

Central Thailand



CENTRAL THAILAND

Buffering Bangkok from the sea and the hinterlands, this fertile river plain is Thailand's cultural heartland. It has birthed rice crops without coaxing, and cultivated a distinct Thai culture centred around the seasonal patterns of the region's 'mother waters'. The rivers brought rich mineral deposits from the northern mountains and sea traders from the oceans. Many of the ancient Southeast Asian kingdoms, like the Dvaravati and the Khmers, reached across the once undivided continent into modern-day central Thailand to plant their own cultural traditions in this earthly womb.

Due north of Bangkok is Ayuthaya, the former Thai capital. Touring the ruined temples on bicycle and learning the names of the illustrious kings will put you close to the Thai psyche. Further north is the little town of Lopburi, a pit-stop for journeys to Chiang Mai. The downtown nurses many crumbling ruins and a resident tribe of monkeys.

Heading northwest from Bangkok leads to the mountain range that climbs into Myanmar. In the wet season, rain feeds foaming waterfalls and keeps the dragon-scaled peaks lush. Kanchanaburi is the base town for organised expeditions into the surrounding wilderness; it also played an unlikely role in WWII when occupying Japanese forces used POW labour to build a railway through the demanding terrain.

Penetrating deeper into the mountain passes, Thong Pha Phum and Sangkhlaburi are two outpost towns, nearly forgotten by the outside world and blissfully undeveloped. This is the end of the line, an attraction in itself, as the Myanmar (Burma) border limits crossings to day-trips only. The cultural story continues beyond these political conventions, but you'll have to save that trip for another time.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Visiting the ruins of **Ayuthaya** (p194), Unesco World Heritage site and former capital of Siam
- Cycling to the WWII memorials in easy-going **Kanchanaburi** (p208)
- Climbing the turquoise waterfall at **Erawan National Park** (p217)
- Snapping pictures of the mischievous **monkey gangs** (p203) in Lopburi
- Escaping the crowds with a weekday trip to sleepy **Thong Pha Phum** (p220)
- Being an 'end-of-the-road' traveller with a trip through rustic **Sangkhlaburi** (p222) and beyond to **Three Pagodas Pass** (p224)



CENTRAL THAILAND

Climate

Central Thailand experiences the country's three seasons in distinct measure; it can dump rain in Sangkhlaburi for days while Kanchanaburi only sees sun. It is hot from February to June, rainy from June to roughly October, and cool (relatively speaking) from October to January: one constant is the humidity. Within the region there are some variations. During the rainy season, Sangkhlaburi is inundated with rain, days and days of it, while Kanchanaburi might only see a few afternoon sprinkles. Because of altitude, it can be significantly cooler in Sangkhlaburi than in other parts of the region. Ayuthaya and Lopburi sit in a wide-open plain that receives similar amounts of rain and heat as Bangkok.

National Parks

Kanchanaburi Province is the wildest of the region and its mountain range once acted as a natural barrier to Myanmar to the west. Within the province there are five national parks: popular Erawan and Sai Yok, and lesser visited Si Nakharin, Chaloem Ratanakosin and Khao Laem.

Language

The people of central Thailand share a common dialect that is considered 'standard' Thai simply because Bangkok, the seat of power, happens to be in the region. High concentrations of Chinese are found in the cities of the central provinces since this is where a large number of Chinese immigrants started out as farmers and labourers and then later as merchants. Significant numbers of Mon and Karen live in Kanchanaburi Province. Pockets of Lao and Phuan – the descendents of war captives who were forcibly resettled following Thai raids into Laos over the centuries – can be found in all three provinces.

Getting There & Away

Most people will leave Bangkok on a bus or train headed to destinations in central

FAST FACTS

- **Best Time to Visit** October to December
- **Population** 3.1 million

Thailand. Buses are faster, more modern and arguably more comfortable. Trains are slower, more scenic and sometimes more social. Central Thailand is also connected to the north and northeast via train.

AYUTHAYA PROVINCE

AYUTHAYA

พระนครศรีอยุธยา

pop 90,500

The sacred city, the sacked city, Ayuthaya is complexly intertwined with Thai nationalism and religion. As the former royal capital, Ayuthaya earned the emerging Thai nation a place among the great empires of Southeast Asia, and placement on the map used by the international merchants sailing between India and China during the era of the trade winds. As a city that was destroyed by an invading army, Ayuthaya is eulogised like a slain hero.

But what is recounted in history and legend is not easily recognisable today. The ancient monuments retain little of their bygone majesty, with only a handful in recognisable forms. The modern city that grew among the rubble is busy and provincial, adding a distracting element of chaos to the meditative mood of crumbled kingdoms.

Still, the city is a necessary stop on the culture trail, because of its position in the historical hierarchy and because its story as a kingdom is more approachable and better recorded than Thailand's other ancient capital, Sukhothai. Ayuthaya's proximity to Bangkok also makes it an alternative base for recent arrivals who find the modern capital just plain crummy.

History

Ayuthaya was the Siamese royal capital from 1350 to 1767. Prior to the emergence of the Ayuthaya kingdom, the town was a Khmer outpost. The city was named after Ayodhya (Sanskrit for 'unassailable' or 'undefeatable'), the home of Rama in the Indian epic *Ramayana*. Its full Thai name is Phra Nakhon Si Ayuthaya (Sacred City of Ayuthaya).

Although the Sukhothai period is often referred to as the 'golden age' of Thailand, in many ways the Ayuthaya era was the kingdom's true historical apex – at least in terms of sovereignty (which extended well into present-day Laos, Cambodia and

Myanmar), dynastic endurance (over 400 years) and world recognition. Thirty-three kings of various Siamese dynasties reigned in Ayuthaya until it was conquered by the Burmese. During its heyday, Thai culture and international commerce flourished in the kingdom, and Ayuthaya was courted by Dutch, Portuguese, French, English, Chinese and Japanese merchants. Ayuthaya's population had reached one million by the end of the 17th century and virtually all foreign visitors claimed it to be the most illustrious city they had ever seen.

In 1767, after numerous conflicts with the Burmese, the city was sacked by the invading army, the golden treasures looted and the Ayuthaya royals were carted off as prisoners. The nervous system of the emerging Thai nation fractured into competing factions until General Taksin united the territories and established a new capital near Bangkok a mere three years later. The Burmese eventually abandoned their Thai conquest without establishing a satellite ruler. Ayuthaya then developed into a provincial trading town while its once magnificent monuments succumbed to gravity and looters. Concerted efforts to restore the old temples were undertaken by various Bangkok kings and then more formally by the Fine Arts Department starting in the 1950s. In 1991 the ancient city was designated a Unesco World Heritage site.

Today the city sees a steady supply of cultural tourists ranging from independent couples cycling between ruins to busloads of escorted package tourists. Despite these visitors, the city is surprisingly untouristy and still very rough around the edges. The surrounding area is transitioning from agricultural to manufacturing and new factories are replacing old rice paddies.

Orientation

Central Ayuthaya is surrounded on all sides by water, having been built at the confluence of three rivers (Mae Nam Chao Phraya, Mae Nam Pa Sak and the smaller Mae Nam Lopburi). A wide canal links them, encircling the town. The town's historic sites are often classified as being 'on the island' (within the boundaries of the rivers) or 'off the island' (on the opposite river banks). The most prominent sites are on the island, except for a few temples accessible via ferry. Accom-

modation and some transport options are located within central Ayuthaya, while the train station and the long-distance bus station are located off the island in the eastern part of town.

Information

EMERGENCY

Tourist Police (☎ emergency 1155; Th Si Sanphet)

INTERNET ACCESS

The ever-changing internet shops clustered on and around Soi 1, Th Naresuan offer decent connects for 30B per hour.

MEDICAL SERVICES

Ayuthaya Hospital (☎ 0 3524 1446; cnr Th U Thong & Th Si Sanphet) Has an emergency centre and several English-speaking doctors.

MONEY

ATMs are abundant in the city, especially along Th Naresuan near the Amporn Shopping Centre.

Bank of Ayuthaya (Th U Thong near Th Naresuan)

Kasikorn Bank (Th Naresuan)

Siam City Bank (Th U Thong)

Siam Commercial Bank (Th Naresuan)

POST

Main post office (Th U Thong; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat) Has an international telephone service, open 8am to 8pm, upstairs.

VISUALISING THE PAST

Like the famous Angkor monuments in present-day Cambodia, Ayuthaya and its temple ruins were an earthly re-creation of the Hindu-Buddhist cosmology. Based on ancient texts, these religious traditions visualised a universe composed of different vertical and horizontal planes roughly corresponding to heaven, earth and hell. In the centre of the universe was Mt Sumeru (or Mt Meru in Hindu texts), where Brahma and other important deities resided and around which the sun and moon orbited.

True to the architectural traditions of the region, Ayuthaya as a whole reflected this sacred geography due to its island location, an intentional invocation of Mt Sumeru. Each of Ayuthaya's ancient temple complexes were a smaller mandala of this microcosm. Mt Sumeru was symbolised by the central *chedi* (conical-shaped Buddhist monument) or *prang* (tall corn-cob shaped tower indicative of the Khmer style), and the minor *chedi* placed at the cardinal directions of surrounding verandas that represented minor peaks and oceans encircling Sumeru.

The architectural representation of Mt Sumeru changed throughout the monument-building career of Ayuthaya to reflect different external influences. The earliest representations (best found at Wat Ratburana) employed the artistic style of a *prang*. After the fall of Sukhothai, the Ayuthaya kings developed the bell-shaped *chedi* (best viewed at Wat Phra Si Sanphet). Around the 17th century until the fall of the city, the Khmer style was again revitalised, most stunningly at Wat Chai Wattanaram (p199).

TOURIST INFORMATION

Tourist Authority of Thailand (TAT; ☎ 0 3524 6076, 0 3524 1672; 108/22 Th Si Sanphet; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm) Tourist information is available from the large white municipal building, which is located beside the traditional Thai-style houses also labelled as TAT (these are administrative buildings). The free interactive display upstairs offers a comprehensive introduction to the history of Ayuthaya.

Dangers & Annoyances

If you're on a bike, motorised or otherwise, watch out for unpredictable traffic, uneven roads and bag-snatchers. Daypacks in unprotected front baskets are easy to grab at traffic stop lights.

Also, be wary of the local dog packs. They won't take notice of you unless you cross into their territory, which will trigger a shrill chorus of barking, exposed fangs and even biting. One dog-avoidance trick is to not catch their eye.

Sights

Over 400 temples were constructed in the ancient city of Ayuthaya. The largest concentration is referred to as the Ayuthaya Historical Park, which was later designated a Unesco World Heritage site. Very little remains of the once monumental temples, but the rows of roofless columns and sagging steps create an ambience of great imaginative wandering. Even fewer Buddha images

RUIN THE DARK

If you think the remains of an ancient era are amazing by day, you should see them at night. Some of Ayuthaya's most impressive ruins take on an other-worldly glow after dark when they are dramatically illuminated. Wat Ratburana, Wat Chai Wattanaram, Wat Phra Ram and Wat Mahathat are all lit up from 7pm to 9pm. The grounds are not open, but it is still worth it to walk by or enjoy dinner at a nearby restaurant.

of merit for a deceased royal elder rather than for glorification of the present ruler.

Wat Thammikarat

วัดธรรมิการาช

To the west of Wat Ratburana, this temple sees fewer visitors and is a pleasant place to sit among the ruins. The most prominent feature is a central *chedi* surrounded by *singha* (guardian lion) sculptures. It is believed by the local people that the temple pre-dates the Ayuthaya period, a claim unsupported by architectural evidence.

Wat Phra Ram

วัดพระราม

Displaying a sturdy *prang*, **Wat Phra Ram** (admission 30B) has a complicated lineage, indicative of much of Ayuthaya's chronicled structures. Claims of construction are often attributed to numerous kings throughout a 300-year period. Some accounts state that this was the cremation site of King U Thong (the founder of the Ayuthaya kingdom).

Ayuthaya Historical Study Centre

ศูนย์ศึกษาประวัติศาสตร์อยุธยา

Although the city's temples are in ruins, it is the history of the relatively modern kingdom that engages cultural visitors. One of the best places to begin digesting the ancient city's role in international commerce and in domination of the neighbouring city-states is at the **Ayuthaya Historical Study Centre** (☎ 0 3524 5124; Th Rotchana; admission adult/student 100/50B; ☎ 9am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, to 5pm Sat & Sun). Funded by the Japanese government, the centre is filled with modern and interesting models, and displays outlining city development, port, administration, lifestyles and traditions. This is a good place to start before a solo exploration of the temple ruins.

Chao Sam Phraya National Museum

พิพิธภัณฑสถานแห่งชาติเจ้าสามพระยา

Like the Egyptian pyramids, the temple's *chedi* were royal tombs, containing the ashes of the deceased (a departure from the Egyptian tradition) and important golden treasures. Very little of the ceremonial jewellery and ornaments traditionally buried with the ashes of the kings survived into the present day due to rampant thievery, but what was salvageable from the temples was put on display at this **museum** (admission 30B; ☎ 9am-4pm Wed-Sun). Exhibitions include gold treasures that were originally kept in the *chedi* of Wat Phra Mahathat and Wat Ratburana. There are also displays of Buddhist sculpture, from varying artistic styles, including many distinctive Ayuthaya-style pieces. Don't miss the traditional teak house on the western edge of the property.

Chantharakasem National Museum

พิพิธภัณฑสถานแห่งชาติจันทระเกษม

This national **museum** (Th U Thong; admission 30B; ☎ 9am-4pm Wed-Sun) houses a collection of Ayuthaya artefacts and devotional items. The physical home of the museum is the greater draw; it is located in Wang Chan Kasem (Chan Kasem Palace), a former palace built for King Naresuan by his father in 1577. During the Bangkok period, King Rama IV had this palace rebuilt and established as a museum in 1936.

OFF THE ISLAND

On the opposite side of the river-like moat that surrounds central Ayuthaya are several famous temples, as well as ethnic communities that defined the former kingdom's international prestige. You can reach some of the sites easily on a good bicycle, but others will require a motorbike. Evening boat tours around the island are another alternative for visiting the highlights.

