Hwy 4 – make a right at Km 286.5.

If you don't have your own wheels, catch a bus or train to Pranburi (possible from both Bangkok and Hua Hin, as well as other regional places). From Pranburi, take a sǒrng-tǎa-ou (50B, every half-hour during daylight hours) to Bang Pu, a small village inside the park. Bang Pu is virtually on Hat Laem Sala.

You can also hire a taxi for 350B, or a motorcycle taxi for 300B, from Pranburi all the way to the park. Be sure to mention you want to go to the *ù-tá-yahn hàang chàht* (national park) rather than Ban Sam Roi Yot.

PRACHUAP KHIRI KHAN & AROUND

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Prachuap town is the administrative centre for the province with the same name. The little burg is light on attractions, but it's an OK place to stretch your legs and grab a bite to eat. If you really need some exercise, hike the 418 steps to the golden-spired **Wat Thammikaram**, established by King Rama IV.

Hordes of monkeys provide endless entertainment along the way. The view from the top stretches west to Myanmar's border, only 11km away.

Fishing still provides the main source of income for the town's inhabitants and you're likely to see brightly painted vessels bobbing up and down the coastline like rainbow-coloured sea birds. Not surprisingly, the seafood here is excellent and considerably cheaper than at the more popular tourist hang-outs along the coast.

Uncrowded beaches and broad bays sweep north and south around town, and locals are always happy to see the few farang that make the effort to get off the well-trodden tourist trail. **Ao Manao** and **Hat Wa Kaw**, both south of Prachuap town, and **Ao Noi**, to the north, all have calm casuarina-lined dunes along quiet rolling waters.

Orientation & Information

The city of Prachuap Khiri Khan stretches along the 8km-long Ao Prachuap. While the bay isn't the best for swimming, a well-lit esplanade runs the length of the town, and is ideal for morning or twilight ambling.

There are two unsigned internet cafés (open 8am to 10pm) right next to each other on Th Sarachip, charging 30B per hour.

Bangkok Bank (cnr Th Maitri Ngam & Th Sarachip)

Kasikorn Bank (Th Phitak Chat)

Police station (☎ 0 3261 1148; Th Kong Kiat) Just west of Th Sarachip.

Post office (cnr Th Maitri Ngam & Th Suseuk) Right by a telephone office with internet access.

Tourist office (☎ 0 3261 1491; Th Chai Thaleh) At the northern end of town. The staff speak good English and offer detailed information of the town.

Sleeping

The accommodation options in Prachuap Khiri Khan leave a lot to be desired, but there are a few passable establishments here and some better ones a few kilometres north and south of town, in particular at Ao Manao.

Yuttichai Hotel (☎ 0 3261 1055; 115 Th Kong Kiat; r from 200B) Yuttichai offers large, old decent rooms with fan, and has friendly and informative staff. The squeaky clean units are fine for a kip, but the mattresses are on the stiff side.

Hadthong Hotel (☎ 0 3260 1050-6; www.hadthong.com; 21 Th Suseuk; r 700-1600B; 🍷) Right on the beach, this place has a light and airy lobby and is hands down the best option in town.

Some rooms have views of Khao Chong Krajok and others have windows facing the sea.

Eating

Prachuap Khiri Khan has a well-deserved reputation for fine seafood. One of the must-try specialities is *Blah sǎm-lee dǎat dee-o* – whole cotton fish that's sliced lengthwise, left to dry in the sun and then fried in a wok. It's often served with mango salad on the side, and it tastes way better than it sounds. An all-day market lines the street on Th Maitri Ngam daily, starting at around 6am.

Pan Phochana Restaurant (☎ 0 3261 1195; 11 Th Suseuk; dishes 40-300B; 🍷 lunch & dinner) This is one of the best seafood restaurants around town. Its speciality is *hǒr mòk hǒy* (ground-fish curry with steamed mussels).

Shiew O Cha (☎ 0 3260 1732; cnr Th Phitak Chat & Th Thetsaban Bamrung; meals 50-160B; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) This big, modern and airy Chinese-Thai restaurant offers plenty of alternatives to seafood and occasionally hosts live music. There's no roman-script sign but you can't miss the large cream and green building.

