



# Northern Thailand

The first true Thai kingdoms arose in northern Thailand, endowing this region with a rich cultural heritage. Whether at the sleepy town of Lamphun or the famed ruins of Sukhothai, the ancient origins of Thai art and culture can still be seen. A distinct Thai culture thrives in northern Thailand. The northerners are very proud of their local customs, considering their ways to be part of Thailand's 'original' tradition. Look for symbols displayed by northern Thais to express cultural solidarity: *kàlae* (carved wooden 'X' motifs) on house gables and the ubiquitous *séua mâw hâwm* (indigo-dyed rice-farmer's shirt). The north is also the home of Thailand's hill tribes, each with their own unique way of life. The region's diverse mix of ethnic groups range from Karen and Shan to Akha and Yunnanese.

The scenic beauty of the north has been fairly well preserved and has more natural forest cover than any other region in Thailand. It is threaded with majestic rivers, dotted with waterfalls, and breathtaking mountains frame almost every view.

The provinces in this chapter have a plethora of natural, cultural and architectural riches. Enjoy one of the most beautiful Lanna temples in Lampang Province. Explore the impressive trekking opportunities and the quiet Mekong river towns of Chiang Rai Province. The exciting hairpin bends and stunning scenery of Mae Hong Son Province make it a popular choice for trekking, river and motorcycle trips. Home to many Burmese refugees, Mae Sot in Tak Province is a fascinating frontier town. Less visited areas like Um Phang are becoming well known for more remote treks, and provinces like Nan and Phrae are worth the extra hike for the unusual temples and some of the best mountain scenery in the north.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Exploring **caves** (p443) and doing **motorcycle rides** (p443) around Soppong
- Taking in the frontier-town feel of **Mae Sot** (p417) and then heading to Um Phang, where the end of the road leads to **Nam Tok Thilawsu** (p426), Thailand's biggest, most beautiful waterfall
- Learning to be a *mahout* (elephant caretaker) at Lampang's **Elephant Conservation Centre** (p348)
- Getting off the beaten path in Nan to see the beautiful murals at **Wat Phumin** (p388)
- Cycling around the awesome ruins of Thailand's 'golden age' at **Sukhothai** (p403) and **Si Satchanalai-Chaliang Historical Park** (p408)
- Volunteering in an Akha village in **Chiang Rai Province** (p354)



**FAST FACTS**

- **Best Time to Visit** November to March
- **Population** 7.8 Million

**History**

Northern Thailand's history has been characterised by the shifting powers of various independent principalities. One of the most significant early cultural influences in the north was the Mon kingdom of Hariphunchai (modern Lamphun), which held sway from the late 8th century until the 13th century. The Hariphunchai art and Buddha images are particularly distinctive, and many good examples can be found at the Hariphunchai National Museum in Lamphun.

The Thais, who had migrated down from China since around the 7th century, united various principalities in the 13th century – this resulted in the creation of Sukhothai and the taking of Hariphunchai from the Mon. In 1238 Sukhothai declared itself an independent kingdom under King Si Intharathit and quickly expanded its sphere of influence. Sukhothai is considered by Thais to be the first true Thai kingdom. In 1296 King Mengrai established Chiang Mai after conquering the influential Mon kingdom of Hariphunchai.

Later, Chiang Mai, in an alliance with Sukhothai in the 14th and 15th centuries, became a part of the larger kingdom of Lan Na Thai (Million Thai Rice Fields), popularly referred to as Lanna. This extended as far south as Kamphaeng Phet and as far north as Luang Prabang in Laos. The golden age of Lanna was in the 15th century. For a short time the Sukhothai capital was moved to Phitsanulok (1448–86), and Chiang Mai became an important religious and cultural centre. However, many Thai alliances declined in the 16th century. This weakness led to the Burmese capturing Chiang Mai in 1556 and their control of Lanna for the next two centuries. The Thais regrouped after the Burmese took Ayuthaya in 1767, and under King Kawila, Chiang Mai was recaptured in 1774 and the Burmese were pushed north.

In the late 19th century Rama V of Bangkok made efforts to integrate the northern region with the centre to ward off the colonial threat. The completion of the northern railway to Chiang Mai in 1921 strengthened those links

until the northern provinces finally became part of the kingdom of Siam in this early period of the 20th century.

**Climate**

The mountains in northern Thailand influence the climate. It can get quite cold in the highland town of Mae Hong Son and rain pockets can get stuck in the ranges of Tak Province. The central-plains areas around Sukhothai are less variable.

**National Parks**

Travellers who make it to one of northern Thailand's national parks usually consider it a highlight of their trip. In a region where the elevation reaches as high as 2000m, the north is home to some of Thailand's rarest geography and wildlife. Chae Son (p349) and Thung Salaeng Luang (p401) were designated for wildlife protection. While Phu Hin Rong Kla (p400) is of interest for its ties to Thailand's Communist Party. Other parks in the north include Lum Nam Kong National Park (p433) with its lazy river, and Doi Phu Kha (see p391) with its 2000m peaks. All of the national parks in this section are worth the extra effort if you love nature and want some peace and quiet.

**Language**

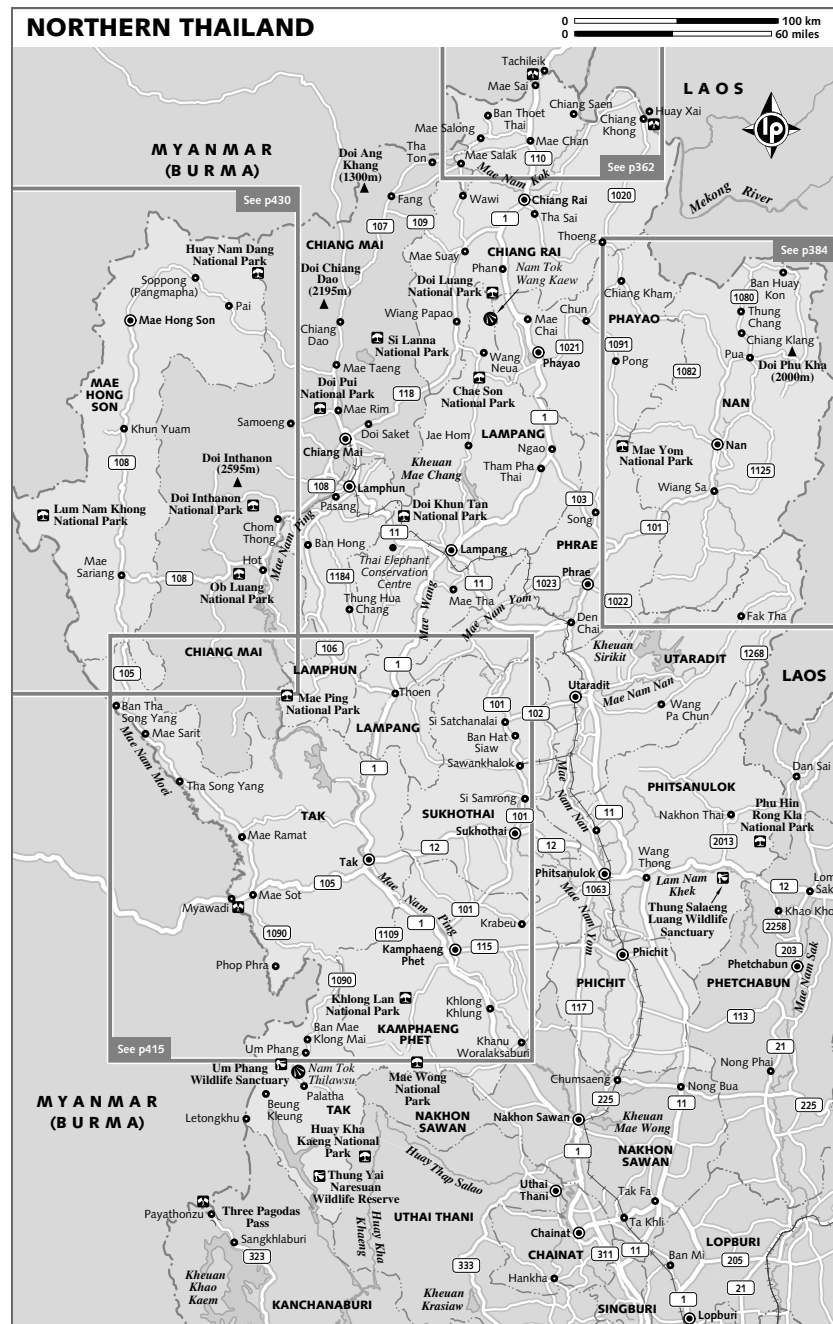
Northern Thais (*khon meuang*) are known for their relaxed, easy-going manner, which shows up in their speech – the northern dialect (*kham meuang*) has a slower rhythm than Thailand's three other main dialects.

**Getting There & Away**

Some travellers make stops in this region en route between Bangkok and Chiang Mai. Others only use Chiang Mai as a point for other destinations. Either way, train access is limited to the northern line out of Chiang Mai. But just about everywhere in the region is accessible by bus, except the outlying communities along the Myanmar border where the *sawnghaew* (pick-up truck) is the transport of choice.

**Getting Around**

If you know how to ride a motorcycle, rent one. If you don't know how to ride one it's easy to learn and you'll be glad you did. For around 150B per day, sometimes less,



you can get out of town and see the idyllic countryside. This increased independence often leads to more interesting interactions with the locals, outside the normal tourist circuit.

## LAMPHUN PROVINCE

### LAMPHUN

ลำพูน

pop 15,200

This quiet town, capital of the province of the same name, lies southeast of Chiang Mai on the banks of Nam Mae Kuang.

Best visited as a day trip from Chiang Mai, Lamphun was, along with Pasang, the centre of a small Hariphunchai principality (AD 750–1281) originally ruled by the semilegendary Mon queen, Chama Thewi. Long after its Mon progenitor and predecessor Dvaravati was vanquished by the Khmer, Hariphunchai succeeded in remaining independent of both the Thais and the Khmer.

The enthusiastically run museum is a good place to learn about this quiet town's venerable history. The ancient and vibrant working temple of Wat Phra That Hariphunchai is a must see, and August is a lively time to visit Lamphun and sample the fruits of the surrounding fields at its longan festival (right).

### Sights

There are many more nearby temples than the two described here. Although none enjoys the fame of Wat Phra That Hariphunchai and Wat Chama Thewi, many of them are quite old and atmospheric.

### WAT PHRA THAT HARIPHUNCHAI

วัดพระธาตุศรีภูกุ้มข้าว

Thais consider the tallest *chedi* at this wat to be one of the eight holiest *chedi* in Thailand. Built on the site of Queen Chama Thewi's palace in 1044 (1108 or 1157 according to some datings), this temple lay derelict for many years until Khruba Siwichai, one of northern Thailand's most famous monks, made renovations in the 1930s. It boasts some interesting post-Dvaravati architecture, a couple of fine Buddha images and two old *chedi* of the original Hariphunchai style. The tallest *chedi*, Chedi Suwan, dating from 1418, is 46m high and is surmounted by a nine-tiered gold umbrella weighing 6.5kg.

### WAT CHAMA THEWI

วัดจามเทวี

A more unusual Hariphunchai *chedi* can be seen at Wat Chama Thewi (popularly called Wat Kukut), which is said to have been erected in the 8th or 9th century as a Dvaravati monument. It was later rebuilt by the Hariphunchai Mon in 1218. As it has been restored many times since then, it's now a mixture of several schools of architecture. The stepped profile bears a remarkable resemblance to the 12th-century Satmahal Prasada at Polonnaruwa in Sri Lanka.

Each side of the *chedi* – known as Chedi Suwan Chang Kot – has five rows of three Buddha figures, diminishing in size on each higher level. The standing Buddhas, although made recently, are in Dvaravati style.