Wat Phanan Choeng

วัดพนัญเชิง

One of the major Ayuthaya highlights, this busy and modern-looking **temple** (admission 20B) is a popular pilgrimage destination for weekenders from Bangkok. Although the original temple allegedly pre-dates the Ayuthaya era, many Thai-Chinese regard this temple with special reverence because of its later benefactor Sam Po Kong (Zheng He),

a Chinese explorer who visited Ayuthaya in 1407. As an emissary of the Chinese imperial court, Sam Po established diplomatic and trading relations all along his sea voyage, which extended as far west as Africa. For many local worshippers, the famous Buddha image (Luang Por Phanan Choeng or Phra Phanan Choeng) is often directly associated with the explorer himself. From an artistic perspective, the 19m-high sitting Buddha image displays many facial characteristics of the U-Thong style (characterised by double lips). A gallery of 84,000 Buddha images sit in crevices that line the walls of the *wihāan* (large hall), directly behind the large Buddha. There is also a smaller Chinese temple on the grounds.

In the ordination hall are three Buddha images (showing a central U-Thong image flanked by two Sukhothai images). The mural directly behind the altar depicts the Buddhist version of heaven, earth and hell. On the opposite wall from the altar another mural depicts the legend of Mae Thorani, the earth goddess, who helped dispel temptations during Buddha's journey to enlightenment. She did so by wringing out a flood from her long hair and washing away the demons and tempters.

The primary activity for the entire temple is merit making rather than architectural surveying, and the road leading to the temple is busy with vendors selling bags of fish that are ritualistically released into the river.

The easiest way to get to Wat Phanan Choeng from central Ayuthaya is by ferry (5B) from the pier near Phom Phet Fortress. You can take a bicycle with you on the boat.

Foreigner Quarter

Due south of the island is the historical district of the kingdom's former diplomatic entourage, many of whom arrived during the reign of King Narai. Japanese, Chinese, Dutch, Portuguese and other foreign representatives came to the Ayuthaya court to encourage trade, serve as advisors or assist in defending the city. One of the eeriest remnants of the foreigners' footprint is the cemetery at the **Portuguese Settlement**. An open pit displays the petrified skeletons of Portuguese residents, many of whom died of small pox. The traditional Thai spirit house on the grounds contains figures of St Joseph and St Paul. To the west of the Portuguese Settlement is

Ayuthaya's **Muslim district**, a community that dates back to ancient times when many Muslim traders called at the Ayuthaya port.

Wat Chai Wattanaram

วัดไชยวัฒนาราม

Everyone's favourite sunset shot, **Wat Chai Wattanaram** (admission 30B) is one of Ayuthaya's most impressive homages to the Angkor/Khmer style. A central *prang* is flanked by minor *prang* arranged in each cardinal direction, in a prime riverside setting. The temple is said to have been built in the 17th century by King Prasat Thong in honour of his mother and was extensively restored in the 1980s. These ruins can be reached by boat or by bicycle via a nearby bridge.

Phu Khao Thong

เจดีย์ภูเขาทอง

Northwest of town, this landscape-dominating *chedi*, translated as Golden Mount, was originally built during a 15-year occupation of Ayuthaya by the Burmese (prior to the 1767 invasion and collapse). The statue in front of the *chedi* depicts King Naresuan, the great Ayuthaya liberator, surrounded by almost comical statues of fighting cocks. According to common lore, Naresuan had been taken to Burma as a hostage where he proved his mettle in a cockfight match with one of the Burmese princes. He later returned to Ayuthaya and kicked out the occupying forces.

Wat Na Phra Meru

วัดหน้าพระเมรุ

This **temple** (Phra Mehn; admission 30B) escaped destruction during the Burmese attack in 1767 because it was used as the invading army's headquarters. It was also the site where the Burmese king was fatally injured after firing a defective cannon. His death ended the sacking of Ayuthaya.

Restoration of the temple, which was originally built in 1546, took place during the reign of King Rama III of the Bangkok era. The primary draw here is the main *bòt* (central sanctuary), which contains an amazing carved wooden ceiling depicting the Buddhist heavens, with Mt Sumeru in the centre. There is also a splendid Ayuthaya-era Buddha image sitting 6m high. The unique characteristics of the Ayuthaya artistic style was to depict Buddha as a king; also note how detailed and

human-like the facial features are, another departure from traditional Buddha images. Inside a smaller *wihāan* (large hall) behind the *bòt* is a green-stone Buddha from Sri Lanka; it's in a European pose (sitting in a chair), and is said to be 1300 years old. The walls of the *wihāan* show traces of 18th- or 19th-century murals.

Elephant Kraal

เขานิเวศน์ช้าง

In olden times Thais resupplied their stocks of elephants with an annual roundup, in which wild herds were chased into captivity for use as beasts of burden or as war machines. This restored stockade (known in Thai as a *kraal*) is an example of the enclosed structures once used as the final destination of the roundups. A huge fence of teak logs planted at 45-degree angles keep the elephants in; the king had a special raised pavilion from which to observe the thrilling event. The last elephant roundup staged here occurred in 1903.

The *kraal* is about 4km from the centre of town, so you can either ride a bicycle here or hire a *túk-túk* (motorised three-wheeled pedicab) for 50B.

Baan Th Dusit

บ้านถนนดุสิต

East of the island and just beyond the train station is another collection of ruins in a more pastoral setting than central Ayuthaya. Tourist groups are rare out here and most of the grounds are kept trimmed by local farmers' livestock.

Wat Maheyong is an operational temple with a popular weekend meditation retreat held in a leafy courtyard beside the temple ruins. The historic portion of the temple was built in 1438. The outstanding *chedi* is bell shaped and was once surrounded by a ring of carved elephants statues, a unique feature in Ayuthaya. A brick walkway connects the ruins to nearby Khlong Maheyong; the middle way was reserved for the king.

Wat Kudi Dao is charmingly ruined with grasses sprouting between the roofless structures. Looking closer at the windows and gates you'll see an impressive amount of surviving details, often described as French architectural influences. Continue past the graveyard of spirit houses to **Wat Ayuthaya**, which has a bell-shaped *chedi* on a square pedestal, an early Ayuthaya characteristic.

Wat Yai Chai Mongkhon

วัดใหญ่ชัยมงคล

Built by King U Thong in 1357, **Wat Yai** is a quiet old place that was once a famous meditation wat. According to some legends, the monks at this temple were consulted by conspirators for an auspicious time to stage a royal coup. Most impressive, though, is the large 7m-long reclining Buddha, obviously enjoying the sunshine. The temple is south-east of the town proper and is best reached by motorised transport.

Tours

Informal boat tours (from 200B per hour) can be arranged at the pier near the night market or at various guesthouses. Several guesthouses offer night tours of the ruins (100B per person). These tours can be cancelled at the last minute if not enough people sign up.

If you'd like more indepth coverage of Ayuthaya history, talk to TAT (p195) about hiring a guide.

Sleeping

Most of Ayuthaya's budget options are clustered around the mini-backpacker ghetto of Soi 1, Th Naresuan, and are simple lodgings in converted private homes.

There isn't a lot of value in Ayuthaya's midrange and top-end places. The majority of clientele in this range are package tourists who aren't independently shopping for accommodation, so there is little incentive to keep quarters spiffy. The following prices in this range are typical rack-rates. Some top-end places offer huge discounts (up to 50%) during the low season (April to November). Few budget or midrange places offer discounts.

BUDGET

PU Guest House (☎ 0 3525 1213; 20/1 Soi Thaw Kaw Saw; s/d from 200/300B; 🚻 📺) Just off the main drag, this clean and friendly place offers a low-key social atmosphere and comfortable rooms. Those with air-con, TV and mini-bar are particularly good value.

Sherwood Guest House (☎ 0 666 0813; 21/25 Th Dechawat; r 280-380B; 🚻 📺) Run by an expat, who has become a defacto expert, Sherwood's café has become a second home for other resident foreigners in town. Rooms are ordinary, with shared bathroom, and the pool

is available to nonguests for a day-use fee (adult/child 45/30B).

Baan Lotus Guest House (☎ 0 3525 1988; 20 Th Pamaphrao; r 500B) Hands-down this is the best value for the bookish sort. Everything from the hostesses to the linen is nicer at this beautifully restored teak home. Get a room overlooking the lotus-covered pond and let the frogs and birds drown out the distant traffic.

Tony's Place (☎ 0 3525 2578; 12/18 Soi 1, Th Naresuan; r 200-500B; 🚻) It's the party atmosphere that keeps this place packed (the rooms aren't bad either).

Chantana Guest House (☎ 0 3532 3200; 12/22 Soi 1, Th Naresuan; r 350-500B; 🚻) A breezy house with sweet staff makes Chantana a safe choice. The 2nd-storey rooms with balconies are extra nice.

Wieng Fa Hotel (☎ 0 3524 3252; 1/8 Th Rotchana; r 400-500B; 🚻) With helpful and professional staff, this motel-style place has a pleasant outdoor patio. Rooms are spacious but worn.

Baan Khun Phra (☎ 0 3524 1978; 48/2 Th U Thong; s/d 300/600B) This rambling 80-year-old teak house is the most atmospheric place in town. Unfortunately the prices aren't as enjoyable. The best rooms overlook the river, but most are very simple in décor.

MIDRANGE & TOP END

There isn't a lot of value in Ayuthaya's non-budget places. The majority of clientele in this range are package tourists who aren't independently shopping for accommodation, so there is little incentive to keep quarters spiffy.

Woraburi Hotel (☎ 0 3524 9600; 89 Th Watkluay; r from 1800B; 🚻 📺 📺) Ayuthaya's latest newcomer has eight floors of rooms with a touch of Bangkok sophistication. Most rooms get a bear-hug view of the river.

River View Place Hotel (☎ 0 3524 1444; 35/5 Th U Thong; r from 2000B; 🚻 📺 📺) A little removed from the action, River View has decent rooms with river views and all the amenities to separate you from those impoverished backpacker days.

Krungsri River Hotel (☎ 0 3524 4333; www.krungsri-river.com; 27/2 Th Rotchana; r from 2350; 🚻 📺) This nine-storey hotel has a nice location on the river and is one of the better so-called upscale options.

Ayothaya Hotel (☎ 0 3523 2855; fax 0 3525 1018; 12 Soi 2, Th Naresuan; r 1200-3500B; 🚻 📺 📺) Although it's

a bit dated, the Ayothaya is a nice option for the wheelee-cart luggage set, with a doorman, English-speaking staff and spacious rooms.

Eating

The backpacker street of Soi 1 is filled with several friendly open-air cafés should you be too tired to venture far. The stalls at the **Chao Phrom Market** (Th Naresuan) offer a good variety of Thai-Chinese and Muslim dishes during the day.

Hua Raw Night Market (Th U Thong) is the centre of nightlife in Ayuthaya, with stalls preparing Thai and Muslim dishes.

Roti Sai Mai Stalls (Th U Thong; ☎ 10am-8pm) Ayuthaya's food specialty is the Muslim dessert known as *roti sai mai*. A row of stalls across from the Ayuthaya Hospital sells this sweet concoction that is made on the premises. The vendors stretch melted palm sugar into a thread-like consistency, which is then wrapped in a flaky roti. It is probably one of the only desserts that will give you muscles – that is if you make it yourself.

Baan Khun Phra (☎ 0 3524 1978; 48/2 Th U Thong; 40-80B) Behind the guesthouse of the same name, this restaurant serves good nibblers with an intimate riverside atmosphere.

Malakor (Th Chee Kun; dishes 50-100B; ☎ 9.30am-midnight) This charming, two-storey wooden house has an incredible view of Wat Ratburana, which is most stunning after dark when it's all lit up.

29 Steak (Th Pamaphrao; dishes 50-100B; ☎ 3.30-11pm) Yep, the focus here is steak. But there are plenty of Western-style salads and other veggie options, plus many Thai favourites. It's popular with a casual local crowd.

Tony's Place (Soi 1, Th Naresuan; dishes 50-100B) This guesthouse restaurant buzzes with visitors and the food gets a heaping dose of concern.

Chainam (☎ 0 3525 2013; 36/2 Th U Thong; dishes 40-120B) Pleasantly situated overlooking the river, Chainam has long attracted foreigners with its extensive bilingual menu, but don't expect too much authenticity from the dishes.

Phae Krung Kao (dishes 60-200B; ☎ 11am-11pm) One of several floating riverside restaurants on Mae Nam Pa Sak. The English menu is limited, but the ambience is still serene.

Drinking

Ayuthaya is a sleepy town and most backpackers don't bother to venture off Soi 1, Th Naresuan for a little night-time tippie. The

local university students tend to hangout at the nightclub at the **Ayuthaya Grand Hotel** (☎ 0 3533 5483; 55/5 Th Rotchana).

Getting There & Away

BOAT

There are no passenger boat services operating between Bangkok and Ayuthaya, but there are several tour companies that make the river journey north from the capital; see p147.

BUS

Ayuthaya has two bus terminals. The long-distance terminal is 5km east of central Ayuthaya and serves destinations north of the city; most locals refer to it as the Asia Highway station. The provincial bus stop is on Th Naresuan, a short walk from the guesthouse area. Buses from Bangkok arrive two blocks away from the provincial stop.

Ayuthaya-bound buses leave from Bangkok's Northern and Northeastern bus terminal (45B, 1½ hours, frequent) and pass by the old Don Muang airport on their way out of town. The old airport used to provide an ideal getaway for visitors who wanted to skip Bangkok in favour of Ayuthaya, but now that the airport has moved to Bangkok's eastern suburbs the trip is more involved. You must take a bus from the new airport to Don Muang and then catch an Ayuthaya-bound bus from the stop near the Don Muang train station.

There are also minivans to Bangkok's Victory Monument (60B, two hours, every 20 minutes from 5am to 5pm), leaving from Th Naresuan, east of the main bus terminal.

Buses to Lopburi (45B, two hours) leave frequently from the provincial terminal on Th Naresuan. Oversized sawngthäew (small pick-up trucks) to/from Bang Pa-In (20B, one hour) also leave from this stop.

The long-distance bus station has services to most major northern towns, including Sukhothai (216B to 300B, six hours, hourly departures), Chiang Mai (605B to 805B, nine hours, three evening departures) and Nan (500B to 800B, eight hours, three nightly departures).

TRAIN

The train station is east of central Ayuthaya and is accessible by a quick cross-river ferry (3B).

Trains to Ayuthaya leave Bangkok's Hualamphong station (15B to 20B, 1½ hours)

throughout the day with more departures between 6am to 10am and from 3pm to 11pm. Train schedules are available from the information booth at Hualamphong station. To save transit time, consider using Bangkok's subway system to go to Bang Sue station, which intersects with the state railway line at the station of the same name.