Getting There & Away

There are frequent air-con buses to/from Bangkok (around 250B, five hours), Hua Hin (around 100B, 1½ hours), Cha-am (around 100B, 2½ hours) and Phetchaburi (around 100B, three hours) leaving from Th Phitak Chat near the centre. For southern destinations such as Phuket or Krabi, hike 2km northwest out to the police station on the highway to catch passing buses (motorcycle taxis will take you for 40B). Ordinary buses to Hua Hin (70B), Bang Krut (60B), Bang Saphan (65B) and Chumphon (160B, 3½ hours) leave from the southeast corner of Th Thetsaban Bamrung and Th Phitak Chat.

There are frequent train services to/from Bangkok (2nd class 317B to 357B, 3rd class 250B, six hours). Trains also run to Ban Krut (one hour) and Bang Saphan Yai (1½ hours).

Getting Around

Prachuap is small enough to get around on foot, but you can hop on a motorcycle taxi around town for 30B. Other destinations include Ao Noi (50B) and Ao Manao (40B). At Ao Manao motorcycles aren't permitted past the gate unless both driver and passenger are wearing helmets.

STAR LIGHT, STAR BRIGHT, FIRST SQUID I SEE TONIGHT...

After the fiery equatorial sun plunges deep into the ocean, stars begin to emerge overhead and a strange concentration of greenish lights materialises on the horizon. The brilliant lights look like a flotilla of UFOs as they illuminate the night sky with their powerful beams – these are the squid fishermen of Thailand, and you are likely to see them ply their trade along the length of the country.

Squid are best fished after dark. The powerful lights mimic sunlight and are used to attract plankton and small fish that usually feed in the daytime to the surface. Squid, which feed on these organisms, follow their mobile meals into waiting nets. The lights are so powerful that they can be seen in satellite photos taken 800km from earth. That's a lot of candle power.

As fishing techniques improve collection rates, overfishing is becoming a growing problem in Thailand and the government has attempted to impose limits, much to the chagrin of fishermen. Regardless, squid fishing is a huge industry and you are likely to see these galaxies of bobbing beams for a while yet.

You can rent motorbikes in front of the Hadthong Hotel for 200B per day. The roads in the area are very good and it's a great way to see the surrounding beaches. Opposite the post office, bicycles can be rented for 100B per day.

BAN KRUT & BANG SAPHAN

หาดบ้านกรูด/บางสะพานใหญ่

Things start to get quiet between the administrative centres of Prachuap Khiri Khan and Chumphon. This wooded realm is dotted with plantations and rice fields that spread between the flaxen shoreline and the Myanmar border. The long strings of sand are popular holiday spots for weekend Thai tourists. During the week, the beaches are virtually deserted, save for a few colourful long-tail vessels.

The main beach of Hat Ban Krut is right beside a road, making the 10km beach handy to cars and services, but detracting from a 100% peaceful beach experience. Sitting atop a headland to the north, **Wat Tan Sai** has multiple golden spires that reach to the sky like a fantasy Disneyland castle. You can clamper up to the top for sensational views of the area. Just beyond, there's **Hat Sai Kaew**, which is quieter but slightly out of the way, making it a better beach experience.

Bang Saphan Yai, 20km south of the town, is starting to experience development. Accommodation is also strung along the sand between Bang Saphan Yai and Bang Saphan Noi, 15km further south. Islands off the coast to the south, including **Ko Thalu** and **Ko Sing**, offer good **snorkelling** and **diving** from the end of January to mid-May. Coral Hotel in Bang Saphan Yai can arrange half-day

diving excursions to these islands, as well as outings to virtually every site in the region.

Sleeping & Eating

There are plenty of places to spend the night in Ban Krut and Bang Saphan. Big-spenders won't find five-star palaces, and penny-pinchers will be hard-pressed to track down dirt-cheap shacks, but there are a couple of unique options within this zone of decidedly midrange places. If you know where you want to stay, it's best to book ahead – public transport is a bit rough around these parts, and the resort of your choice can probably arrange some of your transport. Virtually all beachside accommodation options offer a place to eat.