### HARIPHUNCHAI NATIONAL MUSEUM

พิพิธภัณฑสถานแห่งชาติลำพูน

**Hariphunchai National Museum** (☎ 0 5351 1186; hariphunchao-mu@thaimail.com; Th Inthayongyot; admission 30B; 🕒 9am–4pm Wed–Sun) Across the street from Wat Phra That Hariphunchai, Lamphun's National Museum has a collection of artefacts and Buddhas from the Dvaravati, Hariphunchai and Lanna kingdoms, as well as a stone inscription gallery with Mon and Thai Lanna scripts. The curator's passion about her museum and Lamphun's heritage is infectious. The temporary exhibitions are also interesting, focusing on more contemporary subjects like the settlement of the Yong in Lamphun. There is a small bookshop with some English titles.

### Festivals

During the second week of August, Lamphun hosts the annual **Lam Yai Festival**, which features floats made of fruit and, of course, a Miss Lam Yai contest.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Si Lamphun Hotel** (no roman-script sign; ☎ 0 5351 1176; Th Inthayongyot, Soi 5; s/d 100/200B) On the main street through town, south of Wat Phra That, this small hotel has very basic rooms with ceiling fans.

**Supamit Holiday Inn** (☎ 0 5353 4865; fax 0 5353 4355; Th Chama Thewi; s/d 250–400B; 📶) Although it bears no relation to the international hotel chain, this is a solid choice, with 50 spacious, clean and airy rooms. The restaurant on the 5th floor serves good fare, and has floor-to-ceiling

### WHAT TO EXPECT IN NORTHERN THAILAND

We list high-season rack rates in this book. See the boxed text on p149 for more details on the different sleeping categories.

- Budget (under 600B)
- Midrange (600B to 1500B)
- Top End (over 1500B)

windows giving panoramic views of Lamphun and the surrounding rice fields. It's opposite Wat Chama Thewi.

There is a string of decent **noodle and rice shops** (Th Inthayongyot) south of Wat Phra That on the main street.

### Getting There & Away

Blue sawngthæw to Lamphun (15B) from Chiang Mai leave at 30-minute intervals throughout the day from Th Chiang Mai-Lamphun, just south of the Tourist Authority of Thailand (TAT) office on the opposite side of the road. A small bus station on the same road, north of the TAT office, has regular buses going to Lamphun (20B). Buses also go from Chiang Mai Arcade bus terminal (32B).

In the reverse direction, sawngthæw leave Lamphun from the queue near the intersection of Th Inthayongyot and Th Wang Khwa. The 26km ride (15B, one hour) is along a beautiful country road, parts of which are bordered by tall dipterocarp trees. You can also pick up a bus outside the Hariphunchai National Museum (15B) or go to the bus terminal on Th Sanam.

### PASANG

ป่าซาง

Not to be confused with Bo Sang, the umbrella village, Pasang is known for its cotton weaving. It's not really a shopping destination, but more of a place to see how the weaving is done. The selection of cotton products is limited mostly to floor coverings, tablecloths and other useful household items.

**Wat Chang Khao Noi Neua**, off Rte 106 towards the southern end of town, features an impressive gilded Lanna-style *chedi*. Near the wat is a cotton-products store called **Wimon** (no roman-script sign), where you can watch people weaving on looms in the front of the shop. You'll also find a few **shops** near the

main market in town, opposite Wat Pasang Ngam. A few vendors in the **market** also sell blankets, tablecloths, *phâakhamáa* (cotton wraparounds), shirts and other woven-cotton products.

A sawngthæw will take you from Lamphun to Pasang for 10B. If you're heading south to Tak Province using your own vehicle, traffic is generally lighter along Rte 106 to Thoen than on Hwy 11 to Lampang; a winding 10km section of the road north of Thoen is particularly scenic. Both highways intersect Hwy 1 south, which leads directly to Tak's capital.

### WAT PHRA PHUTTHABAHT TAKH PHAH

วัดพระพุทธรูปบาทตากผ้า

Regionally famous, this wat belonging to the popular Mahanikai sect is a shrine to one of the north's most renowned monks, Luang Pu Phromma. It's about 9km south of Pasang or 20km south of Lamphun off Rte 106 in the Tambol Ma-Kok (follow Rte 1133 1km east). It contains a lifelike resin figure of the deceased monk sitting in meditation.

One of his disciples, Ajahn Thirawattho, teaches meditation to a large contingent of monks who are housed in a *kùti* (a monk's dwelling or meditation hut) of laterite brick. Behind the spacious grounds are a park and a steep hill mounted by a *chedi*. The wat is named after an unremarkable Buddha footprint (*phrá phúththábaat*) shrine in the middle of the lower temple grounds and another spot where Buddha supposedly dried his *táak pháa* (robes).

A sawngthæw from Lamphun to the wat costs 20B.

### DOI KHUN TAN NATIONAL PARK

อุทยานแห่งชาติดอยขุนตาด

This 225-sq-km **park** (☎ 0 5351 9216-7; www.dnp.go.th; admission 400B) receives around 10,000 visitors a year, making it one of northern Thailand's least visited. It ranges in elevation from 350m at the bamboo forest lowlands to 1363m at the pine-studded summit of Doi Khun Tan. Wildflowers, including orchids, ginger and lilies, are abundant. At the park headquarters there are maps of well-marked trails that range from short walks around the headquarters' vicinity to trails covering the mountain's four peaks; there's also a trail to **Nam Tok Tat Moei** (7km round trip). Thailand's longest train tunnel (1352m), which opened

in 1921 after six years of manual labour by thousands of Lao workers (several of whom are said to have been killed by tigers), intersects the mountain slope.

**Bungalows** (☎ 0 2562 0760; r 400B, bungalows 4/6/9 people 1500/2200/2700B) are available near the park headquarters. You can pitch your own tent for 30B or rent a two-person tent for 150B. There is a restaurant by the bungalows. The park is very popular on cool season weekends.

This park is unique in that the main access is from the Khun Tan train station (15B, 1½ hours, daily trains from Chiang Mai at 6.45am, 9.20am and 3.40pm). Once at the Khun Tan station, cross the tracks and follow a steep, marked path 1.3km to the park headquarters. By car take the Chiang Mai-Lampang highway to the Mae Tha turn-off, then follow signs along a steep unpaved road for 18km.

## LAMPANG PROVINCE

### LAMPANG

ลำปาง

pop 50,700

Many Thais visit Lampang for a taste of a more sedate urbane life. The main pull for *faràng* (Western) travellers is the renowned Elephant Conservation Centre (p348), and Wat Phra That Lampang Luang (p348), for many the most beautiful wooden temple in northern Thailand.

### History

Although Lampang Province was inhabited as far back as the 7th century in the Dvaravati period, legend says Lampang city was founded by the son of Hariphunchai's Queen Chama Thewi, playing an important part in the history of the Hariphunchai Kingdom (8th to 13th centuries).

Like Chiang Mai, Phrae and other older northern cities, Lampang was built as a walled rectangle alongside a river (in this case Mae Wang). At the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries Lampang, along with nearby Phrae, became an important centre for the domestic and international teak trade. A large British-owned timber company brought in Burmese supervisors familiar with the teak industry in Burma to train Burmese and Thai loggers in the area. These well-paid supervisors, along with independent Burmese teak

merchants who plied their trade in Lampang, sponsored the construction of more than a dozen impressive temples in the city. Burmese and Shan artisans designed and built the temples out of local materials, especially teak. Their legacy lives on in several of Lampang's best-maintained wats.

### Information

There are many banks with ATMs along Th Boonyawat, especially near Wat Suan Dok.

**Arabica Coffee Internet** (Th Thakhráo Noi; per hr 20B; ☎ 9am-10pm)

**Internet & Games** (Th Thip Chang; per hr 20B; ☎ 10am-10pm)

**Post office** (Th Thakhráo Noi; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-12am Sat)

**Tourist information office** (☎ 0 5421 9300; Th Thakhráo Noi; ☎ 8am-12pm, 1-4.30pm Mon-Fri) Locally run, with a decent map of the area and details about local sights.

### Sights

#### WAT PHRA KAEW DON TAO

วัดพระแก้วดอนเต้า

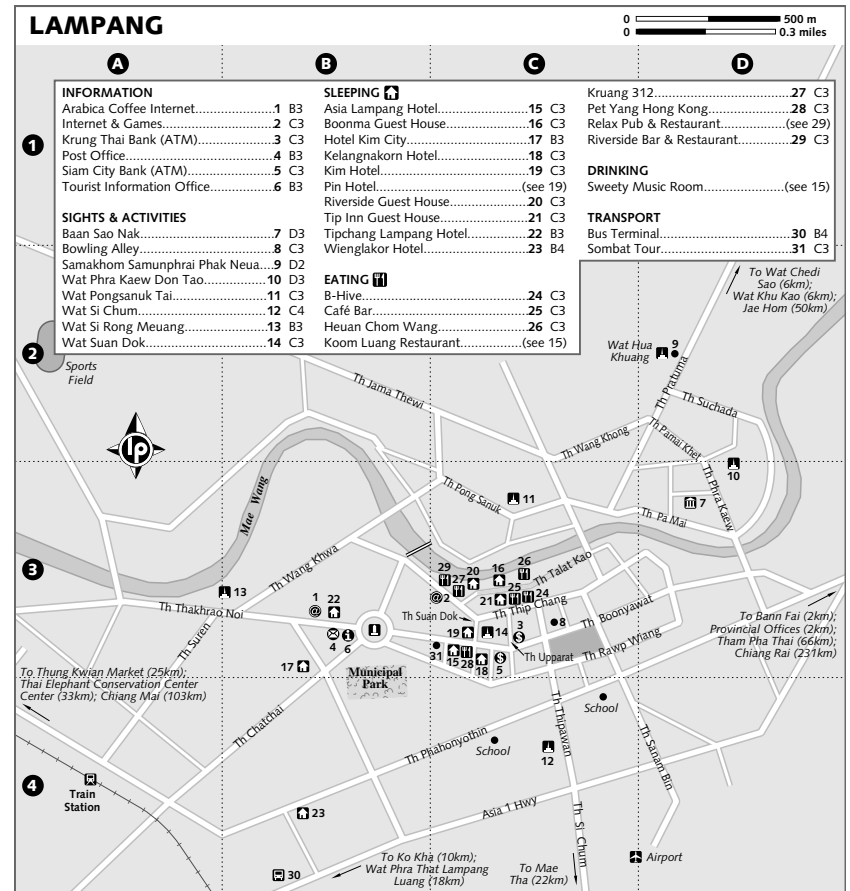
On the northern side of the Mae Wang, this wat housed the Emerald Buddha (now in Bangkok's Wat Phra Kaew, see p108) from 1436 to 1468. The main *chedi* shows Hariphunchai influence, while the adjacent *mondòp* (a square, spire-topped shrine room) was built in 1909. The *mondòp*, decorated with glass mosaic in typical Burmese style, contains a Mandalay-style Buddha image. A display of Lanna artefacts (mostly religious paraphernalia and woodwork) can be viewed in the wat's **Lanna Museum** (admission by donation).

### OTHER TEMPLES

**Wat Si Rong Meuang** and **Wat Si Chum** are two wats built in the late 19th century by Burmese artisans. Both have temple buildings constructed in the Burmese 'layered' style, with tin roofs gabled by intricate woodcarvings. The current abbots of these temples are Burmese.

Apart from the *wihān* (any large hall in a Thai temple) at Wat Phra That Lampang Luang (p348), the *mondòp* at **Wat Pongsanuk Tai** is one of the few remaining local examples of original Lanna-style temple architecture, which emphasised open-sided wooden buildings.