You can also use the train to go north to Chiang Mai (586B to 1298B, depending on class, three departures a day) or northeast to Pak Chong (130B, numerous departures), the jumping-off point for Khao Yai National Park.

Getting Around

Sāamlāw (three-wheeled pedicabs) and shared tūk-tūk ply the main city roads (5B to 10B per person), but good luck hopping aboard as most see a foreigner and immediately switch into 'charter' mode. A tūk-tūk from the train station to any point in old Ayuthaya should cost around 40B; on the island itself figure no more than 20B per trip.

For touring the ruins, the most economical and ecological option is to rent a bicycle from one of the guesthouses (30B to 50B per day). Motorcycles (150B) are also available for rent. Elephant 'taxis' (500B) are also available for touring Wat Mahathat; inquire about a ride at the elephant kraal in town on Th Pa Thon.

See p200 for information on hiring a long-tail boat for trips around the island.

AROUND AYUTHAYA

Bang Pa-In

บางปะอิน

Europeans teathed on royal palaces may find that **Bang Pa-In** (☎ 0 3526 1548; admission 100B; ☎ 8am-3.30pm), a complex of European and Chinese-style palace buildings, creates geographic dislocation. But if this photogenic site is put into historic perspective, its brains and beauty become more apparent. It wasn't until the era of Bangkok's Rama V (King Chulalongkorn, 1868-1910) that the Thai kings began to build monuments to themselves. Known as the great moderniser, King Chula introduced many Western traditions into Thai society to avoid being completely swallowed up by those technologically advanced, and quickly advancing, nations. King Chula could also be described as a Europhile having made a grand tour of the continent and returned with even grander ideas for his own

kingdom. Architecture in particular captured his imagination and he set to work building residences fit for a king, in the most European sense of the word.

The result was the refurbishment of Bang Pa-In, 24km south of Ayuthaya and long used as a royal summer palace, into an homage to every style that had ever caught the king's fancy. Amid the peaceful grounds is a scenic reflecting pool crossed by a neoclassical bridge, giving photographers a well-documented vantage point. Across the pool is a classical **Thai pavilion**, the Chinese-style **Wehat Chamrun Palace** and the **Withun Thatsana** (a fanciful Victorian tower). The rest of the buildings are colonial-style royal residences. The gardens include an interesting topiary garden where the bushes have been trimmed into the shape of a small herd of elephants.

Wat Niwet Thamaprawat, across the river but within the Bang Pa-In complex, could easily be mistaken as a Gothic church, complete with stained-glass window and a Christian-style altar minus the pews. You can reach the wat by crossing the river in a small trolley-like cable car. The crossing is free.

During November the **Loi Krathong festival** (p746) is celebrated here, with much traditional ceremony and touristic outreach.

Bang Pa-In can be reached from Ayuthaya by public sawngthäew (20B, one hour), which departs from the provincial bus stop on Th Naresuan. The sawngthäew stops at the Bang Pa-In bus station, which is 4km from the palace. A motorcycle to the palace should cost 15B. The train service from Ayuthaya (3rd class 3B, 30 minutes) is more scenic but a little more expensive as you'll need to hire a sawngthäew from the train station to the palace and quoted rates are never Westerner-friendly (around 40B).

LOPBURI PROVINCE

LOPBURI

ลพบุรี

pop 62,812

Walkable and amiable, Lopburi is a pleasant small town for tiptoeing off the tourist trail. Ancient ruins amid modern shophouses attest to Lopburi's role in the central region's shifting empires – the Dvaravati, Khmers, Sukhothai and Ayuthaya all established administrative centres here.

Today the rulers of the ruins are a resident troop of monkeys who add mischief and mayhem to these retired places. Meanwhile, a

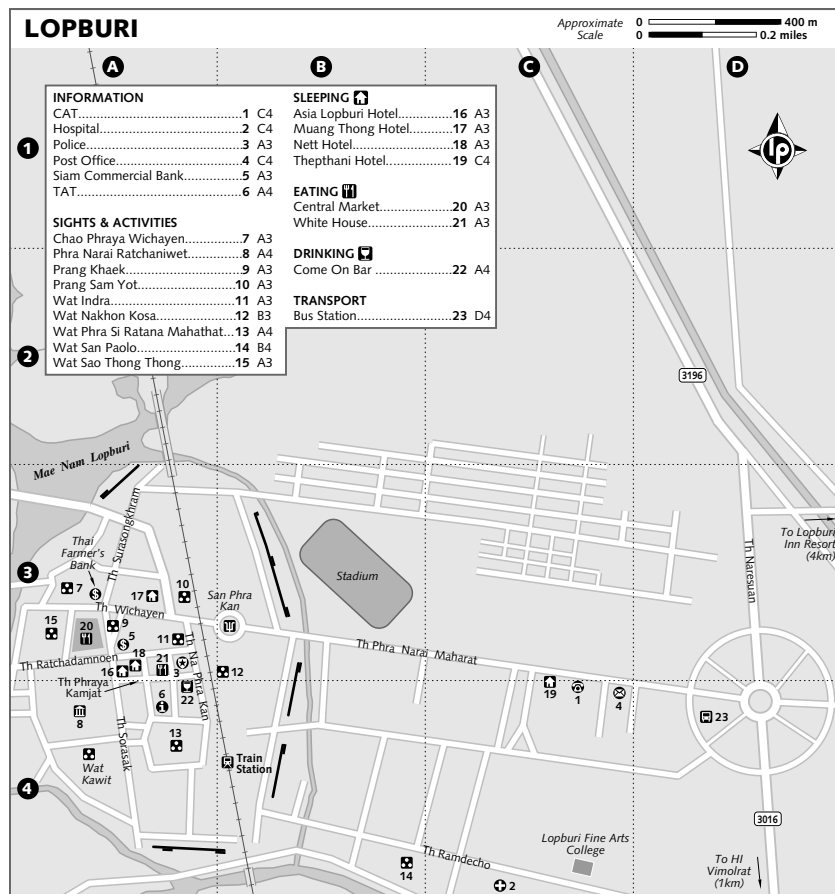
MONKEY TROUBLE

Tight-rope artists, fence-post sitters and general troublemakers: Lopburi's resident monkeys (a type of macaque) inhabit the city with acrobatic bravado. The ruins of **San Phra Kan** (Kala Shrine; Th Wichayan) are their usual daytime hang-out, but once the sun begins to set they cross the railroad tracks to roost in the halls of **Prang Sam Yot** (Th Wichayan).

But their range isn't limited to the ruins. There are just too many tempting places to crawl and fiddle for these dexterous creatures. Up above the usual reach of a human are the telephone and electricity wires that act as monkey roadways to TV antennas that need uninvited adjustment. The train station is also nearby and wanderlust monkeys have been known to hitch a ride for a weekend outing – or so say tall-tale spinning locals.

Like Thailand's legions of stray dogs, Lopburi's monkey population survives in part due to Buddhist discouragement of killing animals. Moreover, many locals say that Lopburi's monkeys are the 'children' of the Hindu god Kala and that to harm one would bring on misfortune. For the most part, however, the inhabitants of Lopburi seem to agree that the monkeys' delinquent behaviour is outweighed by the tourist dollars that they bring in. In late November Lopburi holds a feast for the monkeys at Prang Sam Yot to thank them for their contribution to the prosperity of Lopburi. Buffet tables are meticulously laid out with peanuts, cabbage, watermelon, bananas, pumpkin, pineapple, boiled eggs and cucumbers; the latter two items are monkey favourites, causing plenty of spats. Thousands of Thais turn out to watch the spectacle.

While monkeys frolicking on stone temples make for great photo opportunities, visitors to Lopburi should keep in mind that these are wild animals whose natural fear of humans has diminished over time. Monkeys have been known to attack humans, especially would-be photographers who use food to lure monkeys within the range of their camera lenses.



low-key town filled with motorcycle shops and ice-cream parlours has grown like a weed, providing an engaging vantage point for Thai provincial life as well as a historical retrospective.

Most of Lopburi's highlights can be seen and appreciated in one or two days en route north from Ayuthaya.

History

Lopburi is considered to be one of Thailand's oldest cities, dating from the Dvaravati period (6th to 11th centuries) when Lopburi was called Lavo. When the Khmer kingdom expanded into present-day Thailand in the 10th century, Lavo became a frontier hub for the empire and was filled with the Khmer's

signature architectural monuments, including Prang Khaek (Shiva Shrine), San Phra Kan (Kala Shrine), Prang Sam Yot (Three Spired Shrine) and the tower at Wat Phra Si Ratana Mahathat – many of which remain in various states today.

Power over Lopburi was wrested from the Khmers in the 13th century as the Sukhothai kingdom to the north grew stronger, but the Khmer cultural influence remained to some extent throughout the Ayuthaya period. King Narai fortified Lopburi in the mid-17th century to serve as a second capital when the kingdom of Ayuthaya was threatened by a Dutch naval blockade. His palace in Lopburi was constructed in 1665 and he died there in 1688.

Orientation

Lopburi is distinctly split into two: the old town sandwiched between the western side of the railroad tracks and the river, and the new town that sprawls east of the city. The old part of town is massively more charming, with all the historical sites within walking distance. The train station is also easily reached from the old town on foot.

Information

There are several banks in the old part of Lopburi.

Communications Authority of Thailand (CAT; Th Phra Narai Maharat; ☎ 8.30am-4pm)

Hospital (☎ 0 3662 1537-45; Th Ramdecho)

Police (☎ 0 3642 4515; Th Na Phra Kan)

Post Office (Th Phra Narai Maharat)

TAT (☎ 0 3642 2768-9; Th Phraya Kamjat; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm) Has helpful maps and brochures.

Sights

PHRA NARAI RATCHANIWET

พระนารายณ์ราชนิเวศน์

Start your tour of Lopburi at this **former royal palace** (entrance Th Sorasak; admission 30B; ☎ gallery 9am-4pm Wed-Sun, palace grounds 7am-5.30pm), which is a combination of palace ruins and artefact galleries.

During the reign of Ayuthaya's King Narai, Lopburi was used as a second capital. The king chose this site for his palace, which took 12 years to build between 1665 and 1677. At the time, the Ayuthaya kingdom hosted many Western envoys, and French architects contributed to the design. Interestingly, Khmer architectural influence was still strong in central Thailand so the palace exhibits an unusual blend of Khmer and European styles. Upon the king's death in 1688, the palace was used only by King Phetracha (King Narai's successor) for his coronation ceremony and was then abandoned until King Mongkut (Rama IV of Bangkok's Chakri dynasty) ordered restoration in the mid-19th century.

The main gate into the palace, **Pratu Phayakkha**, is off Th Sorasak. The grounds are well kept, planted with trees and shrubbery, and serve as a kind of town park for local children and young lovers.

Immediately on the left as you enter are the remains of former storage buildings and the palace reservoir. In the quadrangle to the left is the royal reception hall, often used for foreign dignitaries, and the **Phra Chao Hao**, which most likely served as a *wihaan* for a valued

Buddha image. Continuing to the southwest quadrangle of the complex are the ruins of the elephant stables and the **Suttha Sawan** pavilion, a former royal residence.

In the northwest quadrangle are buildings that were used during the king's reign as audience halls and residential quarters for the king's harem, but today have been renovated and house the **Lopburi Museum** (or more officially known as Somdet Phra Narai National Museum). The museum's collection is divided into three separate buildings. The most important building is the Phiman Mongkut Pavilion, which contains a fine collection of Lopburi-period sculpture as well as a variety of Khmer, Dvaravati, U Thong and Ayuthaya art. The Chantara Phisan Pavilion is a memorial to King Narai and ecclesiastical artefacts. The Phra Pratiab Building has a few minor displays of traditional tools (hand looms, and fishing and farming equipment) and shadow play carvings.

WAT PHRA SI RATANA MAHATHAT

วัดพระศรีรัตนมหาธาตุ

The Fine Arts Department has restored this large 12th-century Khmer **wat** (Th Na Phra Kan; admission 30B; ☎ 7am-5pm), considered one of the city's oldest. During Lopburi's heyday, it was the town's largest monastery, a fact clearly shown on a map drawn by French cartographers in 1687. A tall laterite tower still stands and features a few intact lintels and some ornate stucco. There is also a large *wihaan* added by King Narai. Several *chedi* and smaller towers dot the grounds.

CHAO PHRAYA WICHAYEN

บ้านวิชาเยนทร์

King Narai built this Thai-European **palace** (Th Wichayen; admission 30B; ☎ 9am-4pm) as a residence for foreign ambassadors, of whom the Greek Constantine Phaulkon was the most famous. Phaulkon became one of King Narai's advisers and was eventually a royal minister. He was also implicated in an attempted coup and in 1688, as Narai lay dying, Phaulkon was assassinated by Luang Sorasak, who wanted power for himself. The palace is across the street and northeast of Wat Sao Thong Thong.

PRANG SAM YOT

ปราสาทสามยอด

Opposite San Phra Kan, this **shrine** (Th Wichayen; admission 30B; ☎ 8am-6pm) represents classic

Khmer-Lopburi style and is Lopburi's most photographed Hindu-turned-Buddhist temple. Originally, the three towers symbolised the Hindu Trimurti of Shiva, Vishnu and Brahma. Now two of them contain ruined Lopburi-style Buddha images. Some Khmer lintels can still be made out, and some appear unfinished.

An U Thong–Ayuthaya imitation Buddha image sits in the brick sanctuary in front of the linked towers. At the back are a couple of crudely restored images, probably once Lopburi style. The grounds allotted to Prang Sam Yot are quite small and virtually surrounded by modern buildings. The best view of the monument is probably from one of the upper floors of the Muang Thong Hotel. The monument is lit up at night and is constantly crawling with monkeys.

PRANG KHAEK

ปรางค์กู่

Situated on a triangular slice of land bordered by Th Wichayen to the north, Prang Khaek features towers with Khmer-style brickwork. The structure is thought to have originally been a temple to the Hindu god Shiva and dates back to the 11th century.

OTHER RUINS

Built by the Khmers in the 12th century, **Wat Nakhon Kosa** (Th Na Phra Kan) may originally have been a Hindu shrine. The U Thong and Lopburi images found at the temple are thought to have been added later. There's not much left of this wat, but the foliage growing on the brick ruins is an interesting sight. A notably larger base below the monument was uncovered several years ago.

A partial brick and stucco tower is all that's left of **Wat San Paolo** (Th Ramdecho), a Jesuit church founded by the Portuguese during King Narai's reign. A contingent of a dozen French priests came to run the church in 1687. An octagonal, three-storey celestial observatory was also erected here, though it is unclear under whose direction it was built.