BAN KRUT

Banito Beach Resort (☎ 0 2964 2175; www.banito.beach.com; bungalows 1300-9000B; 🏠 🚿) Colourful Banito feels like it was plucked from a Caribbean island and set down in sleepy Ban Krut. Accommodation is arranged in houses along a long street that connects the ocean to a large swimming pool bizarrely placed at the back of the resort. Have a look at a couple of rooms before plopping down your bags – some options have been renovated more recently than others.

Rachavadee Resort (☎ 0 3269 5155; www.rachavadee.com; bungalows 1800-4800B; 🏠 🚿) Rachavadee offers a rugged serenity within its faux-brick walls and skyscraping cantilevered roofs. Free bus transfers are also on offer.

Baan Klang Aow Beach Resort (☎ 0 3269 5123; www.baanklangaowresort.com; bungalows 1800-5200B; 🏠 🚿 🚶) Further south on the same beach

as Suan Bankrut, the one- and two-bedroom bungalows here have large verandas and are hidden in leafy thickets. Bicycles, kayaks and two swimming pools will get you hungry for your next meal at the resort's scenic restaurant.

Suan Bankrut Beach Resort (☎ 0 3269 5217; www.suanbankrut.com; bungalows 2200-6400B; 🏠 🚿) Suan Bankrut offers charming bungalows with plenty of thatch that squat beneath furry palms.

BANG SAPHAN

Vanveena Hotel (☎ 0 3269 1251; www.vanveena.com; r 270-1500B; 🏠 🚿) Vanveena's rooms are noticeably spartan, with a few stencil drawings to liven up the walls, but this cookie-cutter hotel is beach-adjacent and there's a charming bamboo restaurant on the sand.

Western Hotel (☎ 0 3269 1015; r 600-700B; 🏠 🚿) If the bungalows along Bang Saphan are full, try the Western Hotel. The drab décor feels a bit like 'Soviet Gulag takes a tropical holiday', but the rooms are clean enough if you're on a tight budget.

Coral Hotel (☎ 0 3269 1667; www.coral-hotel.com; 171 Moo 9; r 1525B, bungalows 2730-3525B; 🏠 🚿) Set amid a coconut grove, this upmarket French-managed hotel is right on the beach. There's a huge pool, a very good restaurant and all rooms have TV, fridge and hot water. Fill your days with water sports, or exploring the area on an organised tour. Four-person bungalows are also available for families.

Sailom Resort (☎ 0 3269 1003; www.sailomresort.bangsaphan.com; r 1900-4900B; 🏠 🚿) Manicured grounds, a huge swimming pool, Asian chic décor – this new spot has certainly shaken things up in sleepy Bang Saphan.

I-Ta-Lay (☎ 08 9905 8512; dishes 40-150B; 🍽️ lunch & dinner) A small white cottage, just south of Coral Hotel, I-Ta-Lay is a tasty local joint right along the beach. Not a drop of English is spoken, but the seafood is great and there are plenty of smiles. There are also a couple of bungalows out the back for 1500B per night.

Getting There & Around

From Chumphon, there are many connections to Ban Krut and Bang Saphan, departing Chumphon every day at 8am, 9.30am, 11.45am, 1pm, 4pm, 6pm, 7pm and 8pm (70B). Buses from every direction usually stop in front of the Rama Inn, a white hotel

in the heart of Bang Saphan. The towns are positioned along the main train artery between Bangkok and the south; however, you will need to hire a motorcycle taxi to get you to the beach.

There is one **motorcycle shop** (☎ 0 3269 1059) in Bang Saphan Yai that rents out automatic and manual bikes (250B and 300B respectively). Its rows of scooters are hard to miss. Other than that, transport can be a bit of a problem. Once you get to the beaches, however, most resorts can hook you up with bike rental for a similar price.

When booking transport, don't confuse Bang Saphan Yai with Bang Saphan Noi, which is 15km further south.

CHUMPHON

อ.เมืองชุมพร

pop 81,700

Chumphon doesn't pretend to be a destination in itself. The air is thick with anticipation: tourists are eager to arrive in Ko Tao, or they're wrapping up an island getaway and want to get back to Bangkok. Either way, Chumphon feels like a border town. There's even a big, vanilla archway near the train station welcoming passengers to Thailand's south. The sleepy town has embraced its status as a link in the transport chain – it's one of the few cities in Thailand with more travel agencies than 7-Elevens.