**Wat Chedi Sao** (☎ 0 5432 0233), about 6km north of town towards Jae Hom, is named for the *sao* (northern Thai for 20) whitewashed



Lanna-style *chedi* on its grounds. It's a well-endowed wat, landscaped with bougainvillea and casuarina. At one edge of the wat stands a very colourful statue of Avalokitesvara, while a pavilion in the centre features a gilded Buddha similar in style to the Chinnarat Buddha in Phitsanulok (p395). But the wat's real treasure is a solid-gold, 15th-century seated Buddha on display in a glassed-in **pavilion** (☎ 8am-5pm), built over a square pond. The image weighs 150kg, stands 38cm tall and is said to contain a piece of the Buddha's skull in its head and an ancient Pali-inscribed golden palm leaf in its chest; precious stones decorate the image's hairline and robe. A farmer reportedly found the figure next to the ruins of nearby Wat Khu Kao in 1983.

Monks stationed at Wat Chedi Sao make and sell herbal medicines; the popular *yaa màwng* is similar to tiger balm.

### BAAN SAO NAK

บ้านเสาหลัก

In the old Wiang Neua (North City) section of town, **Baan Sao Nak** (Many Pillars House; ☎ 0 5422 7653; admission 30B; ☎ 10am-5pm) was built in 1895 in the traditional Lanna style. A huge teak house supported by 116 square teak pillars, it was once owned by a local *khunying* (a title equivalent to 'Lady' in England); it now serves as a local museum. The entire house is furnished with Burmese and Thai antiques; three rooms display antique silverwork, lacquerware, bronzeware, ceramics and other

northern-Thai crafts. The area beneath the house is often used for ceremonial dinners.

### WALKING STREET

Perhaps wanting to emulate the success of Chiang Mai's walking streets, Lampang now has its own along the charming **Th Talat Kao**. Dotted with old shophouses, the street is closed to traffic on Saturday and Sunday from 4pm to 10pm and fills up with souvenir, handicraft and food stalls.

### Activities

#### HORSE CARTS

Lampang is known throughout Thailand as Meuang Rot Mah (Horse Cart City) because it's the only town in Thailand where **horse carts** are still used as public transport, although nowadays they are mainly used for tourists. You can't miss the brightly coloured horse carts that drip with nylon flowers, and are handled by Stetson-wearing drivers. A 15-minute horse-cart tour around town costs 150B; for 200B you can get a half-hour tour that goes along beside Mae Wang. For 300B a one-hour tour stops at Wat Phra Kaew Don Tao and Wat Si Rong Meuang. Horse carts can be found near the larger hotels and just east of the market on Th Boonyawat.

#### TRADITIONAL MASSAGE

The **Samakhom Samunphrai Phak Neua** (☎ 0 6586 0711; Northern Herbal Medicine Society; 149 Th Pratuma; massage per 30min/hr 100/150B, sauna 100B; ☎ 8am-8pm), next to Wat Hua Khuang in the Wiang Neua area, offers traditional northern-Thai massage and herbal saunas. Once you've paid, you can go in and out of the sauna as many times as you want during one visit.

#### BOWLING

Yep, that's right, Lampang has a **bowling alley** (basement, Th Thipawan shopping centre; 3 games 100B; ☎ 10.30am-11.30pm).

### Sleeping

#### BUDGET

**Tip Inn Guest House** (☎ 0 5422 1821; 143 Th Talat Kao; r 100-160B; ☎) This place has friendly hosts and very basic rooms. Renovation was starting at the time of writing.

**Boonma Guest House** (☎ 0 5432 2653; 256 Th Talat Kao; r 250-300B) This family-run place features a couple of rooms in a gorgeous teak home, and cement rooms behind. Some have shared

bathrooms. It lacks a comfortable place to hang out.

**Kim Hotel** (☎ 0 5421 7721; fax 0 5422 6929; 168 Th Boonyawat; r 250-350B; ☎) On the other side of the road to Kelangnakorn Hotel, the rooms in this three-storey hotel have tiled walls, making the bedrooms feel like bathrooms. Yet they are clean, comfortable and have cable TV.

**Kelangnakorn Hotel** (☎ 0 5421 6137; Th Boonyawat; r 260-340B; ☎) Popular with travelling salesmen, this hotel has modernish rooms with wooden furniture, cable TV and a friendly reception.

**Riverside Guest House** (☎ 0 5422 7005; www.thriversidelampang.com; 286 Th Talat Kao; r 300-600B, ste 800B; ☎) This traveller-oriented place is tucked away near the river and has tastefully decorated rooms set in upgraded old teak buildings. Some rooms are a bit cramped, but you can stretch out in the pleasant outdoor areas. Many of the terraces are right on the river. Walls are thin so expect to hear your neighbours and nightly music from the riverside bars. There is a midnight curfew and motorbikes are available to rent.

**Asia Lampang Hotel** (☎ 0 5422 7844; www.asialampang.com; 229 Th Boonyawat; r 390-500B; ☎) All of the wood-accented rooms in this long-running place are great value, especially the large, suite-style rooms on the 5th floor. The pleasant street-level Koom Luang restaurant (opposite) and basement nightclub, Sweet Music Room (opposite), attract a mature crowd. All rooms have cable TV, fridge and desks.

**Pin Hotel** (☎ 0 5422 1509; www.travelideas.net; 8 Th Suan Dok; r from 450; ☎) The pristine and quiet Pin feels like a Hyatt or Marriott, only it's smaller and more intimate. The rooms are very comfortable, super clean, spacious and come with cable TV, minibar and large bathrooms. Staff are professional, there's a decent restaurant and room service, as well as a laundry service. This would easily cost double in Chiang Mai. A travel agent is attached and books domestic and international flights.

#### MIDRANGE & TOP END

**Hotel Kim City** (☎ 0 5431 0238-40; 274/1 Th Chatchai; r including breakfast 640-740, ste 1040B) The best thing about this big, modern hotel is the lovely Thai styled spa (treatments 350B to 750B). The rooms have all the amenities but are plain, and some smell a bit musty.

**Tipchang Lampang Hotel** (☎ 0 5422 6501; www.tipchanghotel.com; 54/22 Th Thakhras Noi; r incl breakfast 800-1200B, ste 1500-2000B; ☎) This hotel, with

cocktail lounge, conference room and disco, sounds more luxurious than it feels. Rooms are comfortable and have a pool or park view. The cheapest do let in some noise from the disco. Staff are friendly and helpful.

**Wienglakor Hotel** (☎ 0 5431 6430; 138/35 Th Phahonyothin; r 1500-1800, ste 3500B; ☎) This massive hotel has replica Thai antiques in the hallways, a tasteful lobby lounge area and a pretty fishpond and garden. But the rooms are overpriced and nothing special.

### Eating

Lampang has a good selection of restaurants. It's not ultradiverse like Chiang Mai, but the quality is pretty high. Several of the more expensive hotels have restaurants with a nice atmosphere and above-average food.

**Riverside Bar & Restaurant** (☎ 0 5422 1861; 328 Th Thip Chang; dishes 45-225B; ☎ 11am-midnight) This rambling old teak structure on the river is definitely the most popular place in town. There's live music, a full bar and an enormous menu of vegetarian, northern-Thai and Western dishes. The homemade gelato and pizza nights (Tue, Thu, Sat-Sun) are favourites but the pasta dishes aren't too good. Prices are reasonable and service is excellent.

**Kruang 312** (Th Thip Chang; dishes 30-60B; ☎ 10am-9pm) Set in a charming wooden shophouse and surrounded by black-and-white pictures of Lampang and the king, this tiny, simple restaurant serves delicious curries, noodle and rice dishes.

**B-Hive** (Th Thip Chang; dishes 30-80B; ☎ 10.30am-10.30pm) You can't miss this funky looking purple café. Sit outside on wooden chairs or inside on brightly coloured pods, and have coffee or tea with ice cream and pancakes.

**Koom Luang Restaurant** (☎ 0 5422 7844; 229 Th Boonyawat; dishes 50-100B; ☎ 6.30am-midnight; ☎) Choose between air-con or street seating at this northern Lanna-style restaurant. The Thai and Chinese dishes are far more authentic than the European.

**Relax Pub & Restaurant** (Th Thip Chang; dishes 50-150B; ☎ 6pm-midnight) Just west of the Riverside, Relax is a little more punk-rock, with neon lights, industrial architecture and more amplified music. The food's good and the scene is more energetic than the Riverside.

**Pet Yang Hong Kong** (Th Boonyawat; dishes 25-60B; ☎ 8am-6pm) This is the best spot for roast duck with rice (or noodles). It's opposite Kim Hotel, near several other rice and noodle joints.

**Heuan Chom Wang** (☎ 0 5422 2845; 276 Th Talat Kao; dishes 40-120B; ☎ 11am-11pm) This romantic, open-air place fronting the river occupies a beautiful old teak building down an alley off Th Talat Kao. The menu is strictly non-Westernised northern- and central-Thai fare. Service is attentive but English is limited.

### Drinking

In addition to the **Riverside Bar** (left) and **Relax Pub** (left), Lampang has a couple of other nightspots.

**Café Bar** (no sign; Th Talat Kao; ☎ 8am-midnight) This small atmospheric bar next to Tip Inn Guest House is decorated with wooden chairs and old-fashioned glass lamps. If you prefer down-tempo to live rock'n'roll, this is a good place to have a drink and a chat.

**Sweet Music Room** (229 Th Boonyawat; ☎ 7pm-1am) Downstairs from the Koom Luang Restaurant, this retro nightspot plays a good range of Western favourites until 11.30pm, when the mood gets romantic. Dance jams turn on at 12.30am. The room's always dark, the booths are spacious and the house band is lively (but not all that good).

### Getting There & Away

#### AIR

Daily flights between Lampang and Bangkok (2660B, 10.45am & 5pm) are offered by **PB Air** (☎ 0 5422 6238, Bangkok ☎ 0 2261 0220; www.pbair.com; Lampang Airport).

#### BUS

From Chiang Mai, buses to Lampang (ordinary/2nd class air-con/1st class/VIP 51/71/92/140B, two hours) leave from the Chiang Mai Arcade terminal every half-hour during the day, and also from the small bus station (ordinary 51B) near the TAT office in the direction of Lamphun (19B).

Buses go to Lampang from Phitsanulok's main bus terminal (ordinary/2nd class air-con/1st class/VIP 119/167/214/250B, four hours; ordinary/2nd class air-con/1st class 148/207/214B via Sukhothai, five hours). Buses to Phrae leave hourly from 8am to 6pm (ordinary/2nd class air-con/1st class/VIP 60/84/108/315B). There are regular buses to and from Bangkok (2nd class air-con/1st class/VIP 374/481/748B, 2nd class nine hours, 1st class and above eight hours) running from 7.30am to 9pm. To book a cheaper, 10 hour air-con bus from Lampang to Bangkok head

to **Sombat Tour** (☎ 0 5432 3361; Th Boonyawat; 1st class/VIP 446/621B).

The bus terminal in Lampang is some way out of town – 15B by shared *sǎwngthǎew*.

## TRAIN

Trains run between Chiang Mai and Lampang (2nd/3rd class 50/23B, two hours).