Northwest of the palace centre, **Wat Sao Thong Thong** (Th Wichayen) is in pretty poor shape. The *wihāan* and large seated Buddha are from the Ayuthaya period; King Narai restored the *wihāan* (changing its windows to an incongruous but intriguing Gothic style) so it could be used as a Christian chapel. Niches along the inside walls contain Lopburi-style Buddhas with *naga* (serpent) protectors.

Practically nothing is known about the history of **Wat Indra** (Th Ratchadamnoen), which is now merely a sizable brick foundation, the curse of a forgetful history.

Festivals & Events

In mid-February the Phra Narai Ratchaniwet is the focus of the three-day **King Narai Festival** (www.thailandgrandfestival.com), which includes *lakhon ling* (traditional drama performed by monkeys) and the exhibit and sale of locally woven textiles. Visit the website for exact dates.

Blessed be the simians on the last week of November when Lopburi celebrates its annual **Monkey Festival**; the monkeys get a banquet feast while Thais and tourists watch the gorgefest with fear and delight.

Sleeping

Lopburi doesn't have a guesthouse scene, so most of the lodging options are the usual stock of worn-out Thai-Chinese hotels complete with a spittoon and outdated 1960s stylings. The old city has the most convenient options for walkers. There are some equally run-down mid-range options in the new part of town but you'll need your own transport for sightseeing.

BUDGET

Lopburi's budget hotels are quite adequate, if cheap, basic and worn.

Muang Thong Hotel (☎ 0 3641 1036; 1/1-11 Th Prang Sam Yot; r 160B) Great location overlooking Prang Sam Yot, but dumpy, squat-toilet rooms.

Asia Lopburi Hotel (☎ 0 3661 8894; nr Th Sorasak & Th Phraya Kamjat; s/d from 220/250B; 🚽) More of the same: basic rooms ranging from spiffy to depressing. Look at more than one before settling in.

Nett Hotel (☎ 0 3641 1738; 17/1-2 Th Ratchadamnoen; r from 200-350B; 🚽) Clean and friendly option, the Nett has newly tiled air-con rooms.

Hi Vimolrat (Lopburi Youth Hostel; ☎ 0 3661 3731; www.tyha.org/LopburiYH.html; 5/19 Mu 3, Th Naresuan; dm/d/q 140/340/370B; 🚽) Inconveniently located southeast of the town, this hostel is a good place to meet young Thais and other travellers. The train station and old town ruins are an 80B tük-tük ride away.

MIDRANGE & TOP END

Thepthani Hotel (☎ 0 3641 1029; Th Phra Narai Maharaj; r 400B; 🚽) Run by the Rajabhat university's tourism and hospitality department, Thep-

thani is a respectable midrange option. Rooms are spacious with cable TV and central hot water. Blue buses travelling between the old and new town will drop you here for 8B.

Lopburi Inn Resort (☎ 0 3642 0777; www.lopburiinnresort.com; 144 Tambon Tha Sala; r 1000-1200B; 🚽 📺) You might need a sense of humour to appreciate the extensive monkey theme at this resort. It may not be sophisticated or contemporary, but it is the nicest place in town.

Eating & Drinking

Lopburi has the usual assortment of street stalls serving tasty food, which congregate in front of the Nett Hotel and on Th Na Phra Kan in the evenings. For air-con comfort, try the ice-cream parlours around town that offer student snack foods and Western-style breakfasts.

White House (Th Phraya Kamjat; dishes 60-120B; ☎ 5pm-10pm) Across the street from the TAT office, this pleasant little spot offers a range of Thai-Chinese specialties and vegetarian options.

Central Market (off Th Ratchadamnoen & Th Surasongkham; ☎ 8am-2pm) Just north of the palace, this day market is a great place to pick up *kai tháwt* (fried chicken) or *kai yáang* (roast chicken) with sticky rice; *hàw mòk* (soufflé-like fish and coconut curry steamed in banana leaves); *klúay khàek* (Indian-style fried bananas); and a wide selection of fruit, satays, *kháo kriap* (crispy rice cakes), *tháwt man plaa* (fried fish cakes) and other delights. In the centre of the market is a vegetarian pavilion.

A sleepy town like Lopburi doesn't see much nightly action beyond the night market, but the **Come On Bar** (Th Phraya Kamjat) is an exception with a solid Western soundtrack, as well tourist information.

Getting There & Away BUS

Lopburi's **bus station** (Th Naresuan) is almost 2km outside of the old district. The following destinations are served: Ayuthaya (47B, two hours, every 20 minutes) and Bangkok's Northern and Northeastern bus terminal (130B, 3½ hours, every 20 minutes).

Lopburi can also be reached from the west via Suphanburi (55B, three hours, every hour). From Supanburi you can catch another local bus to Kanchanaburi (40B, one hour, every 20 minutes). Other nearby cities that can serve as hopscotch points west include Singburi or Ang Thong, across the river from Lopburi. There are frequent local buses between the

cities, and the Singburi bus (15B, one hour) makes a stop in front of Prang Sam Yot in old Lopburi.

Lopburi can also be reached from the northeast via Khorat (Nakhon Ratchasima) on air-con buses for 120B.

TRAIN

Most people arrive in Lopburi via the train coming north from Ayuthaya or south from Phitsanulok. The **train station** (Th Na Phra Kan) is within walking distance to historic sites and lodging. The station also has baggage storage if you are only stopping in Lopburi for a few hours.

Trains heading south toward Ayuthaya (ordinary/rapid/express 13/120/140B) and Bangkok's Hualamphong station (ordinary/rapid/express 28/125/170B) leave throughout the day with six daytime departures, roughly every hour from 5am to 9pm, and several afternoon and late-night departures. Rapid and express trains take about three hours, ordinary trains about 4½ hours. If headed to Bangkok, you can shave some time off your trip by disembarking at Bangkok's Bang Sue station and taking the nearby subway to points within central Bangkok.

Trains heading north from Lopburi stop at Phitsanulok (ordinary/rapid/express 150/223/390B). There are numerous services with roughly hourly departures between 8am and 3pm and again from 8pm to 11pm.

Getting Around

Săwngthăew and city buses run along Th Wichayen and Th Phra Narai Maharaj between the old and new towns for 8B per passenger; *saamláw* will go anywhere in the old town for 30B.

KANCHANABURI PROVINCE

This frontier province stretches from the fertile sugar-cane fields of the namesake provincial capital all the way to the sparsely inhabited western border with Myanmar. It is home to some of Thailand's largest tracts of preserved land, gushing waterfalls in the rainy season and several declining populations of reclusive but celebrity animal species. Its mountains form a natural boundary with



Myanmar, discouraging major population growth and preserving a wilder way of life. These mountains also provide a slightly cooler climate than Bangkok, especially in the evenings. Most visitors check into Kanchanaburi, do a few days of organised activities and then rush on to Chiang Mai or to the south. But following the highway northwest to the out-bound towns provides an immersion into nature and culture that the traveller grapevine claims only exists in Laos.

KANCHANABURI

กาญจนบุรี

pop 64,300

With field, forest and stream, Kanchanaburi has become a catch basin for new arrivals over-

whelmed by Bangkok (a mere 130km east) and a closer alternative than Chiang Mai for Thailand's soft version of 'trekking' (elephant rides, short hikes and bamboo rafting). The town sits in a fertile valley where sugar-cane fields bow in the breeze, measuring out an easy pace.

In addition to outdoor appreciation, the limestone hills surrounding Kanchanaburi are famous for their temple caves, an underground communion of animistic spirit worship and traditional Buddhism. Winding arteries burrow into the guts of the caves past bulbous calcium deposits and altars for Buddha images, surrounded by offerings from pilgrims.

Crawling out of the mountains to the sea, the surrounding rivers (Mae Nam Khwae Noi and Mae Nam Mae Klong) define much of the

lazy character of the town, except on weekends and holidays when Bangkok Thais come by the busloads to pound the night into light aboard floating discos and karaoke barges. That such tranquillity attracts such mayhem is a true test in appreciating cultural differences.

This quiet provincial capital also played an unlikely role during WWII. Here, occupying Japanese forces used captured Allied prisoners of war (POWs) and conscripted Southeast Asians to build a demanding, deadly rail route to present-day Myanmar. You might have heard of this minor war story thanks to Pierre Boulle's *The Bridge on the River Kwai* and the movie of the same name. The bridge, several museums and cemeteries have respectfully preserved the history and memorialised the dead.

History

Kanchanaburi was originally established by Rama I as a first line of defence against the Burmese along an old invasion route through the Three Pagodas Pass on the Thailand–Myanmar border.

During WWII the Japanese used Allied prisoners of war to build the infamous 'Death

Railway' along this same invasion route, from Mae Nam Khwae Noi to the pass. Thousands of prisoners died as a result of brutal treatment by their captors.

Orientation

Kanchanaburi has a mini-Th Khao San concentrated along Th Mae Nam Khwae, within walking distance of the train station. Most accommodation is built beside the river. The commercial strip of the town follows Th Saengchuto. The in-town attractions are spread out enough to be too far on foot, so you'll want a bicycle or motorcycle to get around.

Information

EMERGENCY

Tourist Police (☎ 0 3451 2668, 0 3451 2795; Th Saengchuto)

INTERNET ACCESS

Internet cafés change names and locations often, but there are always several connections available somewhere along Th Mae Nam Khwae. Prices vary from 20B to 30B per hour.

WHY BRIDGE THE RIVER KWAI?

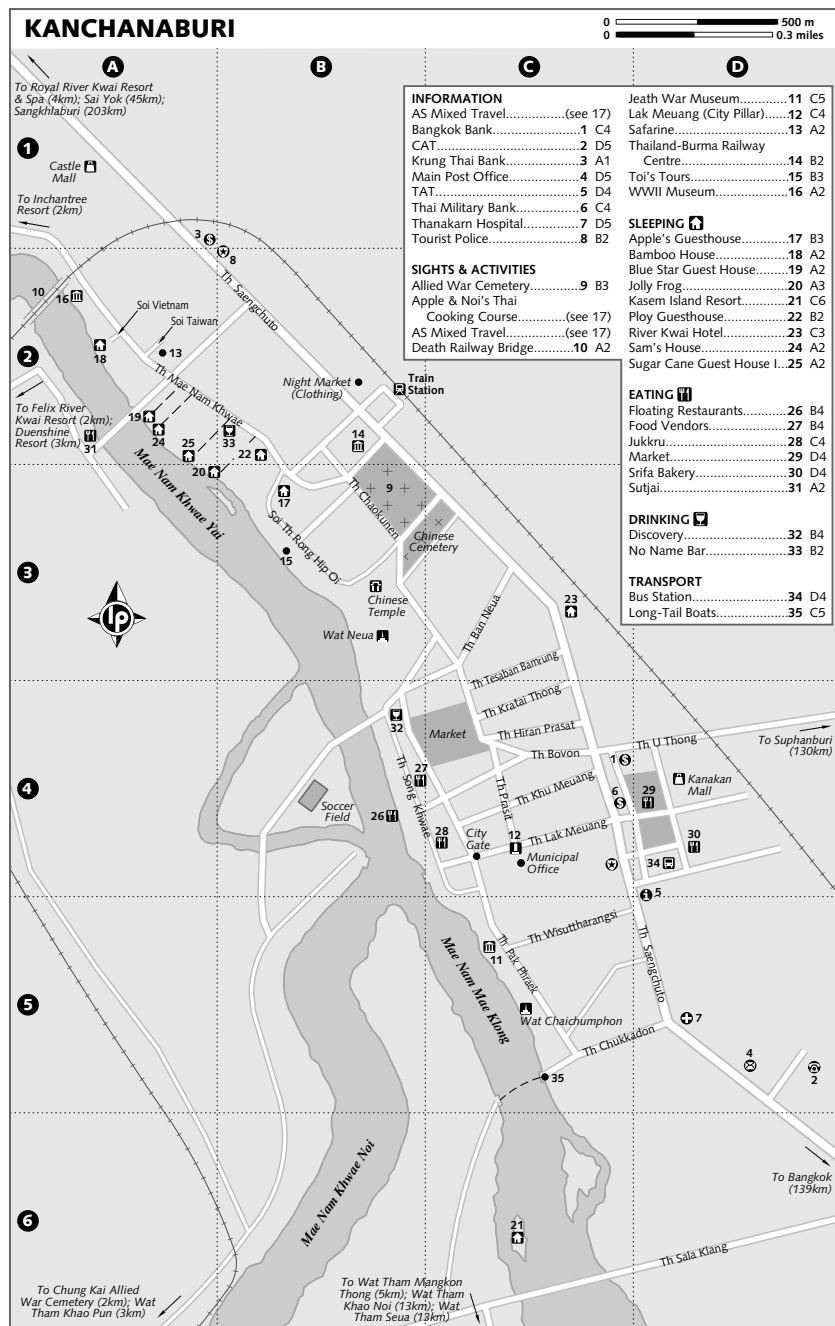
Monumental engineering projects are often the modern measure of a sophisticated and superior society. And the railway now known as the 'Death Railway' is one of the most obvious examples of this fascination with mechanised domination. The railway was built during the WWII-era Japanese occupation of Thailand (1942-43) and its strategic objective was to link 415km of rugged terrain between Thailand and Burma (Myanmar) in order to secure an alternative supply route for the Japanese conquest of India. It was an ambitious goal that was accomplished with limited equipment, brutal treatment of forced labour and engineering creativity.

Construction of the railway began on 16 September 1942 at existing stations at Thanbyuzayat in Myanmar and Nong Pladuk (Ban Pong) in Thailand. Japanese engineers at the time estimated that it would take five years to link Thailand and Burma by rail. In actuality, the Japanese army forced the POWs to complete the 1m-gauge railway in only 16 months. Most of the work was done by hand with simple tools, building high bridges and carving cuttings into the sides of the mountains. The rails were finally joined 37km south of Three Pagodas Pass; a Japanese brothel train inaugurated the line.

The bridge that spans the River Kwai near Kanchanaburi (dubbed the 'Death Railway Bridge'; see p211) was in use for 20 months before the Allies bombed it in 1945. Rather than a supply line, the route had quickly become an escape for Japanese troops. After the war the British took control of the railway on the Burmese side of the border and ripped up 4km of the tracks leading to Three Pagodas Pass for fear of the route being used by Karen separatists.