Information

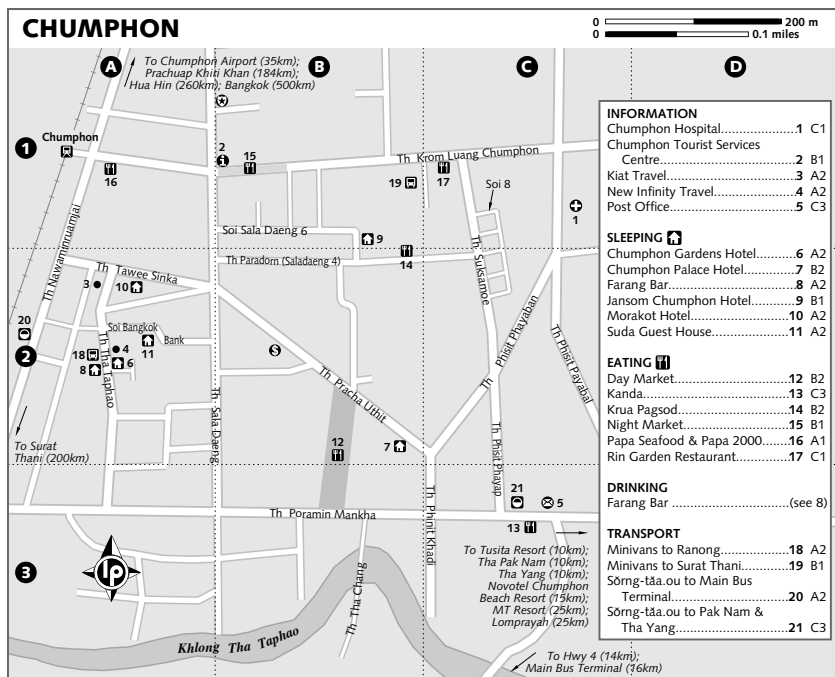
There are dozens of travel agencies around town that can organise all of your booking needs, such as transport, lodging, even scuba lessons on Ko Tao. Most agencies offer internet access for 40B per hour, and complimentary wi-fi for those with laptops. There are numerous banks and ATMs scattered around town.

Chumphon Hospital (☎ 0 7750 3672; Th Phisit Phayaban) The main hospital in town.

Chumphon Tourist Services Centre (Th Sala Daeng) This bureau has recently moved to its present location, and the office hours are a bit unstable. The agencies usually offer better tourism details.

Kiat Travel (☎ 0 7750 2127; www.chumphonguide.com; 115 Th Tha Taphao) One of the better full-service agencies. Friendly and knowledgeable staff who are more than happy to answer questions.

New Infinity Travel (☎ 0 7757 0176; new_infinity@hotmail.com; 68/2 Th Tha Taphao) Extremely helpful and friendly agency with loads of information on the area.



Purchase a second-hand book for some entertainment on the journey to your next destination.

Post office (☎ 0 7751 1012; Th Poramin Mankha) In the eastern part of town.

Festivals & Events

The city hosts the **Chumphon Marine Festival** some time in March – it features cultural and folk art exhibits, a sailboarding competition at Hat Thung Wua Laen and a marathon. **Lang Suan Buddha Image Parade & Boat Race Festival** is a five-day festival that includes a procession of temple boats and a boat race on the Mae Nam Lang Suan. It's held in October.

Sleeping

The accommodation options in Chumphon are quite utilitarian, as the city is mostly used as a transfer centre. There are a few resorty places a few kilometres away along the coast.

CITY CENTRE

Farang Bar (☎ 0 7750 1003; farangbar@yahoo.com; 69/36 Th Tha Taphao; r 150B) The cheap rooms at Farang Bar could definitely use a fix-up, but the

hip staff foster a great backpacker vibe, and they can answer virtually every travel query. Showers cost 20B.