## AROUND LAMPANG

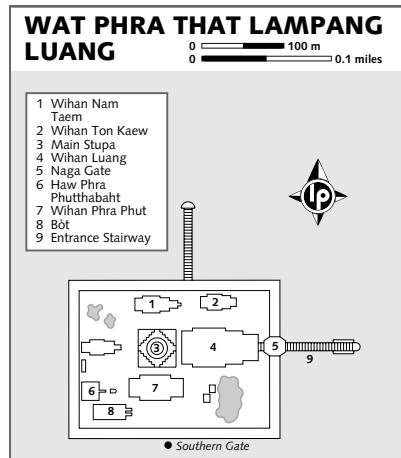
### Sights

#### WAT PHRA THAT LAMPANG LUANG

วัดพระธาตุลำปางหลวง

Arguably the most beautiful wooden Lanna temple found in northern Thailand, Wat Phra That Lampang is centred on the open-sided **Wihan Luang** and is one attraction not to be missed. Believed to have been built in 1476, the impressive *wihāan* features a triple-tiered wooden roof supported by teak pillars, and is considered to be the oldest existing wooden building in Thailand. A huge, gilded *mondòp* in the back of the *wihāan* contains a Buddha image cast in 1563. The faithful leave small gold-coloured Buddha figures close to the *mondòp* and hang Thai Lü weavings behind it.

Early 19th-century *jataka* murals (stories of the Buddha's previous lives) are painted on wooden panels around the inside upper perimeter of the *wihāan*. The tall Lanna-style *chedi* behind the *wihāan*, raised in 1449 and restored in 1496, measures 24m at its base and is 45m high. The small and simple **Wihan Ton Kaew**, to the north of the main *wihāan*, was built in 1476.



Until recently, only men could see a camera obscura image of the *chedi* in the **Haw Phra Phutthaabaht**, a small white building behind the *chedi*. Now everyone can see the shadowy inverted image (which is projected via a small hole in the wall onto a white sheet) in **Wihan Phra Phut** (admission 20B), which is south of the main *chedi*. The 13th-century Wihan Phra Phut is the oldest structure in the compound and houses a seated Buddha.

The *wihāan* to the north of the *chedi*, **Wihan Nam Taem**, was built in the early 16th century and, amazingly, still contains traces of the original murals.

The lintel over the entrance to the compound features an impressive dragon relief – once common in northern Thai temples but rarely seen these days. This gate supposedly dates to the 15th century.

In the arboretum outside the southern gate of the wat, there are now three **museums**. One displays mostly festival paraphernalia, plus some Buddha figures. Another, called 'House of the Emerald Buddha', contains a miscellany of coins, banknotes, Buddha figures, silver betel-nut cases, lacquerware and other ethnographic artefacts, along with three small, heavily gold-leafed Buddhas placed on an altar behind an enormous repoussé silver bowl. The third, a fine, small museum, features shelves of Buddha figures, lacquered boxes, manuscripts and ceramics, all well labelled in Thai and English.

Wat Phra That Lampang Luang is 18km southwest of Lampang in Ko Kha. To get there by public transport from Lampang, flag an eastbound *sǎwngthǎew* (20B) on Th Rawp Wiang. From the Ko Kha *sǎwngthǎew* station, it's a 3km chartered motorcycle taxi ride to the temple (30B). Minibuses outside the temple go back to the city for 30B.

If you're driving or cycling from Lampang, head south on the Asia 1 Hwy and take the Ko Kha exit, then follow the road over a bridge and bear right. Follow the signs and continue for 3km over another bridge until you see the temple on the left. If you're coming from Chiang Mai via Hwy 11, turn south onto Rte 1034, 18km northwest of Lampang at the Km 13 marker – this route is a 50km shortcut to Ko Kha that avoids much of Lampang.

#### THAI ELEPHANT CONSERVATION CENTER

ศูนย์อนุรักษ์ช้างไทย

In Amphoe Hang Chat northwest of Lampang, outside Thung Kwian between Km 28

#### MAHOUT TRAINING

If you like the idea of elephants being employed again, but not in elephant shows, try one of the highly recommended **Conservation Center programmes** ([www.changthai.com](http://www.changthai.com); 1-/3-day course 2500/5000B, per day for 10+ days incl training, lodging & food 1500B), where you learn the skills of the *khwaan cháang* (elephant caretaker) or mahout. If you want a quick taste of the mahout's life, you can sign on for a one-day course and learn a few simple commands for leading an elephant, experiment with dung paper, ride an elephant in the jungle and take a tour of the elephant hospital.

A more involved three-day, two-night homestay programme includes all meals, a night's lodging in a well-equipped wood-and-bamboo bungalow and another night at a jungle camp, plus a general introduction to elephant care and training. Those with a higher level of commitment can choose 10- or 30-day programmes.

and 29, this unique **facility** (TECC; ☎ 0 5422 8035; 0 5422 9042; [www.changthai.com](http://www.changthai.com), [www.thaielephant.org](http://www.thaielephant.org); child/adult 30/50B + shuttle bus or own transport 20B; ♿ elephant bathing 9.45am, 1.15pm; public shows 10am, 11am, 1.30pm) promotes the role of the Asian elephant in ecotourism, and provides free medical treatment and care for sick elephants from all over Thailand.

The elephant show at this 122-hectare centre is less touristy and more educational than most, focusing on how elephants work with logs, as well as the usual painting of pictures and playing oversized xylophones. You can feed the elephants afterwards with bananas. There is also an exhibit on the history and culture of elephants as well as elephant rides (8am to 3.30pm, 100/400/800B for 10/30/60 minutes) through the surrounding forest.

All proceeds from the entrance fee and souvenir shops go to the elephant hospital on site, which cares for old, abandoned and sick elephants from all over Thailand, as well as working for the preservation of elephants by various research and breeding programmes (see boxed text p350).

The camp is 33km from town and can be reached by Chiang Mai-bound bus or *sǎwngthǎew* (25B) from Lampang's main bus terminal. Let the driver know where you are headed and get off at the Km 37 marker. The centre is 1.5km from the highway. Alternatively, you can hire a blue *sǎwngthǎew* for 350B to 500B at the bus terminal. If you have your own transport, on the way to the elephant camp, 25km from Lampang, is the **Thung Kwian market**. Very popular with Thais, this market has a good selection of food stalls and an interesting range of wares, from bottles of herbs for making whisky to preserved fruit and amulets.

#### OTHER ATTRACTIONS

North and east of Lampang are the cotton-weaving villages of **Jae Hom** and **Mae Tha**. You can wander around and find looms in action; there are also plenty of shops along the main roads.

**Tham Pha Thai** (Pha Thai Cave) is 66km north of Lampang, between Lampang and Chiang Rai about 500m off Hwy 1. Besides the usual cave formations (stalagmites and stalactites), Tham Pha Thai has a large Buddha image.

The province is well endowed with waterfalls. Three are found within Amphoe Wang Neua, roughly 120km north of the provincial capital: **Wang Kaew**, **Wang Thong** and **Than Thong** (Jampa Thong). Wang Kaew is the largest, with 110 tiers. Near the summit is a Mien hill-tribe village. This area became part of the 1172-sq-km **Doi Luang National Park** in 1990; animals protected by the park include serow, barking deer, pangolin and the pig-tailed macaque.

In Amphoe Meuang Pan, about halfway between Wang Neua and Lampang, is another waterfall, **Nam Tok Jae Sawan**, part of the 593-sq-km **Chae Son National Park** (☎ 0 5422 9000; Tambon Jae Son, Amphoe Muang Ban, Lampang; admission 400B). Elevations in the park reach above 2000m. Jae Sawan has six drops, each with its own pool; close to the falls are nine hot springs. Small huts house circular baths, recessed into the floor and lined with clay tiles, that are continuously filled with water direct from the spring. For 20B you can take a 20-minute soak, preceded and followed by an invigorating cold-water shower.

Camping is permitted in both Chae Son and Doi Luang National Parks. Chae Son has a visitors centre, 12 bungalows for hire and

### THE PLIGHT OF THAILAND'S ELEPHANTS

The elephant is one of the most powerful symbols in Thai culture and until 1917 a white elephant appeared on the Thai national flag. Historically, Thais have worked side-by-side with elephants on farms and in the jungle, and elephants were the superweapons of Southeast Asian armies before the advent of tanks and big guns. Today, elephants are still revered in Thai society and are a strong drawcard for Western tourists.

Currently, experts estimate there are now fewer than 2000 wild elephants in Thailand, more than India but fewer than Myanmar. There are fewer than 3000 domesticated elephants. The numbers of both wild and domestic animals are steadily dwindling. Around 1900 it was estimated that there were at least 100,000 elephants working in Thailand; by 1952 the number had dropped to 13,397. Today, Tak province has the highest number of elephants.

Elephant mothers carry their calves for 22 months. Once they are born, working elephants enjoy a three- to five-year childhood before they begin training. The training, which is under the guidance of their mahouts, takes five years. They learn to push, carry and stack logs, as well as bathing and walking in procession.

Working elephants have a career of about 50 years; so when young they are trained by two mahouts, one older and one younger – sometimes a father-and-son team – who can see the animal through its lifetime. Thai law requires that elephants be retired and released into the wild at age 61. They often live for 80 years or more.

As a mode of jungle transport, the elephant beats any other animal or machine for moving through a forest with minimum damage – its large, soft feet distribute the animal's weight without crushing the ground. Interestingly, an adult elephant can run at speeds of up to 23km/h but puts less weight on the ground per square centimetre than a deer!

In 1989 logging was banned in Thailand, resulting in decreased demand for trained elephants. Some owners, however, continue to work their elephants in the illegal logging industry along the Thai–Myanmar border. Sadly, some animals are pumped full of amphetamines so they can work day and night.

The plight of these unemployed creatures is becoming an issue of national concern. Many domesticated elephants are increasingly neglected, mistreated or abandoned by owners who often cannot afford to care for them. Meanwhile, destruction of forests and ivory-trade poach-

ing are placing the wild-elephant population in increasing jeopardy. The Asian elephant is now officially classified as an endangered species.

Rising numbers of unemployed elephants also means unemployed mahouts; many mahouts have begun migrating with their elephants to large Thai cities, even Bangkok. They earn money simply by walking the animal through the streets and selling bananas and sugarcane to people to feed the elephants. In these urban environments, the elephants often suffer.

Elephant conservation experts are urging tourists not to feed elephants in the cities. A better way to make contact with these beautiful animals is at the Thai Elephant Conservation Center (TECC) in Lampang Province (p348) or at other bona fide conservation facilities.

One of the problems in the elephant camps around Thailand is inbreeding; due to a lack of males in mainly female camps, baby elephants are being born with disabilities. One of the initiatives of TECC is an artificial insemination programme to avoid this problem, and as a longer-term solution if the population dwindles even more. Apart from its elephant hospital in Lampang, TECC also has mobile health clinics, which travel around Thailand health checking and treating the elephants.

Outside of Thailand the attempt to conserve Asian elephants has caused controversy. In 2004 Australia granted import permits for five Thai elephants to go to Taronga Zoo in Sydney, and three to be sent to Melbourne Zoo. In both zoos breeding programmes have been established aimed at preserving the species. This decision led to two years of legal action and protests, where animal welfare groups alleged that importing the elephants had no conservation benefit, that the zoos were not equipped to meet the needs of the elephants, and their import would potentially be detrimental to the survival and recovery of the species. It was alleged that the import was more about increasing visitor numbers than animal conservation. It was also pointed out that the millions spent on the enclosures should have gone to conservation efforts in the elephant's home country.

However, the tribunal gave the go-ahead to the imports in 2006 after they had been convinced that the zoos were committed and dedicated to the welfare and conservation of the elephants, and that extra conditions put forward by the welfare groups had been met. In June 2006 protests in Bangkok prevented the elephants from leaving but they arrived in their respective Australian zoos in November 2006.

a restaurant, but food must be ordered in advance of your visit. Several privately run food/snack stalls provide sustenance as well. For further information, contact the **Royal Forest Department** (☎ 0 2579 7223, 0 2561 4292-3; Th Phahonyothin, Chatuchak, Bangkok) of the Natural Resources Conservation Office.