On the Thai side, the State Railway of Thailand (SRT) assumed control and continues to operate trains on 130km of the original path between Nong Pladuk, south of Kanchanaburi, to Nam Tok. See *Getting There & Away* (p216) for information about riding this historic route.

Approximately 40km of the railway is now submerged under the Khao Laem Dam, while the remaining track on either side of the dam was dismantled. Hellfire Pass (Konyu Cutting), one of the most demanding construction points, is still visible today at the Hellfire Pass Memorial (p218).



Connections and processing strength varies, so shop around.

MEDICAL SERVICES

Thanakorn Hospital (☎ 0 3462 2359; Th Saengchuto)

Near the junction of Th Chukkadon, this hospital is best equipped for foreign visitors.

MONEY

Several major Thai banks can be found on Th Saengchuto near the market and the bus terminal.

AS Mixed Travel (☎ 0 3451 2017; Apple's Guesthouse, 52 Soi Rong Hip Oi) Foreign-exchange service available outside of bank hours.

Bangkok Bank (Th U-Thong) Located near the market.

Krung Thai Bank (Th Saengchuto) Near River Kwai Bridge.

Thai Military Bank (Th Saengchuto) Near the bus station.

POST

Main post office (Th Saengchuto; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm)

Mon-Fri, 9am-12pm Sat & Sun)

TELEPHONE

There are numerous private shops along Th Mae Nam Khwae offering long-distance calls.

CAT (☎ 7am-10pm) This office has an international

telephone service.

TOURIST INFORMATION

TAT (☎ 0 3451 1200, 0 3451 2500; Th Saengchuto;

☎ 8.30am-4.30pm) Has free maps of the town and province. It also has comprehensive information on accommodation, activities and transport.

Sights

There is a lot to see in Kanchanaburi town and the countryside to the northwest, so much that many visitors get overwhelmed and just sign up for a tour to erase the guesswork. This is a shame because Kanchanaburi is so laid-back that you'll surely encounter all sorts of lovely stories if you step outside the tourist incubator and flag down a local bus.

Most attractions in town – the WWII historic sites and Kanchanaburi's cave temples – can be tackled in one or two days aboard a bicycle or motorcycle. Another two days can be used to visit the out-of-town destinations aboard a public bus.

THAILAND-BURMA RAILWAY CENTRE

ศูนย์รถไฟไทย-พม่า

This well-designed museum (☎ 0 3451 0067; www.tbrcnline.com; 73 Th Chaokan; admission 80B; ☎ 9am-

5pm) is the best place to start your exploration of Kanchanaburi's role in WWII. The museum succeeds in its aim to offer a non-partisan explanation of the Japanese occupation of Thailand, the reasons for building the Thailand-Burma railway, the technological impediments to its construction, the harsh working conditions and the state of the railway since the end of the war. Each of the nine galleries is packed with interesting facts presented in a dynamic way. There are also video interviews with POWs and Japanese officials who worked on the railway, adding a necessary element of human drama to historical events. The models of the landscape and the faithful reproductions of the Japanese designs show why building the railway was such a treacherous challenge.

ALLIED WAR CEMETERY

สุสานทหารสัมพันธมิตรดอนรัก

Directly across the street from the museum is the **Allied War Cemetery** (Th Saengchuto; ☎ 8am-6pm), a fitting memorial to the POWs who died building the railway. The lovingly tended grounds is the final resting place of only a small portion of the total number of prisoners who died during the construction of the railway. It is estimated that more than 100,000 men died, 16,000 of whom were Western POWs, mainly from Britain and Holland. Conscripted labourers, many from Japanese-occupied Southeast Asian countries, suffered even higher casualties; it is estimated that 90,000 to 100,000 labourers died in the area.

DEATH RAILWAY BRIDGE (BRIDGE OVER THE RIVER KWAI)

สะพานข้ามแม่น้ำแคว

This little railway **bridge** (Th Mae Nam Khwae) is not nearly as impressive in person as the dramatic story that made it famous. The materials for the bridge were brought from Java by the Imperial Japanese Army during its 1942-43 occupation of Thailand. The first version of the bridge, completed in February 1943, was all wood. In April of the same year a second bridge of steel was constructed. In 1945 the bridge was bombed several times by Allied planes and was only rebuilt after the war – the curved portions of the bridge are original.

Train enthusiasts should not miss the old locomotives used during WWII that are parked on display near the bridge. During the last week of November and first week of

December there is a nightly sound-and-light show at the bridge, commemorating the Allied attack on the Death Railway in 1945. It's a big scene, with the sounds of bombers and explosions, fantastic bursts of light and more. The town gets a lot of Thai tourists during this week, so book early if you want to witness this spectacle.

The bridge spans Mae Nam Khwae Yai, which is 2.5km from the centre of Kanchanaburi. The most enjoyable way to get to the bridge from town is to rent a bicycle or motorcycle. You can also catch a northbound *sǎwngthǎew* (10B) along Th Saengchuto.

WWII MUSEUM

พิพิธภัณฑ์สงครามโลกครั้งที่สอง

Despite what the sign out front says, this **museum** (admission 30B; ☎ 9am-6pm), unlike the Jeath War Museum, is a monument to kitsch, with a random and almost ridiculous collection of stuff inside.

The larger, more lavish of the two buildings contains Burmese-style alabaster Buddhas and a *phrá khreuang* (sacred amulets) display. Upper floors exhibit Thai weaponry from the Ayuthaya period, ceramics and brightly painted portraits of all the kings in Thai history. On the 5th and uppermost floor – above the royal portraits (flirting with lese-majesty) – is the history of the Chinese family who built the museum.

A smaller building opposite holds WWII relics, including photos and sketches made during the POW period, and a display of Japanese and Allied weapons. Along the front of this building stand life-size sculptures of historical figures associated with the war, including Churchill, MacArthur, Hitler, Einstein, de Gaulle and Hirohito. The English captions are sometimes unintentionally amusing or disturbing – a reference to the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima, for example, reads 'Almost the entire city was destroyed in a jiffy'. Even more odd is a diorama of the famous bridge being bombed. More light-hearted is the collection of Miss Thailand clothing on the 2nd floor.

The museum is just south of the Death Railway Bridge and is an amusing tourist spot, but not essential for a history buff.

JEATH WAR MUSEUM

พิพิธภัณฑ์สงคราม

This worn but heart-felt **museum** (Th Wisuttharangsi; admission 30B; ☎ 8.30am-6pm), on the grounds

of Wat Chaichumphon (Wat Tai), is worth visiting just to sit on the cool banks of Mae Nam Mae Klong and to witness the genuine concern modern-day Thais feel toward the suffering that occurred on their soil. The museum is a replica of the bamboo-*atap* huts used to house Allied POWs during the occupation. The long huts contain various photographs taken during the war, drawings and paintings by POWs, maps, weapons and other war memorabilia. The acronym Jeath represents the meeting of Japan, England, Australia/America, Thailand and Holland at Kanchanaburi during WWII.

The war museum is at the west end of Th Wisuttharangsi (Visutransgi), not far from the TAT office. The common Thai name for this museum is *phiphitháphan songkhraam wát tái*.

LAK MEUANG (CITY PILLAR)

ศาลหลักเมือง

Like many older Thai cities, Kanchanaburi has a **city pillar** (*lák meuang*; Th Lak Meuang) denoting the original town centre and providing shelter for the city spirit. The bulbous-tipped pillar is covered with gold leaf and is much worshipped. Within sight of the pillar, towards the river, stands Kanchanaburi's original city gate.

CHUNG KAI ALLIED WAR CEMETERY

สุสานสัมพันธมิตรช่องไก่

This former POW camp is now a memorial cemetery that sees fewer visitors than the more central Allied War Cemetery. The burial plaques at this cemetery carry names, military insignia, and short epitaphs for Dutch, British, French and Australian soldiers.

The cemetery is approximately 4km south of central Kanchanaburi across the Mae Nam Khwae Noi and is best reached by bicycle or motorcycle. The route here is very scenic, passing by sugar-cane fields and village life.

WAT THAM KHAO PUN

วัดท่าเขาปูน

Another kilometre beyond Chung Kai Allied War Cemetery is this quiet cave **temple** (admission by donation; ☎ 7am-4pm), filled with shrines to the Buddha, Hindu deities and Thai kings, that attracts a trickle of pilgrims from around Thailand. The cave complex is fairly extensive and more interesting to explore

than similar caves at Wat Tham Seu. During WWII the cave complex was used by the Japanese to store weapons and equipment, and some of the smaller chambers are said to have been used to imprison and torture POWs. The caves were the site of another tragedy in 1995 when a British tourist was murdered by a drug-addicted monk living at the wat. Kanchanaburi residents, like the rest of Thailand, were mortified by the crime, and many now refer to the cave as 'Johanne's Cave' in memory of the victim. The monk was defrocked and sentenced to death (commuted to life imprisonment without parole by the king in 1996).

WAT THAM MANGKON THONG

วัดท่ามังกรทอง

The 'Cave Temple of the Golden Dragon' has long been an attraction because of the 'floating nun' – a *mâe chii* (Thai Buddhist nun) who meditated while floating on her back in a pool of water. The original nun passed away, but a disciple continues the tradition – sort of. The current floating nun does not meditate but instead she strikes Buddha-like poses based upon traditional *mudra* (ritual hand movements). Shows do not have a set schedule but instead are timed for the arrival of tour groups.

Most Western visitors prefer to visit the temple cave instead of the swimming antics. A long, steep series of steps with dragon-sculpted handrails leads up the craggy mountainside behind the main *bót* to a complex of limestone caves. Follow the string of light bulbs through the front cave and you'll find a view of the valley and mountains beyond. One section of the cave requires crawling or duck-walking, so wear appropriate clothing and shoes – the cave floor can be slippery.

The temple is 7km south of town and accessible via bicycle or motorbike.

WAT THAM SEUA & WAT THAM KHAO NOI

วัดท่าเสือ/วัดท่าเขาน้อย

Built on a ridge overlooking a patchwork of fields and forests, these adjacent hilltop monasteries are important local pilgrimage spots, especially for Chinese Buddhists, and are just high enough above the ground to put the faithful closer to heaven.

Wat Tham Khao Noi (Little Hill Cave Monastery) has crowned its side of the shared

hillside with a fanciful Chinese-style pagoda, similar in size and style to Penang's Kek Lok Si. Next door, Wat Tham Seu (Tiger Cave Monastery) boasts a Thai-style *chedi* framing a huge 18m-tall Buddha facing Mae Nam Khwae Noi.

You can ascend the hill either on an inclined cable car or climb a set of *naga* stairs. To the right of the hill-top landing is a cave filled with the usual assortment of Buddha images and shrines.

The temples are about 15km southeast of Kanchanaburi in Tha Meuang district. By public transport, you can take a bus (10B) to the Tha Meuang Hospital and then a motorcycle taxi (50B) directly to the temples. If you're on a motorbike, take the right fork of the highway when you reach Tha Meuang, turn right across the Kheuan Meuang (City Dam) and right again on the other side of the river. By bicycle, you can avoid taking the highway by using back roads along the river. Follow Th Pak Phraek in Kanchanaburi southeast and cross the bridge towards Wat Tham Mangkon Thong, then turn left on the other side and follow the road parallel to the river. After about 14km, you'll see the Kheuan Meuang up ahead – at this point you should start looking for the hill-top pagodas on your right.

Activities

THAI COOKING

Although Kanchanaburi's main highlights are the outdoors, **Apple & Noi's Thai Cooking Course** (Apple's Guesthouse, Th Saengchuto; course 950B) poses a formidable indoor rival. Their full-day Thai cooking course is held in a specially designed kitchen and includes a morning trip to the market. To reserve an apron, contact Apple or Noi at their guesthouse.

TREKKING & KAYAKING

The 'treks' offered by tour agencies of Kanchanaburi are far from being strenuous adventures into the wilderness. Most offer a one-day, greatest-hits tour of Kanchanaburi's sites: ride an elephant, see the Erawan Waterfall, visit the Death Railway Bridge or Hellfire Pass, or some combination of these that requires a lot of crawling in and out of minivans. Most of these day-tour sites can be visited independently aboard public transport and we strongly encourage those who have a guidebook to actually use it.

The tours are better options if you're interested in doing either an elephant or an overnight trek that usually includes a visit to a Karen village and a short river journey on a bamboo raft. But don't expect Indiana Jones – this is Thailand, a country that loves photo ops over swashbuckling.

Be careful when choosing a trek as many companies will cancel at the last minute if not enough people sign up. New companies pop up every season, so ask around for recommendations. The following agencies are reputable:

AS Mixed Travel (☎ 0 3451 2017; www.applenoi-kanchanaburi.com; Apple's Guesthouse) A locally owned and well-organised company with longevity. Overnight tours go to Chaloeem Ratanakosin National Park.

Toi's Tours (☎ 0 3451 4209; 45/3 Soi Th Rong Hip Oi) If you need a French-speaking guide, this is a good option. There's a second office on Th Tha Makam.

Whether or not you're an experienced paddler, river kayaking is a great way to explore Kanchanaburi. The French-managed **Safarine** (☎ 0 3462 4140; www.safarine.com; 4 Soi Taiwan; ☎ Mon-Sat) is a complete tour company that specialises in river-based trips and will design custom tours for groups.

Sleeping

Along the mini-Th Khao San strip of Th Mae Nam Khwae are numerous guesthouses with cheap interior rooms and more expensive riverside bungalows or floating rafts. Many

budget guesthouses now offer rooms with air-con and hot-water showers that straddle budget and midrange options. The old backpacker area of Soi Th Rong Hip Oi is a fine spot until nightfall when the thumping karaoke starts to raise the dead; for this reason we have not listed these options here, but feel free to decide for yourself.

Many traditional midrange hotels are located on Th Saengchuto, but we've found the rooms to be lacking in ambience and quality compared to the upper-budget river guesthouses. Several resorts located outside of the city centre are visited by families with their own transport; check out **Kanchanaburi Info** (www.kanchanaburi-info.com) for more resort options.

BUDGET

There are many, many more options than these, so explore on your own if nothing here suits. The following are listed geographically from south to north.

Sugar Cane Guest House I (☎ 0 3462 4520; 22 Soi Pakistan, Th Mae Nam Khwae; s/d from 150/250B; ☎) Sugar Cane has the cleanest interior fan rooms in town. Its river-raft rooms share a wide veranda but don't stand out against the competition. There is a second location closer to the bridge.

Jolly Frog (☎ 0 3451 4579; 28 Soi China; s 70B, d 150-290B; ☎) A favourite with young backpackers, Jolly Frog is a happening spot with a social café and riverfront lawn. Rooms aren't the cleanest but neither are the guests.