Suda Guest House (☎ 0 7750 4366; 8 Soi Bangkok Bank; r 200-500B; ☎) A fantastic little find hidden within the urban chaos, this little guesthouse has a homey vibe and a low price tag. The owner, Suda, speaks perfect English and keeps her rooms spick-and-span. It's best to book ahead.

Morakot Hotel (☎ 0 7750 3628-32; fax 0 7757 0196; Th Tawee Sinka; r 310-600B; ☎) The staff here don't speak much English, but the rooms are spotless and some have great views. It's in a large green structure and the reception is located behind a motorcycle showroom that rents out motorcycles for 150B per day.

Chumphon Palace Hotel (☎ 0 7757 1715-22; 328/15 Th Pracha Uthit; r 450-600B; ☎) Keep an eye out for a purple sign saying 'Hotel', and you'll find the pink, frilly Chumphon Palace Hotel hiding just off the main drag. Upstairs, the rooms are clean and crisp, and the beds have rose-coloured ruffles like at granny's house.

Chumphon Gardens Hotel (☎ 0 7750 6888; 66/1 Th Tha Taphao; r 540-700B, ste 2000B; ☎) The new kid

on the block, Chumphon Gardens is the go-to spot for businesspeople passing through town. The lobby is a bit drab, but the rooms are sparkling clean.

Jansom Chumphon Hotel (☎ 0 7750 2506-11; 188/138 Th Sala Daeng; r 550-1600B; ☎) From the outside, Jansom could double as an abandoned warehouse, but the interior has some passable rooms – just make sure you find one that doesn't reek of stale air-con. The advertised rates are ludicrously high; however, you'll often find touts at the train station offering units with TV and hot water for around 350B.

SEASIDE

MT Resort (☎ 0 7755 8153; www.mt resort-chumphon.com; Hat Tummakam Noi; bungalows incl breakfast 1500B; ☎) This low-key hang-out, right beside the Lomprayah ferry pier, is a scenic option if you'd rather stay outside of Chumphon's grimy downtown core while waiting for the boat to Ko Tao. There are free kayaks for wandering around the nearby islands and mangroves. Call ahead to organise transport, or grab a cab for around 300B.

Novotel Chumphon Beach Resort (☎ 0 7752 9529; info@novotel-chumphon.com; 110 Moo 4, Hat Paradonpab; r from 2500B; ☎ ☎ ☎) The brand new Novotel is breathing new life into Chumphon's quiet coast nearby. Despite its chain status, this plush getaway is a great place to hang your hat if you want to turn a layover into a mini vacation.

Tusita Resort (☎ 0 7757 9073; www.tusita resort.com; 259/9 Moo 1, Paktako, Tungtako; bungalows 6900-18,500B; ☎ ☎ ☎) A worthy option if you're not yet ready to hit the islands, this Indian-style resort features large teak *sāh-lah* dotting the wind-swept sand, and private bungalows hidden among a patchwork of coconut palms and jungle vines. Tusita is 10km from the city centre – take a taxi to Kaaoo Pii junction (30B to 45B) and then call the resort for a free pick-up. There are no public phones, so you'll need a mobile phone or ask to use someone else's.

Eating & Drinking

Krua Pagsod (☎ 0 7757 1731; 110/32 Th Paradorn; dishes 50-200B; ☎ lunch & dinner) Delicious vegetarian options are available at this prim, modern establishment that blows cool gusts of air-conditioning over weary travellers.

Papa Seafood & Papa 2000 (☎ 0 1569 6161, 0 7751 1972; 188/181 Th Krom Luang Chumphon; dishes 80-200B; ☎ lunch & dinner) This large patio restaurant right in the heart of town dishes out tasty

barbecued seafood and steak under flickering Christmas lights. As the evening turns to night, Papa fills up with locals who toss back a few beers before heading to the adjacent Papa 2000 discotheque.

Farang Bar (☎ 0 7750 1003; 69/36 Th Tha Taphao) A good place to meet other backpackers in transit, Farang Bar has cheap eats and frosty beer in a tiki-torched ambience.

Rin Garden Restaurant (☎ 0 7751 1531; ☎ lunch & dinner) and **Kanda** (☎ 0 7751 1707; ☎ lunch & dinner) both have good local reputations if you want to chow down off the tourist trail.