## CHIANG RAI PROVINCE

Chiang Rai, the northernmost province in Thailand, is one of the country's most rural areas. Half of its northern border, separating the province and nation from Laos, is formed by the Mekong River. Mountains form the other half, cleaving Myanmar from Thailand, with the junction of Nam Ruak (Ruak River) and Mekong River at Thailand's peak. The fertile Mekong floodplains to the east support most of the agriculture in the province;

to the west the land is too mountainous for most crops. One crop that thrives on steep mountain slopes is opium and until recently Chiang Rai was the centre for most of the opium in Thailand.

Crop substitution and other development projects sponsored by the late Princess Mother (the king's mother), along with accelerated law enforcement, have pushed much of the opium trade over the border into Myanmar and Laos. While there are undoubtedly still pockets of the trade here and there (even a few poppy patches), Chiang Rai's Golden Triangle fame is now mostly relegated to history books and museums.

### CHIANG RAI

เชียงใหม่

pop 73,300

About 180km from Chiang Mai, the city northern Thais know as 'Siang Hai' has

been marketed in tourist literature as 'the gateway to the Golden Triangle'. Thais often tout Chiang Rai as a laid-back alternative to Chiang Mai. Things are on a smaller scale here, from the night market to the amount of sites to see, but the city has a more relaxed atmosphere, less pollution, and its trekking areas are quicker to get to. There are also more volunteering and homestay opportunities outside of Chiang Rai compared to Chiang Mai. Although often compared to the north's capital, Chiang Rai has its own character and attractions, like the unique, sparkling white Wat Rong Khun temple, just outside the city.

Phaya Mengrai founded Chiang Rai in 1262 as part of the Lao-Thai Lanna kingdom and it didn't become a Siamese territory till 1786, then a province in 1910. Lots of wealthy Thais began moving to Chiang Rai in the 1980s, and in the early 1990s the area saw a development

boom as local entrepreneurs speculated on the city's future. Things have calmed down a bit since then but ambitions are still high. Although the airport still doesn't link Chiang Rai with international destinations in the region, there has been talk (but not much action) of the potential of possible roads connecting Chiang Rai and cities in Laos, Myanmar and southern China.

### Information BOOKSHOPS

**Gare Garon** (869/18 Th Phahonyothin; ☎ 10am-10pm) Mainly new books with a smattering of overpriced used ones; also sells coffee, tea and some handicrafts.

**Orn's Bookshop** (☎ 08 1022 0318; ☎ 8am-8pm) By far the best used bookshop in Chiang Rai, this place is run by the eccentric and discerning Peter. His superb collection of books are in many languages and at much cheaper prices than Gare Garon. Turn right down the *soi* past Boonbun Guest House.

**EMERGENCY**

**Tourist Police** (☎ 0 5374 0249; 🕒 24hrs) At the new tourist police office next to North Wheels cars; English is spoken and police are on stand-by 24 hours a day

**INTERNET ACCESS**

Internet access is readily available around town and costs 40B per hour. It's especially abundant around the Wang Come Hotel.

**Connect Café** (☎ 0 5374 0688; 868/10 Th Phahonyothin; 🕒 10.30am-10.30pm) This colourful, funky internet café serves homemade brownies and good coffee while you're typing away. It has an overseas call service, burns digital photos onto CDs, sells books and maps, and plays chilled-out music.

**MEDICAL SERVICES**

**Overbrook Hospital** (☎ 0 5371 1366; www.overbrookhospital.com; Th Singkhlae) English is spoken in this modern hospital that treats foreigners.

**MONEY**

There is an abundance of banks and ATMs on both Th Phahonyothin and Th Thanalai.

**POST**

**Main post office** (Th Utarakit; 🕒 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat, Sun & holidays) South of Wat Phra Singh.

**TELEPHONE**

Many internet places offer international call services, including Connect Café (above).

**Communications Authority of Thailand office** (CAT; cnr Th Ratchadat Damrong & Th Ngam Meuang; 🕒 7am-11pm Mon-Fri) Offers international telephone, internet and fax services.

**TOURIST INFORMATION**

**Tourism Authority of Thailand office** (TAT; ☎ 0 5374 4674, 0 5371 1433; tatchrai@tat.or.th; Th Singkhlae; 🕒 8.30am-4.30pm) Staff here are some of the best in north Thailand. Fantastically helpful, they take the time to give detailed advice, and have maps and useful brochures.

**Sights****WAT PHRA KAEW**

วัดพระแก้ว

Originally called Wat Pa Yia (Bamboo Forest Monastery) in local dialect, this is the city's most revered Buddhist temple. Legend says that in 1434 lightning struck the temple's octagonal *chedi*, which fell apart to reveal the Phra Kaew Morakot or Emerald Buddha (actually made of jade). After a long journey

that included a long stopover in Vientiane, Laos, this national talisman is now ensconced in the temple of the same name in Bangkok (see boxed text p109).

In 1990 Chiang Rai commissioned a Chinese artist to sculpt a new image from Canadian jade. Named the Phra Yok Chiang Rai (Chiang Rai Jade Buddha), it was intentionally a very close but not exact replica of the Phra Kaew Morakot in Bangkok, with dimensions of 48.3cm across the base and 65.9cm in height, just 0.1cm shorter than the original. The image is housed in the impressive Haw Phra Kaew, which sits towards the back of the wat compound.

The main *wihāan* is a medium-sized, well-preserved wooden structure with unique carved doors. The *chedi* behind it dates from the late 14th century and is in typical Lanna style.

**WAT JET YOT**

วัดเจ็ดยอด

The namesake for this wat is a seven-spired *chedi* similar to that in Chiang Mai's Wat Jet Yot, but without stucco ornamentation. Of more aesthetic interest is the wooden ceiling of the front veranda of the main *wihāan*, which features a unique Thai astrological fresco.

**WAT PHRA SINGH**

วัดพระสิงห์

Housing yet another copy of a famous Buddha image, this temple was built in the late 14th century during the reign of Chiang Rai's King Mahaphrom. A sister temple to Chiang Mai's Wat Phra Singh, its original buildings are typical northern Thai-style wood structures with low, sweeping roofs. The impressive dragon-carved gate looks to be of Thai Lü design. The main *wihāan* houses a copy of Chiang Mai's Phra Singh Buddha.

**WAT PHRA THAT DOI CHOM THONG**

วัดพระธาตุคอกอยจอมทอง

This hilltop wat northwest of Wat Phra Kaew has partial views of the river and gets an occasional river breeze. The Lanna-style *chedi* here was supposedly built in 940, impossible since Lanna hadn't yet been founded. Most likely it dates from the 14th to 16th centuries, and may cover an earlier Mon *chedi* inside. King Mengrai, Chiang Rai's founder, first surveyed the site for the city from this peak.

**CHIANG RAI**

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**CR 49**

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**HILLTRIBE MUSEUM & EDUCATION CENTER**

พิพิธภัณฑ์และศูนย์การศึกษาชาวเขา

This museum and handicrafts centre (☎ 0 5374 0088; www.pda.or.th/chiangrai; 3rd floor, 620/1 Th Thanalai; admission 50B; 🕒 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-6pm Sat-Sun) is a good place to visit before undertaking any hill-tribe trek. The centre, run by the non-

profit Population & Community Development Association (PDA), offers a 20-minute slide show on Thailand's hill tribes with narration in English, French, German, Japanese and Thai. The curator is passionate about his museum, and will talk about the different hill tribes, their histories, recent trends and the community projects that the museum helps



fund. Exhibits include typical clothing for six major tribes, examples of bamboo usage, folk implements and other anthropological objects. The PDA also run highly recommended treks (below). There's a gift shop and a branch of Bangkok's **Cabbages & Condoms restaurant** (p358) is on the premises.

## THAM TU PU

ถ้ำตุ่ม  
If you follow Th Winitchaikul across the bridge to the northern side of Mae Nam Kok, you'll come to a turn-off for Tham Tu Pu, 800m from the river. Follow the road 1km, then follow a dirt path 200m to the base of a limestone cliff where there is a monk and his collection of dogs. Here, you'll find a steep set of stairs leading up to one of the main chambers.

## Activities

### TREKKING

More than 30 travel agencies, guesthouses and hotels offer trekking trips, typically in the Doi Tung, Doi Mae Salong and Chiang Khong areas. Many of the local travel agencies merely act as brokers for guides associated with one of the local guesthouses, so it may be cheaper to book directly through a guesthouse. As elsewhere in northern Thailand, you're more assured of a quality experience if you use a TAT-licensed guide.

Trek pricing depends on the number of days and participants, and the type of activities. Rates range from 950B per person per day in a group of six or more, to 2300B per person per day for two people.

The following agencies in Chiang Rai operate treks and cultural tours where profits from the treks go directly to community-development projects:

**PDA Tours & Travel** (☎ 0 5374 0088; crpdatur@hotmai.com; 620/1 Th Thanalai, Hilltribe Museum & Education Center; 620/1 Th Thanalai) Culturally sensitive treks are led by Population & Community Development Association-trained hill-tribe members. One- to three-day treks are available and profits go back into community projects that include HIV/AIDS education, mobile health clinics, education scholarships and establishment of village-owned banks.

**Natural Focus** (☎ 0 5371 5696, 08 1706 7639; www.naturalfocuscotour.com; 129/1 Mu 4, Th Pa-Ngiw, Soi 4, Rop Wiang) Set up by the Hill Area and Community Development Foundation (www.hadf.org),

Natural Focus offers tours ranging from one to fifteen days that concentrate on nature and hill-tribe living.

**The Mirror Art Group** (☎ 0 5373 7412-3; www.mirrorartgroup.org; 106 Moo 1, Ban Huay Khom, Tambon Mae Yao) This nonprofit NGO does many admirable hill-tribe projects, ranging from educational workshops to Thai citizenship advocacy. Trekking with this group encourages real interaction with the villagers. Trips can be of any length but one-week homestay programmes, in which you learn traditional weaving or bamboo work, are available.

**Akha River and Hill House** (☎ 08 9997 5505; www.akhahill.com, www.akha.info; 423/25 Mu 21 Soi 1 Th Kohloy) Wholly owned and managed by Akha tribespeople, Akha River House does one- to seven-day treks. They begin at the guesthouse with a long-tail boat up the river, before trekking to and around their Akha Hill House about 23km from Chiang Rai, at a height of 1500m (see also p333). Profits from the guesthouses and their activities go back into the hill community and its school.

From Chiang Rai's pier, boats can take you upriver as far as Tha Ton (see p360). An hour's boat ride east from Chiang Rai is **Ban Ruammit**, which is a fair-sized Karen village. From here you can trek on your own to Lahu, Mien, Akha and Lisu villages – all of them within a day's walk. Another popular area for do-it-yourself trekkers is **Wawi** (see p334), south of the river town of Mae Salak near the end of the river route.

## VOLUNTEERING

**The Mirror Art Group** (☎ 0 5373 7412-3; www.mirrorartgroup.org/volunteereenglish.html; 106 Moo 1, Ban Huay Khom, Tambon Mae Yao) This nonprofit NGO working with hill tribes in the Mae Yao area is 15km west of Chiang Rai. Its Volunteer Teaching Programme needs English and IT skills. The programme goes for a minimum of one week. Donations of books, toys and clothes are also appreciated.

**Akha Association for Education and Culture in Thailand** (AFFECT; ☎ 0 5371 4250, 08 1952 2179; www.akhaasia.org; 468 Th Rimkok) Volunteer at AFFECT's Life Stay and you will be living and working in a village with an Akha family. Depending on the agricultural season, the days can be quite physical – you may be working in the fields, helping build a house, or gathering food in the forest. Stays are from seven days, and places are limited so it is best to

arrange in advance of travel. Proceeds from the Life Stay are put back into the community for programmes that range from health to education.