Bamboo House (☎ 0 3462 4470; 3-5 Soi Vietnam, Th Mae Nam Khwae; r 200-500B; ☎) Serene, well-kept Bamboo House is close to the bridge, and far from all the hubbub in town.

Sam's House (☎ 0 3451 5956; www.samsguesthouse.com; Th Mae Nam Khwae; d 150-600B; ☎) Just one of Sam's empire outposts, this spot has a mix of options, the best being the fan-cooled, wooden rooms overlooking the river.

Blue Star Guest House (☎ 0 3451 2161; 241 Th Mae Nam Khwae; r 200-600B; ☎) Budget rooms here are ordinary and adequate, but the more expensive A-frame bungalows overlooking the river are extraordinary. They are creatively constructed with naturally twisted wood, reminiscent of a fantasy tree house.

Apple's Guesthouse (☎ 0 3451 2017; www.applenoi-kanchanaburi.com; 52 Soi Th Rong Hip Oi; r 300-600B) Apple's is a homey place with comfortable outdoor seating areas for socialising and

simple interior rooms for sound sleeping. The on-site restaurant and one-day Thai cooking courses (see p213) both get rave reviews.

MIDRANGE

Many midrange places offer discounts during the low season (April to November), but reservations should be made in advance.

Kasem Island Resort (☎ 0 3451 3359, in Bangkok 0 2255 3604; r from 800B; ☎) On an island in the middle of Mae Nam Mae Klong, this long-running resort may be in the sunset of its years, but its still got a golden location. The pricier rooms are more soundproofed against the floating discos and have a lovely view of the surrounding mountains. From Th Chukkadon, you can arrange for a free shuttle boat to the island.

Ploy Guesthouse (☎ 0 3451 5804; www.ploygh.com; 79/2 Th Mae Nam Kwai; r 600-800B; ☎) With gracious staff and remarkable rooms, Ploy Guesthouse has comfort and contemporary design smack dab in backpacker-land. The clientele tends to be older wanderers. The ground-floor rooms have a bath that opens up into an atrium garden. Don't miss the view from the elevated restaurant-bar and the rooftop terrace.

Inchantree Resort (☎ 0 3462 4914; www.inchantreeresort.com; Th Mae Nam Khwae; r from 950-1500B; ☎) North of the bridge, this boutique resort has set stylish Balinese-style bungalows with open-air showers in among Kanchanaburi's usual assortment of stuffy hotels.

TOP END

Although the following places fall into the top-end category, they do vary in quality and amenities. Most resorts are north of the bridge on either side of the river. Shop the online booking services for discounts.

Duenshine Resort (☎ 0 3465 3369; www.duenshine.com; Th Thamakhham; r from 1500; ☎) Across the river near Felix River Kwai Resort, this family resort has clean and comfortable rooms that aren't especially stylish; the balconies and porches overlooking the lush gardens make up for the dowdy interiors.

River Kwai Hotel (☎ 0 3451 3348; www.riverkwai.co.th; 284/3-16 Th Saengchuto; r from 1500B; ☎) Big and anonymous in-town hotel with modern and spacious rooms that are lacking in character. The on-site disco and bar are a mainstay in the Kanchanaburi nightscene.

Royal River Kwai Resort & Spa (☎ 0 3465 3297; 88 Kanchanaburi-Saiyok Rd; d/ste 1500/2900B; ☎) Stylishly Zen, the rooms could be featured in an interior-design magazine. The riverside, wood-decked pool is the real highlight.

Felix River Kwai Resort (☎ 0 3451 5061; www.felixhotels.com/riverkwai; r from 3500B; ☎) One of Kanchanaburi's longest-running resorts, Felix has the perfect riverside location with manicured grounds and all the resort amenities. Its heyday has come and gone but it hasn't yet been unseated by any other competition.

Eating

Kanchanaburi is a festive, prosperous town and people eat out a lot. Th Saengchuto near the River Kwai Hotel is packed with inexpensive restaurants catering mostly to a local clientele. Don't miss the **night market** (Th Saengchuto), near the bus station, which has the best *hāwy thāwt* (fried mussels in an egg batter) in Thailand.

There are also **food vendors** (Th Song Khwae) on both sides of the road, along the river where you can buy inexpensive takeaways and picnic on mats along the riverbank. In the evenings the floating restaurants along this street are set ablaze with Thais and package tourists. The food quality varies, but it's hard not to enjoy the atmosphere.

Th Mae Nam Khwae is lined with Western tourist-driven restaurants; we trust you and your stomach to make a good choice.

Jukkrū (no Roman-script sign; dishes 50-160B) This restaurant is in a tasty spot on the row opposite the floating restaurants – look for the blue tables and chairs.

Sutjai (dishes 60-180B) A garden-style place on the western bank of the river next to the one-lane bridge. It has a bilingual menu, but little English is spoken. It's a little out of the way, though better than the other riverside restaurants in town.

Srifa Bakery, located on the west side of the bus station, handles most of the pastry and bread business in town. It's a modern place that has bakes up everything from Singapore-style curry puffs to French-style pastries.

Drinking

A crop of bars, complete with videos, pool tables and even prostitutes, has sprouted up along Th Mae Nam Khwae. Along the interior

SLEEP TIGHT, DON'T LET THE KARAOKE BITE

During the day Kanchanaburi is so peaceful that those floating raft rooms right on the river look the perfect place to be cradled to sleep. And then just when the crickets and frogs might switch on, karaoke dominates the airwaves. It seems that urban Thais define fun as leaving noisy Bangkok and going to quiet Kanchanaburi for all-night amplification. On weekdays most of the ruckus booms out of the karaoke restaurants and piers along Th Song Khwae, making the older guesthouses along Soi Rong Hip Oi uninhabitable. Then on the weekends, the floating disco barges lumber up and down the river chasing the sandman away for good.

side of Th Song Khwae are another cluster of bars and discos for weekenders Thais.

No Name Bar (Th Mae Nam Khwae) With a slogan that goes 'Get shitfaced on a shoestring', who could resist this brash backpacker hang-out. Besides coming here for suds, there's a range of Western snacks, satellite TV for football games and BBC.

Discovery (Th Song Khwae) Loud and flashy, this riverside disco fills to the gills on weekends with locals and Bangkok Thais who don't need karaoke to have a good time.

Getting There & Away BUS

Kanchanaburi's bus station is at the southern end of town, near the TAT office on Th Saengchuto. The following destinations are served: Bangkok's Southern bus terminal (100B, three hours, every 20 minutes between 4am and 8pm); Bangkok's Northern and Northeastern bus terminal (2nd/1st class 100/122B, three hours, every hour between 6.30am and 5pm); Nakhon Pathom (70B, two hours, every 15 minutes between 4am and 7pm); Sangkhlaburi (ordinary/air-con 110/200B, five hours, every hour); and Suphanburi (42B, 1½ hours, every 20 minutes), where you can connect to Ayuthaya.

You can bypass Bangkok if you're heading south by going to Ratchaburi (47B, two hours, frequent) and picking up a Hua Hin or Phetchaburi-bound bus. If you're heading north to Chiang Mai or around, your best bet is to backtrack to Bangkok's Northern and Northeastern terminal in time to pick up a Chiang Mai-bound bus.

TRAIN

Kanchanaburi's train station is 2km northwest of the bus station and is within walking distance to the guesthouse area. Kanchanaburi is on the Bangkok Noi-Nam Tok rail line, which includes a portion of the historic Death Railway built by WWII POWs during the Japanese occupation of Thailand. Although the modern usage of the line used to be a low-key commuter route, SRT has decided to promote it as a historic line and hike the rates for foreigners to 100B between any station, regardless of distance. If you're travelling from Bangkok Noi station (located in Thonburi, across the river from Bangkok), this flat fare represents reasonable value, considering the scenery and

subtracting the discomfort of an ordinary (non-airconditioned) cabin.

The most historic part of the journey begins north of Kanchanaburi as the train crosses the Death Railway Bridge and terminates at Nam Tok station. For some the flat rate of 100B will seem negligible; others will feel slightly stung considering a bus costs half the amount and we won't even bother telling you what Thais pay.

Ordinary trains leave Thonburi's Bangkok Noi station at 7.45am and 1.30pm for Kanchanaburi. Trains return to Bangkok Noi from Kanchanaburi at 7.15am, 2.45pm and 5.40pm. The journey takes about four hours.

Trains along the historic portion of the rail line leave Kanchanaburi heading north to Nam Tok at 5.50am, 10.20am and 4.20pm. Return trains depart from Nam Tok at 5.20am, 12.50pm and 3.15pm. The trip takes about two hours. The Nam Tok train station is within walking distance to Sai Yok Noi waterfall and beside the highway; if you miss the return train, you can always flag down one of the frequent Sangkhlaburi-Kanchanaburi buses.

The SRT operates a special **tourist train** (☎ 0 3451 1285) on weekends and holidays that leaves Kanchanaburi around 10.30am for Nam Tok (300B).

Getting Around

Trips from the bus station to the guesthouse area should cost 30B to 40B on a *saamlaw* and 20B on a motorcycle taxi. Public *sawngthæw* run up and down Th Saengchuto for 10B per passenger and are an alternative for shuttling between the bus station and the guesthouse area (hop off once you see the cemetery). The train station is within walking distance of the guesthouse area.

Motorcycles can be rented at guesthouses and shops along Th Mae Nam Khwae for 150B a day. Bicycle rentals cost 50B.

The river ferry that crosses Mae Nam Mae Klong costs 8B per person. Sometimes there's an extra few baht charge for bikes (motor or push), although usually it's included.

One way to see the river and Kanchanaburi's sights is to hire a long-tail boat. To travel between the Jeath War Museum and the Death Railway Bridge costs approximately 250B for up to six people one way. For a two-hour roundtrip tour to three riverside attractions, rates start at 700B. Boats can be hired

from the boat pier off Th Chukkadon or at the Jeath War Museum.

AROUND KANCHANABURI

It isn't obvious how stunning the Kanchanaburi countryside is until you travel northwest of the town into a barely tamed landscape of dragon-scaled mountains and crystalline waterfalls. The peaks and valleys are lush thanks to the bountiful rains and are preserved from concrete by a series of protected forests, the largest such complex in Thailand. Many visitors only skim the surface of this natural world on speedy one-day tours, but real explorers can hit all the highlights on their own and then continue northwest to sleepy Thong Pha Phum, Sangkhlaburi and even peak over the Myanmar border.

The following sites are organised geographically along the major access highways to make it easier to visit via public transport.

The waterfalls outside of Kanchanaburi are best visited during the rainy season from June to October or in November and December, the cool season, when the water levels are most impressive.

Erawan National Park

อุทยานแห่งชาติเอราวัณ

Best known for its stunning seven-tiered waterfall, this 550-sq-km **park** (☎ 0 3457 4222; www.dnp.go.th; admission 400B; ☎ 8am-4.30pm) is easily accessed by public bus from Kanchanaburi.

The cascading and pooling waterfall feeds into Mae Nam Khwae Yai, and it's a 2km hike to the top pool. The uppermost fall is said to resemble Erawan, the three-headed elephant of Hindu mythology.

The trail can be steep, slippery and non-existent from place to place, so wear good walking shoes or sneakers. Also bring a bathing suit as several of the pools are great for swimming.

On weekends and holidays, the falls are very crowded, and are a favourite destination during Songkran (Thai New Year).

The rest of the park is not as popular, especially for people without their own transport. If you have your own transport, check out **Tham Phra That** (off Hwy 323, 12km northwest of the turn-off to the park) and **Tham Wang Badan** (off Hwy 32, 30km northwest of the turn-off to the park).

Park bungalows (☎ 0 3457 4222, in Bangkok 0 2562 0760; bungalows 800-4000B) sleep between two and

50 people. Camping is also available for 90B to 150B; park offices rent out camping equipment. Advance reservations are necessary.

There are run-down hotels outside of the park entrance, but options near Kanchanaburi are better. There are food stalls near the bus station, which is 800m from the falls. To cut down on rubbish, food is not allowed beyond this point.

Buses run from Kanchanaburi all the way to the entrance of the Erawan waterfall (40B, 1½ hours, every hour from 8am to 5.20pm). The last bus back to Kanchanaburi is at 4pm. Within the park, you can rent bicycles for 20B per day and a pick-up truck for 500B for one hour.

Prasat Meuang Singh Historical Park

อุทยานประวัติศาสตร์ปราสาทเมืองสิงห์

One of the most southwestern corners of the Angkor kingdom, this **historical park** (☎ 0 3459 1122; admission 40B; ☎ 8am-5pm) preserves the remains of a 13th-century Khmer outpost that might have been used as a relay point for trade along Mae Nam Khwae Noi. The restored ruins cover 73.6 hectares and were declared a historical park under the administration of the Fine Arts Department in 1987.

All the park's shrines are constructed of laterite bricks and are situated in a huge grassy compound surrounded by layers of laterite ramparts. Sections of the ramparts show seven additional layers of earthen walls, suggesting cosmological symbolism in the city plan. Evidence of a sophisticated water system has also been discovered amid the ramparts and moats.

The town encompasses four groups of ruins, although only two groups have been excavated and are visible. In the centre of the complex is the principal shrine **Prasat Meuang Singh**, which faces east (the cardinal direction of most Angkor temples). Walls surrounding the shrine have gates in each of the cardinal directions. A reproduction of a sculpture of Avalokitesvara stands on the inside of the northern wall and establishes Meuang Singh as a Mahayana Buddhist centre. The original is in the National Museum in Bangkok. Inside the main *prang* is a reproduction of a sculpture of Prajnaparamita, another Mahayana Buddhist deity.

To the northeast of the main temple are the remains of a smaller **shrine** whose original

contents and purpose are unknown. Near the main entrance to the complex at the north gate is a small **exhibition hall** that contains various sculptures of Mahayana Buddhist deities and stucco decorations, most of which are reproductions.

Prasat Meuang Singh is approximately 43km west of Kanchanaburi and is most easily reached by private transport. The train heading north of Kanchanaburi to Nam Tok stops 1.5km away at Ban Kao/Tha Kilen stop (100B; see p216 for train departure times). There might be motorcycle taxis available at the train station if you don't want to walk. Bicycles can be rented at the park for 20B per day.