Chumphon's **night market** (Th Krom Luang Chumphon) can be a little hit-or-miss depending on the day of the week (and the weather), but when things start to get moving, it can be a good distraction while waiting for the next link in your chain of transport. The food isn't fantastic, but it's dirt-cheap. A bustling day market runs north-south between Th Pracha Uthit and Th Poramin Mankha.

Getting There & Away

There are Lomprayah and Seatran Discovery bus/boat packages from Bangkok to Ko Tao, Ko Samui and Ko Phan-Ngan via Chumphon. Taking a train/boat combination is another way of getting to these islands. If you're arriving in Chumphon from Ko Tao, the Lomprayah shuttle from the ferry drops passengers off at either Fame Travel Agency or New Infinity, depending on the day.

BOAT

The small island of Ko Tao (p227), north of Ko Samui and Ko Pha-Ngan, can be reached by boat from one of three piers south of town. Services continue to Samui and Pha-Ngan.

The *Lomprayah Express* catamaran (550B, 1½ hours) leaves from Tha Tummakam (25km from town) at 7am and 1pm, and returns from Ko Tao at 10am and 3pm. Transfers between Chumphon and Tha Tummakam are included in the ticket price. The *Songsrem Express* (400B, three hours) leaves Tha Yang (7km from town) at 7am, returning from Ko Tao at 2.30pm. Most travel agencies will provide free transfers to this pier as well.

There is also a midnight boat (200B) that leaves from Tha Pak Nam (10km from town) and arrives at Ko Tao at 6am. Consider nixing this option if there's a chance of rain. A shared taxi to Tha Pak Nam costs 50B. Sörng-taa-ou to Tha Pak Nam or Tha Yang are 15B.

BUS

The main bus terminal is inconveniently located on the main highway, 16km from Chumphon – it's better to take the train if you are arriving from Bangkok. To get here you can catch a local bus or *sǒrng-tǎa-ou* from a stop on Th Nawaminruamjai for 20B. There are several buses travelling daily from Bangkok to Chumphon: one VIP bus (500B, seven hours, departs 9.30pm), three regular air-conditioned buses (around 350B, seven hours) and three 2nd-class buses (250B). From Bangkok, all buses leave from the Southern bus terminal. There are several private bus companies running buses to Bangkok for around 400B; tickets can be bought at any travel agency and include a free pick-up from your hotel.

Figure on around 1B per kilometre when paying for your ticket on government buses. Destinations include Hua Hin (230B, five hours), Bang Saphan (100B, two hours), Prachuap Khiri Khan (160B, 3½ hours), Ranong (130B, three hours), Surat Thani (170B, 3½ hours), Krabi (270B, eight hours), Phuket (320B, eight hours) and Hat Yai (310B, 10 hours). Tickets can be bought at travel agencies.

MINIVAN

Air-conditioned minivans run hourly to/from Ranong (100B to 200B, three hours) and leave from a stop on Th Tha Taphao. Half-hourly

minivans to/from Surat Thani (150B to 200B, 3½ hours) run all day and leave from a stop just off Th Krom Luang Chumphon.

TRAIN

The southern line has several trains a day to/from Bangkok. If you catch the train in mid-afternoon, you will arrive in Chumphon in time to find a room and crash for the night. Early evening trains arrive in the wee hours of the morning; however, you may miss your connection to Ko Tao and be forced to lounge around Chumphon until the afternoon ferry. If this is the case, scout out a travel agency that has comfy chairs and plenty of space for your luggage.

Trains to and from towns all along the southern line leave and arrive several times a day. Third-class trains head out to Prachuap Khiri Khan (40B, three hours), Surat Thani (45B, three hours) and Hat Yai (90B, 12 hours). Southbound rapid and express trains – the only trains with 1st and 2nd class – are much less frequent and can be difficult to book out of Chumphon in the high season (November to April).

Getting Around

Motorcycle taxis around town cost a flat 20B per trip. Most travel agencies can arrange motorbike rentals, as can the Morakot Hotel (p186), which has dozens of bikes sitting around the lobby.