**Hill Area and Community Development Foundation/Natural Focus** (☎ 0 5371 5696, 08 1706 7639; www.hadf.org; www.naturalfocuscotour.com; 129/1 Mu 4, Th Pa-Ngiw, Soi 4, Rop Wiang) Contact Natural Focus to find out about possible volunteering opportunities with the Hill Area And Community Development Foundation (HADF). This foundation helps hill tribes deal with problems ranging from environmental management to social development. Currently, volunteering includes teaching English in the Mae Chan/Mae Salong area for six months, but shorter stays may be possible.

## Sleeping

The two main areas for accommodation are in the centre, clustered around Th Jet Yot and off Th Phahonyothin, or by the relaxed setting of Mae Nam Kok. Prices are lower in Chiang Rai for comparable comfort in other big towns. Budget accommodation has pulled up its socks in the last couple of years with some good new offerings. The top end is showing signs of leaving the bland four/five-star and going the boutique way.

## BUDGET

**Akha River House** (☎ 0 5371 5084; www.akha.info, www.akhahill.com; 423/25 Mu 21 Th Kohloy, Soi 1; s 100-200B, d 150-300B; ☑) Behind the TAT office on the Mae Nam Kok, this wholly Akha-owned guesthouse is a real retreat. Comfortable rooms and bungalows are set in a manicured garden, tastefully designed with warm ochres and Akha textiles. There is a restaurant and seating areas for relaxing by the river, plus a small boat to explore in. Bikes are free of charge to use and free pick-up from the bus station is available. Its treks are raved about (opposite), and part of the profits from the guesthouse goes back into Akha education and community projects.

**Chat House** (☎ 0 5371 1481; www.chathouse32.com; Th Trairat, 3/2 Soi Saengkaew; s/d without bathroom 80/150B, r from 200-300B; ☑) Out of the way on a residential street, this long-running guesthouse has a relaxed and personable atmosphere. The collection of cheap but run-down rooms are set in a pleasant garden with a small restaurant. Bikes, motorbikes and 4WDs can be rented here.

**Tourist Inn** (☎ 0 5375 2094; touristinn1@hotmail.com; 1004/4-6 Th Jet Yot; fan s 150-180B, d 200-250B, air-con r 350B; ☑ ☑) Rooms here are a little stark but clean, and set in two buildings – the newer one has the nicer and slightly more expensive rooms. Breakfasts here are fantastic with homemade croissants, wholemeal bread and baguettes. There is a cable TV in the communal area. Car and motorcycle rentals can be arranged and the proprietors speak English, Thai and Japanese.

**Pam's Guest House** (☎ 08 9433 5134; Th Jet Yot; r 150-250B) This friendly place has a colourful communal area with a small bar and pool table, plus lounging areas with cable TV and DVDs. The cheaper rooms have shared hot water bathrooms; all of them are clean but plain.

**Boonbundan Guest House** (☎ 0 5375 2413-4; 1005/13 Th Jet Yot; r 170-500B; ☑) Contained in a quiet, walled compound, this old favourite has had many rooms renovated and a new building added. There is something to suit every budget, but the older rooms lack character and could do with a lick of paint. The newer rooms are great value and come with cable TV, fridge and a kitchenette. A laundry service is available. Motorcycles can be rented.

**Baan Bua** (☎ 0 5371 8880; baanbua@yahoo.com; 879/2 Th Jet Yot; r 250-400B; ☑) This place can be full any time of the year. It's in a quiet location off Th Jet Yot, and offers 17 large, spotless rooms with hot showers, all in a cement row house with a garden out the front. The guide who does its tours has been with them for eight years.

**PS Guesthouse** (☎ 0 5360 0470, 0 5374 4521; 82/2 Kohloy; r 250-450B; ☑ ☑) Near Akha River House, this new guesthouse has a friendly host and eight fan or air-con, large, good-value rooms. Although not filled with lots of character, the rooms do have cable TV, attractive, well-designed bathrooms, plus a fridge, sink, kettle and free drinks. Bicycles are free to use and motorbikes can be rented.

**City Home** (☎ 0 5360 0155; 868 Th Phahonyothin; r 400B; ☑) Down a tiny soi, smack in the middle of town, this quiet four-storey hotel has 17 large rooms. All have wooden floors, air-con, and cable TV, and are well furnished. There's no garden but a 'relax zone' with brightly coloured chairs surrounded by plants. Fantastic value.

**Janson House** (☎ 0 5371 4552; 897/2 Th Jet Yot; r 450B; ☑) This new three-storey hotel offers

## TREKKING IN NORTHERN THAILAND

Thousands of visitors trek into the hills of northern Thailand each year. Most come away with a sense of adventure, but some are disillusioned by the experience. The most important ingredient in having an enjoyable trek is having a good leader-organiser, followed by a good group of trekkers.

### Before Trekking

Hill-tribe trekking isn't for everyone. First, you must be physically fit enough to withstand extended uphill and downhill walking, exposure to the elements and unsavoury food. Second, many people feel awkward walking through hill-tribe villages and playing the role of voyeur.

In cities and villages elsewhere in Thailand, Thais and other lowland groups are quite used to foreign faces and foreign ways (from TV if nothing else). But in the hills of northern Thailand the tribes lead largely insular lives. Therefore, hill-tribe tourism has pronounced effects, both positive and negative. On the positive side, travellers have a chance to see how traditional, subsistence-oriented societies function. Also, since the Thai government is sensitive about the image of their minority groups, tourism may actually have forced it to review and sometimes improve its policies towards hill tribes. On the negative side, trekkers introduce many cultural items and ideas from the outside world that may erode tribal customs to varying degrees.

If you have any qualms about interrupting the traditional patterns of life in hill-tribe areas, you probably shouldn't go trekking. If you do go, keep in mind that anyone who promises you an authentic experience is probably exaggerating at the very least, or at the worst contributing to the decline of hill-tribe culture by leading travellers into untouristed areas.

### Choosing a Company

Many trekking guides are freelance and float from company to company, so there's no way to predict which companies are going to give the best service. Many guesthouses that advertise their own trekking companies actually act as commission-charging brokers for off-site operations. The Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) office in Chiang Mai (p283) maintains a list of licensed agencies and is making efforts to regulate trekking companies.

Make sure that the guides you go trekking with are licensed TAT guides. This means they have had at least regional and survival training, and they are registered, which is useful if there are problems later. The guide should be able to show you their licence and certificate. Green licences are for trekking only, pink are for sightseeing only and silver ones are for guides licensed to do both. Still, with more than 300 companies, it's very difficult to guarantee any kind of control. Ultimately, the best way to shop for a trek is to talk to travellers who have just returned from one.

In short, if you decide to do a trek, choose your operator carefully, try to meet the others in the group (suggest a meeting), and find out exactly what the tour does and does not include; and if there are additional expenses. In the cool season, make sure sleeping bags are provided, as the thin woollen blankets available in most villages are not sufficient for the average visitor. Here's a useful checklist of questions:

- How many people will there be in the group? (Six to 10 is a good maximum range.)
- Can the organiser guarantee that no other tourists will visit the same village on the same day, especially overnight?
- Can the guide speak the language of each village to be visited? (This is not always necessary, as many villagers can speak Thai nowadays.)
- Exactly when does the tour begin and end? (Some three-day treks turn out to be less than 48 hours in length.)
- Does the tour company provide transport before and after the trek or is it by public bus (which may mean long waits)?
- Is the trek (ie number of participants, itinerary and the duration) registered with the tourist police?

In general, the trekking business has become more conscious of the need to tread carefully in hill-tribe villages than in previous decades. Most companies now tend to limit the number of visits to a particular area and are careful not to overlap areas used by other companies. Everyone

benefits from this consciousness: the hill tribes are less impacted, the trekkers have a better experience and the trekking industry is more sustainable.

You might find that places other than Chiang Mai or Chiang Rai offer better and less expensive tours for more remote and less-trekked areas. Also, they are generally smaller, friendlier operations and the trekkers are usually a more determined bunch since they're not looking for an easy and quick in-and-out trek. You can easily arrange treks out of Mae Hong Son, Pai, Mae Sai and Tha Ton. If you have a little time to seek out the right people, you can also join organised treks from Mae Sariang, Khun Yuam, Soppong (near Pai), Mae Sot, Um Phang and various out-of-the-way guesthouses elsewhere in the north.

The downside, of course, is that companies outside Chiang Mai are generally subject to even less regulation than those in Chiang Mai, and there are fewer guarantees with regard to terms and conditions.

### Costs

Organised treks out of Chiang Mai average around 2000-2500B for a three-day, two-night trek, including transport, guide, accommodation, three meals per day, sleeping bags, water bottles and rafting and/or elephant riding. Not included are beverages other than drinking water or tea, lunch on the first and last days and personal porters. Rates vary, so it pays to shop around – although these days so many companies are competing for your business that rates have remained pretty stable for the last few years. Elephant rides actually become boring and uncomfortable after an hour or two. Some companies now offer quickie day treks or one-night, two-day programmes – these tend to cost around 900B a day. Don't choose a trek by price alone. It's better to talk to other travellers in town who have been on treks.

### Seasons

The best time to trek is November to February, when the weather is refreshing, there's little or no rain and wildflowers are in bloom. Between March and May the hills are dry and the weather is quite hot. The second-best time is early in the rainy season, between June and July, before the dirt roads become too saturated.

### Independent Trekking

You might consider striking out on your own in a small group of two to five people. Some guesthouses, like Cave Lodge (p445) near Tham Lot and Shin Sane Guest House in Mae Salong (p363) have good trekking maps and knowledge of their areas.

Gather as much information as you can about the area you'd like to trek in, from the Tribal Museum in Chiang Mai (p287) or the excellent Hilltribe Museum & Education Center in Chiang Rai (p353). Browsing the displays will help you identify different tribes, and the inscriptions offer cultural information. Don't bother staff with questions about trekking as this is not their area of expertise.

Be prepared for language difficulties. Few people will know any English. Usually someone in a village will know some Thai, so a Thai phrasebook can be helpful. Lonely Planet publishes a *Hill Tribes Phrasebook* with phrase sections for each of the six major hill-tribe languages.

Many people now do short treks on their own, staying in villages along the way. It's not necessary to bring a lot of food or gear, just money for food that can be bought en route at small Thai towns and occasionally in the hill-tribe settlements. (Obviously, be sure to take plenty of water and some high-energy snacks.) However, the TAT strongly discourages trekking on your own because of the safety risk. Check with the police when you arrive in a new district so they can tell you if an area is considered safe or not. A lone trekker is an easy target for bandits.

### Safety

Thai police mount regular hill-country patrols and we haven't heard of any trekking groups being robbed for several years now. Still, you shouldn't take anything along on a trek that you can't afford to lose. If you leave your valuables with a guesthouse, make sure you obtain a fully itemised receipt before departing on a trek.

some of the best value rooms in town. In a central location, the neat, spacious rooms are set around a small courtyard filled with plants. Each has cable TV, well-designed bathrooms, good furniture and tiled floors. Free coffee in the morning is an extra bonus.

#### MIDRANGE

**Moon & Sun Hotel** (☎ 0 5371 9279; 632 Th Singkhla; r/ste 400-500/700B; ☺) Bright and sparkling clean, this little hotel offers large modern rooms. Some come with four-poster beds, all come with desks, cable TV and refrigerators (although some don't have bedside tables). Suites have a separate, spacious sitting area.

**Golden Triangle Inn** (☎ 0 5371 1339/6996; www.goldenchiangrai.com; 590/2 Th Phahonyothin; r includes breakfast 800B; ☺) This place is more like a home than a hotel. It has 39 rooms with tile or wood floors and stylish furniture. Some rooms have bathtubs, but no rooms have TV. The lush, landscaped grounds include a restaurant, a Budget car-rental office and an efficient travel agency. It's a popular place so book in advance.