Ban Kao Neolithic Museum

พิพิธภัณฑ์บ้านเก่ายุคหิน

You really need an archaeology degree to appreciate this **museum** (admission 30B; ☎ 9am-4pm Wed-Sun), displaying 3000- to 4000-year-old artefacts from the excavation of the Ban Kao neolithic site. During the construction of the Death Railway along Mae Nam Khwae Noi, a Dutch POW named Van Heekeren uncovered Neolithic remains in the village of Ban Kao (Old Village), about 7km southeast of Meuang Singh. After WWII a Thai-Danish team retraced Van Heekeren's discovery, concluding that Ban Kao is a major Neolithic burial site. Archaeological evidence suggests it may have been inhabited 10,000 years ago.

Ban Kao is best reached by private transport. The train heading north of Kanchanaburi to Nam Tok stops 6km away at Ban Kao/Tha Kilen stop (100B; see p216 for train departure times). There might be motorcycle taxis available at the train station for the remaining trip to the museum.

Tiger Temple (Wat Luang Ta Bua Yanna Sampanno)

วัดหลวงงาบัวถาณสัมพนัน

What could quite possibly be one of the worst tourist traps in history is actually an incredible photo opportunity. This **forest monastery** (☎ 0 3453 1557; admission 300B; ☎ 3.30-6pm) is a petting zoo for the big boys, tigers that is. Fulfilling its mission as a refuge for all life, this temple adopted its first tiger cub in 1999 after its mother was killed by poachers. Word spread that the temple could care for orphaned tigers and soon others were brought in for adoption. Now 10 tigers reside with the monks.

In the afternoons (between 1pm and 5pm), the tigers are taken out of their cages to an enclosed canyon for exercise and community outreach. Visitors are allowed under supervision to be photographed up close with the beasts. Some of the tigers clearly love to pose, while others get agitated easily. The temple requests that visitors avoid wearing 'hot' colours (red, pink and orange) that would excite the animals.

The obvious question is why the king of the jungle can be approached like a house cat. Some speculate that it is pure monk magic, probably coupled with the docile daytime behaviour of a nocturnal creature, and their familiarity with humans. But a healthy respect of the tigers' power is important, just ask Siegfried and Roy.

Many locals complain that the admission price is too high and whisper about the money being used on superfluous toys for the monks. The temple claims that the entrance fee is being used to build a natural 'island' enclosure so that the tigers can be released from their cages. At this point, it is impossible to predict the outcome.

The temple is 38km from Kanchanaburi on Hwy 323. You could take the Kanchanaburi-Sangkhlaburi public bus to the turn-off, but the temple is another 8km from the main road. An easier alternative is to sign up for one of the guesthouse-arranged afternoon tours to the temple.

Sai Yok Noi Waterfall

น้ำตกไทรโยค

Part of Sai Yok National Park (opposite), this roadside waterfall is a popular local attraction, best visited for observing Thais in nature instead of appreciating nature. The waterfall is 60km northwest from Kanchanaburi on Hwy 323 and easily reached by the Sangkhlaburi-Kanchanaburi bus (40B, one hour, frequent departures); just let the driver know your destination is 'naam tok sai yok noi'. The last bus back is at 4.30pm. Alternatively Nam Tok train station is 2km away (100B; see p216 for train departure times).

Hellfire Pass Memorial

ช่องเขาไฟ

To round out your exploration of the Death Railway historical sites, this **museum** (www.dva.gov.au/commem/oawg/thailand.htm; admission by donation; ☎ 9am-4pm) contains informative background

on the railway and a 4km-long walking trail (which takes four hours roundtrip) along the original railbed. The trail passes seven mountain cuttings that were carved with minimal equipment by POW labour.

The most famous cutting is the 110m **Hellfire Pass** (also known as Konyu Cutting), which is 300m from the museum entrance. The ominous nickname was earned during the 'speedo' period of construction when crews worked around the clock in 16- to 18-hour shifts for 12 weeks. At night the eerie glow of torch light casting shadows of the workers' emaciated frames were reminiscent of the fires of hell. During this period the original crew of 400 Australian POWs was later augmented with 600 additional Australian and British prisoners. By the time the cuttings were finished, 70% of the POW crew had died and were buried in the nearby Konyu Cemetery.

Northwest of the Konyu Cutting, the **Pack of Cards bridge** was so named by prisoners because it collapsed three times during construction.

The museum is operated by the Australian-Thai Chamber of Commerce to honour the Allied POWs and Asian conscripts who died while constructing some of the most difficult stretches of the Thailand-Burma Death Railway. A walking trail map is available at the museum information desk.

The museum and walking trail is 80km northwest of Kanchanaburi on Hwy 323. It is easily accessed by Sangkhlaburi-Kanchanaburi bus (45B, 1½ hours, frequent departures). Tell the driver that your destination is *chawang khao khuat* (Hellfire Pass). The last bus back to Kanchanaburi passes here around 4pm.

Sai Yok National Park

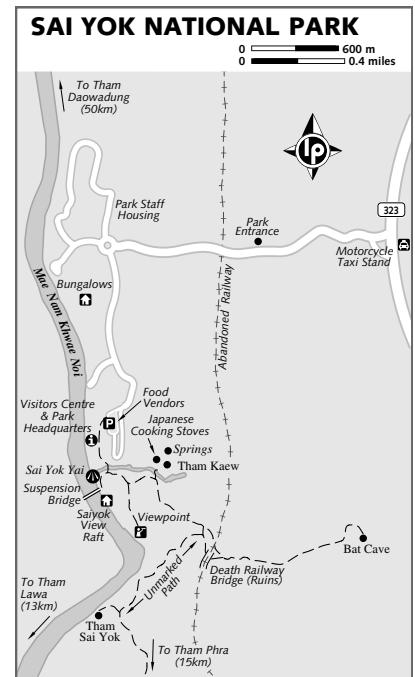
อุทยานแห่งชาติไทรโยค

The 500-sq-km **Sai Yok National Park** (☎ 0 3451 6163; www.dnp.go.th; admission 400B) is not as well developed as other national parks but it is Kanchanaburi's most accessible wilderness. Within the main entrance of the park, you'll find limestone caves, remains of a bridge on the Death Railway and Japanese cooking stoves (actually little more than piles of brick). There's also a network of clear streams that bubble up from springs in the park, and a cave where people go to watch clouds of bats stream out at dusk. Unfortunately, the park does not produce detailed hiking maps or much in the way of visitors information for English speakers.

Near the visitors centre is the misnomer Nam Tok Sai Yok Yai (Sai Yok Yai waterfall), which is better described as being a small cascading creek than a big waterfall. It empties into Mae Nam Khwae Noi near the suspension bridge. It was at this park that the famous Russian-roulette scenes in the 1978 movie *The Deer Hunter* were filmed.

Notable wildlife in the park includes Kitti's hog-nosed bats (the world's smallest mammal), regal crabs, barking deer, blue pittas, wreathed hornbills, gibbons, Malayan porcupines, slow loris and serow. There are also wild elephants that occasionally cross over from Myanmar.

Forestry department **bungalows** (☎ 0 2562 0760; bungalows 800-2100B) are available at Sai Yok National Park; they sleep up to six. Incredibly scenic are the raft guesthouses near the suspension bridge that are totally deserted on weekdays during the rainy season – just you and the river. One of the prettiest ones is **Saiyok View Raft** (☎ 0 3451 4194; 1700B), which has rooms with private bathrooms that look out on to the river. Ask when making reservations about arranging meals, as food options are limited.



There are a row of permanent food stalls near the visitors centre.

The entrance to the park is about 100km northwest of Kanchanaburi and 5km from Hwy 323. You can take the Sangkhlaburi-Kanchanaburi bus (50B, two hours, frequent departures) to the turn-off and hire a motorcycle taxi from the main road to the entrance. Tell the driver that you want '*ndaam tok sai yok yai*'. The last bus back to Kanchanaburi passes at about 3.30pm.

From the raft guesthouses near the suspension bridge, you can rent long-tail boats for sightseeing along the river and to the caves **Tham Daowadung** (below) or Tham Lawa. Chartering a long-tail costs about 400B per hour, but rates are negotiable.

Tham Daowadung

ถ้ำดาวดึงส์

The eight-room **Tham Daowadung** (Daowadung Cave) is one of Thailand's prettiest limestone caves. The cave is best visited once the rainy season has ended when the paths are less slippery and the mosquito population less thriving. Park rangers recommend that you hire a guide who will provide torches. Contact **Santi** (☎ 06167 6855, 09151 4357), who can speak some English and help with transport; he charges about 200B for a tour.

Reaching the cave can be a little tricky. Tham Daowadung is 2.5km from Hwy 323 and 110km northwest of Kanchanaburi. If you are coming from the visitors centre of Sai Yok National Park, it is easiest to hire a long-tail boat (about 800B) from the park to Tha Daowadung (Daowadung pier) and then take a motorcycle taxi (20B) to the cave. If you are coming from outside the park, take the Sangkhlaburi-Kanchanaburi bus (50B, two hours, frequent departures) to the turn-off; tell the driver that you're going to Tham Daowadung. From the main road, you might have to walk or hitch a ride; on weekends there are sometimes public sawngthäew and motorcycle taxis available.

THONG PHA PHUM

ทองผาภูมิ

This little town wedged between shaggy karst mountains is an ideal spot to drop off the map for a spell. During the dry season, weekend Thai tourists pass through en route to nearby Kheuan Khao Laem (Khao Laem Dam; officially named Vachiralongkorn

Dam), but otherwise the major comings and goings are shipments of produce and a few rickety buses. Many of the town's inhabitants are ethnic Mon or Burmese who originally congregated here to work on the construction of the dam. During the rainy season, life becomes slower, albeit wetter – much wetter.

The town of Thong Pha Phum isn't much, with all of its businesses (including one ATM) along one street. Mae Nam Khwae Noi runs along the east side of town.

If you arrive without transport, you can entertain yourself with a walk to the hill-top **temple** on the opposite side of the river. Follow the riverfront road in the direction of the main highway to a footbridge. On the opposite bank of the river, you can scale the steps to the hill top or wander the length of the road through forests and small villages.

South of Thong Pha Phum town is **Hin Dat Hot Springs** (admission 20B; ☎ 6am–10pm), a pleasant place to wrinkle your skin and turn a lobster's shade of red. Protected by trees, two geothermal pools sit beside a fast-moving stream, creating three temperature options for contrasting soakers. Foreigners arrive hardly dressed, while Thai women come fully clothed. The *baw ndaam rawn* (hot springs) is accessible via the Sangkhlaburi-Kanchanaburi bus on Hwy 323 (Km 105 marker) and is about 1km from the main road.

On the same road as the hot springs is **Nam Tok Pha That**, a low-key waterfall. Every foreigner that finds it feels satisfied with their inherent intrepidity.

The southern entrance to **Kheuan Khao Laem** is about 10km northwest of town. Several rustic lakeside resorts, with thatched bungalows and raft houses, become a weekend home-away-from-dorm for Thai college students who pack the rooms with as many friends as they can SMS, and stay up all night for guitar and whiskey sessions. The lake is a huge draw for these students.

All of the places to stay in Thong Pha Phum town cater to Thai tourists. On the main street between the market and the highway, **Som Jainuk Hotel** (☎ 0 3459 982; 29/10 Mu 1; r 200–500B; 📶) has a range of options from basic boarding rooms to more comfortable air-con bungalows set around a shaded courtyard.

So Boonyong Hotel (☎ 0 3459 9441; 27 Mu 1; r 200–400B; 📶), just beyond the market, is a multi-storey hotel with large modern rooms. The

THAILAND'S GREEN BELT

In a country where more concrete means more success, the western portion of Kanchanaburi Province is a surprising retreat into the wilderness. Save for a few minor towns and villages, most of the landscape is dominated by national parks that have developed little in the way of Thailand's signature hybridisation of resorts and reserves. These are fairly far-flung outings that don't normally appear on a tourist's two-week itinerary and have little in the way of amenities.

The entrance fee to all national parks is 400B; park-run **accommodations** (📞 bookings 0 2562 0760; www.dnp.go.th/parkreserve; bungalows from 1200–1800B) are also available. The following parks are best accessed by private transport.

Si Nakharin National Park (☎ 0 3451 6667; Tha Kradan district) is best known for Huay Khamin (Turmeric Stream), one of the provinces most powerful waterfalls. This area is also the headwaters of Mae Nam Khwae Yai. The park can be accessed on Hwy 3199 north of Erawan National Park, but the 42km stretch of road is quite rough. Continue to Tha Kradan (Kradan Pier), near Si Nakharin Dam, to take a ferry across the reservoir to the waterfall trail. Camping is available near the falls. There are plans to improve access to this area but road construction has been suspended pending an environmental impact study.

Chaloem Ratanakosin National Park (☎ 0 3451 9606; Nong Preu district) is a 59-sq-km park that attracts spelunkers because of two caves: Tham Than Lot Yai and Tham Than Lot Noi. There are also waterfalls within hiking distance of park bungalows and the forest area is the watershed of Mae Nam Mae Klong. The park is 97km north of Kanchanaburi. Buses from Kanchanaburi to Ban Nong Preu (55B, two to three hours) leave every 20 minutes between 6.15am and 6.30pm. Once in Ban Nong Preu, you can hire transport to the park entrance, but most visitors arrive by private transport via Hwy 3086.

Thong Pha Phum National Park (☎ 0 1382 0359; Thong Pha Phum district) is a 1120-sq-km green belt that connects Khao Laem and Sai Yok national parks to encourage the migration of the provinces' threatened animal species. Waterfalls, caves and a lush tropical climate are the park's main attributes. Nearby in the town of Pilok is a reclusive but charming guesthouse-homestay called **Forest Glade** (☎ 0 1325 9471; r 1200–1400B); the locals know it and can provide directions. The park is about 60km west of Thong Pha Phum and is accessible by private transport via Hwy 3272 off Hwy 323.

Khao Laem National Park (☎ 0 3453 2099; Thong Pha Phum district), measuring in at 3200-sq-km, is Thailand's largest protected land parcel. Popular attractions include Nam Tok Takien Thong, where pools are suitable for swimming nearly year-round. Tham Sukho is a large limestone cave shrine just off the highway at the Km 42 marker. The park is 34km south of Sangkhlaburi between the Km 39 and Km 40 markers; you'll find a turn-off on the east side of the highway.