#### TOP END

**Wang Come Hotel** (☎ 0 5371 1800; www.wangcome.com; 869/90 Th Premawiphat; r 1500-1800B; ☺) In a lively and convenient location, the Wang Come has very comfortable rooms decorated in burgundy and dark wood. Staff members are polite, and there's a funky bar and coffee shop, two restaurants, a banquet room and a disco. The pool is quite small.

**Wiang Inn** (☎ 0 5371 1533; www.wianginn.com; 893 Th Phahonyothin; s/d/ste from 1800/2200/5000B; ☺) Centrally located, this full-sized hotel offers all the service and comfort you expect from a business-class hotel. The rooms are well maintained and have a few Thai touches. It has a kidney-shaped pool, a pleasant non-smoking lobby lounge and live music in the restaurant.

**Mantrini** (☎ 0 5360 1555-9; www.mantrini.com; 292 Moo 13, Robwiang on the superhighway; r 2990-3290B; ☺) Around 1km south of the town centre, this brand new, achingly hip hotel is for design conscious travellers. Lounge music is played in the lobby, where there's a huge plasma screen surrounded by bright curvy Arne Jacobsen-style chairs. The minimalist, chic rooms are gleaming white, contrasted by accents of primary colour, although the superior rooms are slightly cramped. The contemporary bar with floor-to-ceiling windows overlooks the lush

garden and pool. There's also a good restaurant. Discounts are available.

**Legend of Chiang Rai** (☎ 0 5391 0400; www.thelegend-chiangrai.com; 124/15 Kohloy; studio 3900-5900B, villa 8100B; ☺) At this elegant and stylish hotel the spacious bungalows exemplify a fine mixture of contemporary rustic Thai architecture. Rooms feel romantic and luxuriously understated with furniture in calming creams and rattan. Each has a pleasant outdoor sitting area, frosted glass for increased privacy and a cool, outdoorlike bathroom with an oversized shower; villas have a small private pool. The riverside infinity pool and spa are the icing on the comfort-filled cake.

#### Eating

The **night market** has a good collection of food stalls offering snacks and meals, from wonton to fresh fish. Choose a dish and sit at the nearby tables. There are lots of stalls and restaurants on and off Th Phahonyothin by the night market, as well as on the streets around Wang Come Hotel.

#### THAI

**Rot Prasoet** (English sign reads 'Muslim food'; Th Itsaraphap; dishes 25-50B; ☺ 7am-8pm) This Thai-Muslim restaurant next to the mosque on Th Itsaraphap dishes up delicious Thai Muslim favourites, including *khào mòk kài*, a Thai version of chicken briyani. The set lunch is popular.

**Cham Cha** (Th Singkhla; dishes 35-100B; ☺ 7am-4pm Mon-Sat) This casual little hole-in-the-wall is good for breakfast or lunch. It has all the usual Thai and Chinese standards, along with a few Isan dishes that are not on the English menu, such as *lâap* (spicy minced-meat salad) and *sôm-tam* (spicy green papaya salad), plus ice cream.

**Cabbages & Condoms** (C&C; ☎ 0 5395 2314; 620/1 Th Thanalai; dishes 35-200B; ☺ 8am-midnight) Next to the Hilltribe Museum, this restaurant serves hit-and-miss northern-Thai food. With the intention of making condoms as easy to find as cabbages, profits from the restaurant are used by the PDA for family planning and HIV/AIDS education.

**Nakhon Pathom** (no roman-script sign; Th Phahonyothin; dishes 40-110B; ☺ 8am-3pm) Another local restaurant named after a central-Thai land city, Nakhon Pathom is very popular for inexpensive *khào man kài* (chicken rice) and *küaytiaw pèt yàng* (roast duck with rice noodles).

**Muang Thong Restaurant** (☎ 0 5371 1162; Th Phahonyothin; dishes 60-100B; ☺ 24hr) You can't miss

the sidewalk side platters of Thai and Chinese dishes here. It's packed nightly. One of the house specialities is *kaeng pàa phèt*, a delicious duck curry.

**Aye's Restaurant** (☎ 0 5372 2534; 869/170 Th Phahonyothin; dishes 90-500B; ☺ 7.30am-12pm) Looking for atmosphere and an unbeatable selection of food? This friendly spot draws a big crowd nightly. The ceiling fans, rattan furniture and parasols feel slightly colonial, and everything from the steak schnitzel to the northern Thai curries is tasty and well presented. The extensive wine list is impressive.

**Old Siam** (☎ 0 5371 4282; 541/2 Th Phahonyothin; dishes 105-250B; ☺ 8am-12pm) Set in a teak house, this gem of a restaurant is tucked in a corner off Th Phahonyothin. It has low lighting and lovely decorating details, like old black-and-white photos, wooden birdcages and ceramics jewelled with colour, which make it a romantic spot. There's a choice of tables and chairs or low tables and mats to sit on for eating the recommended fish and curry dishes.

#### INTERNATIONAL

**BaanChivitMai Bakery** (☎ 08 1764 7020; at the bus station, Th Prasopsuk; www.baanchivitmai.com; ☺ 7am-9pm Mon-Sat, 2-9pm Sun) If you want to feel virtuous and eat delicious cakes, croissants and bread, then come to this two-storey, superclean Swedish bakery. Profits from the bakery go back into BaanChivitMai, an organisation that runs homes and education projects for vulnerable, orphaned or AIDS-affected children.

**The Old Dutch** (541 Th Phahonyothin; dishes 50-300B; 8am-12pm) Next to the Old Siam restaurant, The Old Dutch is an atmospheric place with a European café-style décor. A large choice of good Western, Indonesian and Thai dishes are on the menu.

**Il Pirata** (☎ 08 9758 9173; 868/8 Th Phahonyothin; dishes 50-200B; ☺ 12am-10pm) This simple, Italian-run restaurant serves delicious homemade gnocchi, fettuccine and lasagne, as well as pizza with good, fresh ingredients, and dishes like chicken with cream and mushroom sauce. Located down a *soi* off the night market, this is good spot to drop in after shopping.

**Da Vinci** (☎ 0 5375 2535; 879/4-5 Th Phahonyothin; mains 125-300B; ☺ 12am-11pm) This slightly pricey, smart Italian restaurant serves fresh pasta, pizza and salads plus some fish and meat dishes. Recommended are the rib fingers with rosemary and the black spaghetti with prawns and chilli.

**Nice Kitchen** (Th Jet Yot; ☺ 7.30am-8.30pm) Along Th Jet Yot, Nice Kitchen is a good restaurant for breakfast, especially as most places round here don't open till much later. You'll find a large selection of cheap and satisfying breakfasts, as well as sandwiches and Thai dishes.

#### Drinking & Entertainment

Th Jet Yot is the liveliest area for bars. The dodgy go-go bar centre is at the end of Th Jet Yot on an L-shaped lane between Th Banphapranak and Th Suksathit.

**Teepee Bar** (Th Phahonyothin; ☺ 6.30pm-12pm) A hang-out for backpackers and Thai hippies, the Teepee is a good place to exchange information.

**CR 49** (Th Jet Yot; ☺ 10.30am-2am) Thais and expats recommended this new, popular, funky-looking bar. Its stays open late and the food is good too.

**24 Bar** (Th Jet Yot; ☺ 5pm-1am) Next to a couple of girlie bars, this cool bar manages to stand out with its all-black décor, bright squares of light on the floor, glitter balls and DJ. Have a drink at the lacquered bar or flop in the deep sofas surrounded by abstract paintings. There is outdoor seating in the back.

**Easy House** (☎ 0 5360 0963; Th Premawiphat; ☺ 11am-12pm) On the corner of Th Jet Yot and Th Premawiphat, this laid-back place serves beer and food on chunky wooden tables and chairs.

**Centre Point Night Bazaar** (off Th Phahonyothin) Free northern-Thai music and dance performances are staged nightly.

#### Shopping

Adjacent to the bus station off Th Phahonyothin is Chiang Rai's **night market** (☺ 6pm-11pm). On a much smaller scale than Chiang Mai's, it is nevertheless a good place to find an assortment of handicrafts at decent prices. On entering the night market from Th Phahonyothin you'll see **MZ Collection** (☎ 0 5375 0145; www.mzcollection.com; 426/68 Kok Kalair) on the right-hand side. This shop has unusual handmade silver and semiprecious stone jewellery. Each piece is unique so don't expect bargain basement prices.

Antiques and silverwork are sometimes cheaper in Chiang Rai than in Chiang Mai. Several shops worth checking for handicrafts, silver and antiques can be found along Th Phahonyothin, including the following: **Ego** (869/81 Th Premawiphat) Carries upmarket items such as antique textiles.

**Gong Ngoen** (873/5 Th Phahonyothin)  
**Silver Birch** (891 Th Phahonyothin)

Just out of town are two handicraft centres that are worth a look:

**Chiangrai Handicrafts Center** (☎ 0 5371 3355;

🕒 9am-6pm) Four kilometres out of town on Rte 101.

**Khum Muang Mang** (☎ 0 5371 8789; Th Kasalong;

🕒 9am-6pm) This brand new handicraft centre is 500m past the boat pier.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

**Chiang Rai Airport** (☎ 0 5379 3048-57) is 8km north of the city. Currently, there are just daily connections to Bangkok. The terminal has restaurants, a money exchange, a post office (open 7am to 7pm) and car-rental booths.

In town, **Air Agent** (☎ 0 5374 0445; 863/3 Th Phahonyothin; 🕒 8.30am-9pm) can book domestic and international flights in advance. Alternatively, book online or go directly to the airport offices listed below:

**Air Asia** (☎ 0 5379 3545-8275; www.airasia.com)

Operates three flights a day between Bangkok and Chiang Rai (from 1400B).

**One-Two-Go** (☎ 0 5379 3555; www.fly12go.com) has one flight a day to Bangkok at 1950B.

**Thai Airways** Th Phahonyothin (☎ 0 5371 1179; www.thaiair.com; 870 Th Phahonyothin; 🕒 8am-5pm Mon-Fri); airport office (☎ 0 5379 8202-3; 🕒 8am-8pm daily) Does flights to/from Bangkok (3345B, 1¼ hours) four times daily.

Taxis run into town from the airport and cost 200B. Out to the airport you can get a túk-túk for 100B.

### BOAT

Another way to reach Chiang Rai is by boat on Mae Nam Kok from Tha Ton (see p333).

### LONG BOAT DESTINATIONS FROM CHIANG RAI

Destination	Fare (B)	Duration (hr)
Ban Ruammit	80	1
Hat Yao	150	2¼
Kok Noi	200	3
Mae Salak	210	4
Pha Khwang	180	2½
Pong Nam Rawn	90	1½
Tha Ton	350	5

For boats heading upriver, go to the pier in the northwest corner of town. Boats embark daily at 10.30am. Long boats from Chiang Rai leave at times approximate for ideal river conditions.

You can charter a boat to Ban Ruammit for 700B or all the way to Tha Ton for 2000B at the pier.

### BUS

Buses to Chiang Mai leave regularly from 6.30am to 6pm from Chiang Rai's bus terminal, behind the night market. The journey takes around three hours. The fare is 100B ordinary (one departure a day at 7.45am, four hours), 140B 2nd-class air-con, 180B 1st-class air-con or 280B for VIP. Buses from Chiang Mai to Chiang Rai leave from Chiang Mai's Arcade bus terminal. Buses on this route are sometimes stopped for drug searches.

Check the adjacent table for information about fares and duration of journeys to bus destinations from Chiang Rai.