Thung Yai & Huay Kha Khaeng Wildlife Sanctuary was designated a Unesco World Heritage site in 1991 and it adjoins Um Phang Wildlife Sanctuary to the north and Khao Laem National Park to the west, forming one of the largest protected areas in the region. The area preserves grassland and dry tropical forest, claiming a diverse ecosystem of flora and fauna. The sanctuary is also one of the last natural habitats in Thailand for the tiger. The **Western Forest Conservation Club** (WFCC; www.thungyai.org), along with other groups, works with the Thai government to track, count and protect the tigers that roam in this area. Bordering Myanmar, the reserve is also home to many displaced Karen and Hmong communities that introduce many potential threats to the forest integrity. Poaching as well as illegal logging and farming have contributed to the decline of natural habitat, including the tiger population. Infrastructure within the park is limited; the Uthai Thani-based company **Thai Country Trails** (www.thaicountrytrails.com) can arrange tours or provide additional information.

manager speaks English and can give you sightseeing advice.

Hardly a step above camping, the **Kraton Koudin Resort** (☎ 0 1362 8857; r 300–600B) is a collection of rustic, wooden bungalows (all with

shared bathrooms), planted beside a cascading stream that slices the property in half so that guests can sleep to the sounds of rushing water. The owners can arrange transport from the main road as well as outings to nearby

waterfalls and the hot springs. It's south of Thong Pha Phum – to get here, take the Sangkhlaburi–Kanchanaburi bus to Baan Saphan Lao. The 'resort' is 7km from the Km 110 marker on Hwy 323.

In typical Mon style, vendors on the main street near the highway proffer curry in long rows of pots; instead of two or three curry choices more typical of Thai vendors, the Mon vendors lay out eight or more – all delicious. A small night market convenes near the centre of town each evening with the usual rice and noodle dishes.

Getting There & Away

All buses arrive and depart from Thong Pha Phum's market. Ordinary buses depart from Kanchanaburi (70B, three hours, every 30 minutes between 6am and 6.30pm) and minivans to Sangkhlaburi also stop in Thong Pha Phum (60B, two hours, three times daily). There is also a new air-con bus service to Bangkok's Northern and Northeastern bus terminal (150B, five hours, four departures daily).

SANGKHLABURI

จังหวัดบุรีรัมย์
pop 10,800

Geopolitical borders guillotine one nation from another but rarely succeed in severing the body ethnic identity. Sangkhlaburi is an excellent example of a border town's ethnic spectrum, populated by Burmese, Karen, Mon, Thai and a small group of Lao. Each group holds fast to their mother tongue; in some cases because it is the only language they know, in other cases as a farewell gesture to an abandoned homeland. To the immigrants from Myanmar, Sangkhlaburi must represent a beginning, but from any other direction this is the end of the road with all of its attendant remoteness.

Sangkhlaburi sits at the edge of the huge Kheuan Khao Laem (Khao Laem Dam); the town was created after the dam flooded out an older village near the confluence of the three rivers that now feed the reservoir. There's not much to do in town except wander the traffic-less streets and watch the fishing boats putter across the lake. The town has become a popular recreation spot for jungle tours and elephant treks. The town comes alive on **Mon National Day**, celebrated during the last week of July.

Information

For foreign-exchange services head to Siam Commercial Bank (ATM), in the city centre near the market. Internet access has arrived in town, but the exact location is always changing; it's typically within eye-shot of the market. There is an international phone in front of the post office (located on the main street).

Sights & Activities

WANG KHA

วังกา

On the opposite bank of the lake from Sangkhlaburi is a **Mon settlement** (Wang Kha). The village was relocated to this spot after the dam's construction flooded the original village that developed in Thailand during Burma's post-independence civil wars. The persistent conflicts across the border swelled the population with displaced people who sustained Wang Kha's connection with its ethnic Mon character. Just 15 years ago the settlement looked more like an isolated Burmese village than a run-of-the-mill Thai neighbourhood. Assimilation and development has taken its natural course and the geographic dislocation of years past is not as pronounced. But the quiet lanes are still worth a look; you'll see squatty wooden houses and bike-riding kids, and some of the older women still wearing the Burmese-style face powder and gnawing on a cheroot.

To get to the settlement follow the **wooden bridge** (Saphan Mon), said to be Thailand's longest, across the lake from town.

A **day market** in the centre of the village is a good spot to sample pots of rich Mon curry and peruse the daily shopping needs.

North of the market is **Wat Wang Wiwekaram** (Wat Mon), which is regarded as the spiritual centre of the Mon people in Thailand. The temple occupies two complexes that are approximately 3km apart. To the right of the T-junction is the multiroofed *wihaan* with stainless-steel-plated pillars, heavy, carved wooden doors, and marble banisters. To the left of the T-junction (near the shores of the lake) is the landscape-dominating Chedi Luang Phaw Uttama. Constructed in the style of the Mahabodhi *chedi* in Bodhgaya, India, it is topped by about 6kg of gold.

A 300- to 400-year-old disintegrating *chedi* is located about 50m south of Chedi Luang Phaw Uttama. From the edge of the *chedi* grounds is a view of the tremendous lake and

WHO ARE THE MON?

The Mon ethnic group is one of Southeast Asia's oldest peoples, whose historic kingdom of Dvaravati flourished in the 6th to 11th centuries, covering parts of Burma and the central plains of modern-day Thailand. The Mon and their cultural traditions intermarried extensively with ethnic groups in the central plains, and much of what is associated with 'Thai' culture today derives from this union.

Eventually the Mon territory shrank to a distinct section of Burma where they struggled against the more dominant ethnic Burmese. The British capitalised on this long-standing rivalry during its colonisation campaign, promising the Mon independence in exchange for support. After Burma's independence in 1948, the Mon resisted the consolidation of power under the ethnic Burmese-led military and struggled for self-determination. A semi-autonomous Mon state was created in 1974, but armed clashes continued until the late 1990s when a ceasefire was negotiated.

During surges in violence, Mon villagers escaped fighting by crossing the border into western Thailand, mainly around Sangkhlaburi. The greatest influx of refugees occurred between the mid-1980s until 1997. They were often given temporary asylum in refugee camps, but periodically forced to return to Myanmar. Like other ethnic refugees, Mon who remained in Thailand have no political status, can't work legally in the country or send their children to Thai public schools. One major improvement in their limbo state came in 2006 when the Thai government granted citizenship to some 2000 Mon children living in Sangkhlaburi who were born in the country.

Although displacement of Mon people from Myanmar has decreased, Thailand still receives ongoing waves of economic migrants as well as other ethnic asylum seekers from its unstable neighbour. Of the two refugee camps on the border near Sangkhlaburi, Karen make up the majority with a minority of Burmese nationals of varying ethnic backgrounds who have been caught working illegally in Thailand.

the three rivers that feed into it. A Burmese handicrafts market convenes at the *chedi* daily from mid-morning until sunset.

For such a remote temple, Wat Wang Wiwekaram claims a nationally revered monk, Luang Phaw Uttama. He was born in Burma in 1910 and fled to Thailand in 1949 to escape civil war; he was instrumental in the spiritual and educational life of the Mon community and helped secure this area after the Mon village's previous location was submerged by the construction of the dam. He died at the age of 97 at Bangkok's Srirat Hospital in 2006 and his medical bills were covered by the queen.

KHAO LAEM RESERVOIR

เขื่อนเขาแล่ม

This huge lake was formed when the Vachiralongkorn Dam (locally known as Khao Laem Dam) was constructed across Mae Nam Khwae Noi near Thong Pha Phum in 1983. The lake submerged an entire village at the confluence of the Khwae Noi, Ranti and Sangkhalia Rivers. The spires of the village's **Wat Sam Prasop** (Three Junction Temple) can be seen protruding from the lake in the dry season.

Canoes can be rented for exploring the lake, or for longer trips you can hire a long-

tail boat and pilot. **Lake boating** is a tranquil pastime, best early in the morning with mist and bird life; early evening is also good for bird-watching.

Guesthouses in Sangkhlaburi arrange all sorts of activities on the water, including bamboo rafting and sightseeing boat tours.

For those interested in practising forest meditation, the Sunyataram Forest Monastery, 42km south of Sangkhlaburi, also operates a meditation centre on an island in the middle of the lake called **Ko Kaew Sunyataram** (Sunyataram Jewel Isle). Permission to visit the meditation island must be obtained from Sunyataram Forest Monastery beforehand; see **Dhamma Thai** (www.dhammathai.org) for more information.

Volunteering

At the end of the main road through town is **Baan Unrak** (House of Joy; www.baanunrak.org), founded in 1991 to care for orphaned children. Several years later the centre expanded to include a weaving centre to provide supplemental income to local women struggling to support their families, a shelter for abused or destitute women, and a primary school. The need for such outreach is great in

Sangkhlaburi because of the refugee population and other non-Thai citizen groups who suffer from poverty, HIV/AIDs and/or substance abuse.

Access to medical care is another pressing concern for the impoverished community, many of whom do not qualify for Thailand's national health-care plan. The foundation offers natural medicines, underwrites some medical procedures and partners with **Unite For Sight** (www.uniteforsight.org), an international medical volunteer organisation. Volunteers are welcome to donate their time to the orphanage or the school and typically reside at the complex following the rules of the foundation's neo-humanist philosophy, an Indian tradition of universal love, daily meditation and a vegetarian lifestyle.

Sleeping

Burmese Inn (☎ 0 3459 5146; www.sangkhlaburi.com; 52/3 Mu 3; r from 80-500B; 🚽) It isn't the cleanest in town, but it is the cheapest. The flimsy huts are hammered into a hillside overlooking the wooden bridge. The Austrian co-owner is knowledgeable about the area.

P Guest House (☎ 0 3459 5061; www.pguesthouse.com; 8/1 Mu 1; r from 200-700B) Well worth the 1.2km walk from the bus stop, P Guest House has spacious, stone bungalows with verandas along a slope overlooking the lake. Cheaper rooms share a remarkably clean bathroom. P also organises elephant treks, and rents canoes and kayaks.

Ponntatee Resort (☎ 0 3459 5134; 84 Mu 1; r 800-1200B; 🚽) Trickling down the hillside overlooking the lake, this maze-like hotel has modern but drab rooms, some with stunning views.

Eating

Don't leave town without trying the local Burmese curry. There are a couple of places around the market that serve a delicious assortment of curries (20B). Many of the guesthouses do a thriving dinner business because of their waterfront locations.

Baan Unrak Bakery (☎ 0 3459 5428; snacks 10-30B) One of the few non-guesthouse restaurants in town, this simple café has a rotating selection of baked goods and vegetarian options. It is affiliated with the Baan Unrak organisation that operates an orphanage and school in Sangkhlaburi (p223); many volunteers spend their free time at the café.

Shopping

Visitors interested in acquiring some Karen weaving should check out the small store at the Baan Unrak Bakery; the products are made by the Baan Unrak women's cooperative.

Getting There & Away

Sangkhlaburi's buses haphazardly assemble either at the informal bus station across from the market or at ticket counters nearby. If you're looking for a particular bus, go and ask the motorcycle taxi drivers – they know everything.

Ordinary bus 8203 leaves Sangkhlaburi for Kanchanaburi (110B) at 6.45am, 8.15am, 10.15am and 1.15pm, and takes five to six hours, depending on how many mishaps occur on the Thong Pha Phum to Sangkhlaburi road. An air-con bus (200B) leaves every hour from 6.30am to 3.30pm and takes four hours. An air-con bus also trundles to Bangkok's Northern and Northeastern bus terminal (Mo Chit, 2nd/1st class 228/295B, four times daily).

The distance between Kanchanaburi and Sangkhlaburi is about 230km. From Thong Pha Phum to Sangkhlaburi it's 74km. The road between Thong Pha Phum and Sangkhlaburi is quite rough but it is one of the most beautiful in Thailand. It winds through mountains of limestone and through a major teak reforestation project.

THREE PAGODAS PASS

ด่านเจดีย์สามองค์

Thailand's western border town with Myanmar is named for three rather small pagodas (Chedi Sam Ong). But these forgettable landmarks are not the reason for a visit. Instead travellers come to peak into Myanmar without a full commitment. This is not an official border crossing, but foreigners are allowed a day pass into the Myanmar town of **Payathonzu** and its souvenir market.

A true frontier town, Payathonzu has around a half-dozen Burmese **teahouses** (a couple of them with *nam-bya* – the Burmese equivalent to Indian naan bread); several **mercantile shops** with Burmese *longyi* (sarongs), cheroots and clothes; and a few general souvenir shops with Mon-Karen-Burmese handicrafts. It is necessary to bargain; traders speak some English and also some Thai.

A Buddhist temple, **Wat Suwankhiri**, can be seen on a bluff near the town. A Myanmar

military checkpoint at the edge of town usually bars all visitors from leaving the town limits.

Three Pagodas Pass hosts a **Songkran Festival** during April, complete with cockfights; hemp-fisted, Thai-Burmese kickboxing; and Karen, Thai, Burmese and Mon folk dancing.

Not readily apparent to the daytripper, this remote crossing once vacillated between the Karen National Union and the Mon Liberation Front, since Three Pagodas was one of the only passable routes through hundreds of miles of rugged mountains. This 'toll gate' was used by the ethnic armies to collect tax on smuggled goods. The funds were often used to finance armed resistance against the Myanmar government.

The Myanmar government wrested control of the town in 1989 from both the Karen and Mon and has been firmly established here ever since. It renamed the town Payathonzu (Three Pagodas) and filled it with shops catering to an odd mix of troops and tourists. Teak furniture shops on either side of the border are one of the most dominant cottage industries, but recent reports suggest that these businesses are declining because of scarcer sources of timber or excessive logging taxes levied by the Myanmar government or ethnic groups.

Foreigners are allowed to enter Myanmar on a day pass and all immigration formalities can be arranged at the border. This crossing does not issue visa extensions. You will need to temporarily surrender your passport, along with a passport photo, to the Thai immigration office before crossing the border. At the Myanmar immigration office, you must submit a copy of the photo page of your passport and a passport photo, in addition to 500B or US\$10. Upon your return into Thailand, you will receive your passport back. There is a small photocopy shop near the Thai immigration office where you can arrange border documentation.

Occasionally this border is closed, especially during conflicts between ethnic armies and the central Myanmar government, but these incidents are less frequent now than in years past.

Getting There & Away

Sāwngthāew leave Sangkhlaburi's bus station (30B) every half-hour from 6am to 4pm. Along the way you'll pass little bamboo-hut villages inhabited by Mon or Karen people. The last sāwngthāew back to Sangkhlaburi leaves Three Pagodas Pass at around 4pm.

The border is only a short walk from the sāwngthāew stop in Three Pagodas Pass.

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