### Getting Around

A sǎamláw (three-wheeled pedicab) ride anywhere in central Chiang Rai should cost around 30B. Túk-túk often charge twice that. Shared sǎwngthǎew cost 15B per person.

Bicycles and motorcycles can be hired at **ST Motorcycle** (☎ 0 5371 3652; Th Banphapraikan and Th Wat Jet Yot; per day bicycles 60-100B, motorcycles older Honda Dreams/newer/250cc Yamaha TTR 150/200/700B; 🕒 8am-6pm), which has two locations and takes good care of its bicycles. Many guesthouses also rent motorcycles.

Several small agencies near Wang Come Hotel rent out cars (around 1200B a day), vans (1300B to 1500B) and Suzuki Caribbean 4WDs (800B).

The following companies have good reputations and charge a little more:

**Avist Rent-A-Car** (☎ 0 5379 3827; www.avisthailand.com; Chiang Rai Airport)

**Budget Rent-A-Car** (☎ 0 5374 0442-3; www.budget.co.th; 590 Th Phahonyothin) At Golden Triangle Inn.

**National Car Rental** (☎ 0 5379 3683; Chiang Rai Airport)

**North Wheels** (☎ 0 5374 0585; www.northwheels.com; 591 Th Phahonyothin; 🕒 8am-7pm)

### AROUND CHIANG RAI

#### WAT RONG KHUN

Thirteen kilometres south of Chiang Rai is the unusual and popular **Wat Rong Khun** (☎ 0

### BUS DESTINATIONS FROM CHIANG RAI

Destination	Bus	Fare (B)	Duration (hr)	Destination	Bus	Fare (B)	Duration (hr)						
Bangkok	air-con	511	12	Mae Sai	ordinary	33	1½						
	1st class	722	11		1st class	58	1½						
	VIP	900	11		VIP	85	1½						
Ban Huay Khrai (for Doi Tung)	ordinary	20	¾	Mae Sot	air-con	379	12						
Basang	ordinary	20	¾	1st class	488	12							
Chiang Khong	ordinary	57	2½	Mae Suay	ordinary	27	1¼						
Chiang Saen	ordinary	32	1½	Nan	air-con	176	6						
Fang	ordinary	64	2½	Phayao	air-con	66	1½						
								1st class	85	1½			
Khon Kaen	air-con	462	12	Phitsanulok	air-con	267	7						
								1st class	594	12	VIP	344	7
Khorat	air-con	508	13	Phrae	air-con	160	4						
								1st class	653	12	1st class	205	4
								VIP	767	12			
Lampang	ordinary	109	5½	Tak	air-con	312	8						
								air-con	153	5	1st class	401	8

5367 3579), aka the 'White Wat'. Whereas most temples have centuries of history, this one's construction began in 1997 by noted Thai painter-turned-architect Chalermchai Kositpipat. The impressive and quiet temple stands out due to its pure white exterior, sparkling with clear-mirrored chips.

Walk over a bridge and sculpture of reaching arms (symbolising desire) to enter the sanctity of the wat, where inside you can watch Chalermchai Kositpipat's murals still being completed. Instead of the traditional Buddha life scenarios, the artist has added contemporary scenes representing *samsara* (the realm of rebirth and delusion). Check out the plane smashing into the Twin Towers or rockets going into space being held back by demonlike creatures.

Whether you agree with the overheard descriptions calling it, romantically 'a glittering ice castle', or less complementarily, 'a frosted birthday cake on fire', it is definitely worth seeing this modern spin on the Thai wat.

A gallery sells reproductions of Chalermchai Kositpipat's rather New Age-looking works.

Pick up an entertaining free leaflet where the artist describes his aims and achievements in a simultaneously humble and self-aggrandising way. Londoners may recognise his style from the Wat Buddhapadipa in Wimbledon, where his students did the mural paintings.

To get to the temple, hop on one of the regular buses that run from Chiang Rai to Chiang Mai and ask to get off at Wat Rong Khun (15B).

### MAE SALONG (SANTIKHIRI)

เมืองสอง (สันติคีรี)

pop 10,000

Aside from Bangkok's Amphoe Yaowarat, Mae Salong is Thailand's most Chinalike community. The atmosphere here is reminiscent of a small Chinese mountain village. The combination of pack horses, a mainly Yunnanese population, hill tribes (Akha, Lahu, Shan, Mien), red lanterns decorating shops, and southern Chinese-style houses conjure up images of a small town or village in southern China's Yunnan Province.

## History

Mae Salong was originally settled by the 93rd Regiment of the Kuomintang (KMT), which fled to Myanmar from China after the 1949 Chinese revolution. After futile intermittent rearguard action against the Chinese communists, the renegades were forced to flee Myanmar in 1961 when the Yangon government decided it wouldn't allow the KMT to remain legally in northern Myanmar. Crossing into northern Thailand with their pony caravans, the ex-soldiers and their families settled into mountain villages and re-created a society like the one they left behind in Yunnan.

After the Thai government granted the KMT refugee status in the 1960s, efforts were made to incorporate the Yunnanese KMT and their families into the Thai nation. Until the late 1980s they didn't have much success. Many ex-KMT persisted in involving themselves in the Golden Triangle opium trade in a three-way partnership with opium warlord Khun Sa and the Shan United Army (SUA). Because of the rough, mountainous terrain and lack of sealed roads, the outside world was rather cut off from the goings-on in Mae

Salong, so the Yunnanese were able to ignore attempts by the Thai authorities to suppress opium activity and tame the region.

Infamous Khun Sa made his home in nearby Ban Hin Taek (now Ban Thoet Thai; p365) until the early 1980s when he was finally routed by the Thai military. Khun Sa's retreat to Myanmar seemed to signal a change in local attitudes and the Thai government finally began making progress in its pacification of Mae Salong and the surrounding area.

In a further effort to separate the area from its old image as an opium fiefdom, the Thai government officially changed the name of the village from Mae Salong to Santikhiri (Hill of Peace). Until the 1980s packhorses were used to move goods up the mountain to Mae Salong, but today the 36km road from Basang (near Mae Chan) is paved and well travelled. The Yunnanese immigrants' equestrian history, alien to the Thais, has led the latter to refer to them as *jiin haw* (galloping Chinese).

In spite of the ongoing 'Thai-isation' of Mae Salong, the town is unlike any other in Thailand. It's not unusual for hotels and

restaurants in Mae Salong to boast satellite reception of three TV channels from China and three from Hong Kong. Although the Yunnanese dialect of Chinese remains the lingua franca, the new generation of young people look more to Bangkok than Taipei for its social and cultural inspirations. Many have left for greater educational and career opportunities.

In an attempt to quash opium activity, and the more recent threat of *yaa baa* (methamphetamine) trafficking, the government created crop-substitution programmes to encourage hill tribes to cultivate tea, coffee, corn and fruit trees. This seems to be successful as tea and corn are abundant in the surrounding fields, every other shop along the main street is a teashop, and there are tea factories in and around town. In both you can sample the fragrant Mae Salong teas (originally from Taiwan).

The local illicit corn whisky is much in demand – perhaps an all-too-obvious substitution for the poppy. Another local speciality is Chinese herbs, particularly *yaa dawng*, a kind that is mixed with liquor. Thai and Chinese tourists who come to Mae Salong frequently take back a bag or two of assorted Chinese herbs.

## Information

There is an ATM at the Thai Military Bank opposite Khumnaiphol Resort.

The weather is always a bit cooler on the peak of Doi Mae Salong than on the plains below. During the cooler and dry months, November to February, nights can actually get cold – be sure to bring sweaters and socks for visits at this time of year.

Minivans full of Thai day-trippers begin arriving in Mae Salong around 10am and leave by 4pm. If you can stay overnight you'll pretty much have the place to yourself in the mornings and evenings.

## Sights

An interesting **morning market** convenes from 5am to 7am (5am to 6am is the peak time) at the T-intersection near Shin Sane Guest House. The market attracts town residents and many tribespeople from the surrounding districts.

To get to **Wat Santikhiri** go past the mosque and up a steep hill that affords heady views along the way. The wat is of the Mahayana

tradition and Chinese in style. Go further to the top of the hill to meet the impressive **Princess Mother Pagoda**.

Past the Khumnaiphol Resort and further up the hill is a **viewpoint** with some teashops, and a KMT general's **tomb**. It is guarded by a soldier who will describe (in Thai or Yunnanese) the history of the KMT in the area.

Fifteen kilometres north of Mae Salong is the **Hilltribe Development & Welfare Centre**, which supports the local hill-tribe settlements by selling mainly Akha and Mien handicrafts, such as woven cloth and silverware.

## Trekking

Shin Sane Guest House has a wall map showing approximate routes to Akha, Lisu, Mien, Lahu and Shan villages in the area. Nearby Akha and Lisu villages are less than half a day's walk away.

The best hikes are north of Mae Salong between Ban Thoet Thai and the Myanmar border. Ask about political conditions before heading off in this direction (towards Myanmar), however. Shan and Wa armies competing for control over this section of the Thailand–Myanmar border do occasionally clash in the area. A steady trade in methamphetamine and, to a lesser extent, heroin, flows across the border via several conduit villages.

Shin Sane Guest House (below) arranges four-hour **horseback treks** to four nearby villages for around 400B per day. It's possible to hire ponies as pack animals or horses for riding. You could also trek the 4km to an Akha village on your own. A basic guesthouse there offers rooms and two meals a day for 50B per person.

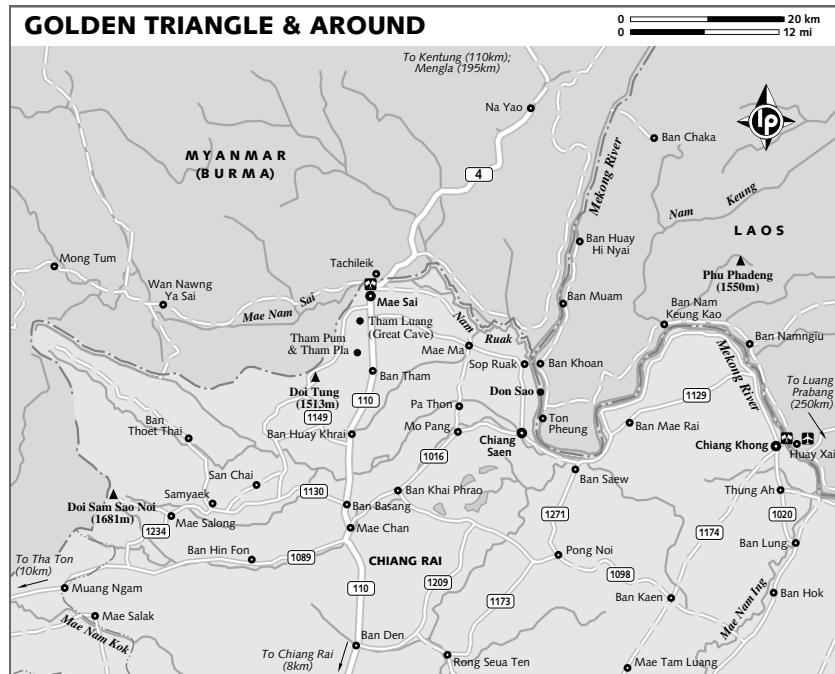
Akha Mae Salong Guest House (p364) also runs treks and can arrange half-day horse-riding tours.

## Sleeping

Since the road from Mae Salong to Tha Ton opened, fewer visitors are opting to stay overnight in Mae Salong. The resulting surplus of accommodation often makes prices negotiable, except at holidays when they tend to increase.

## BUDGET

▣ **Shin Sane Guest House** (Sin Sae; ☎ 0 5376 5026; 32/3 Th Mae Salong; s/d from 50/100B, bungalow 300B) Mae Salong's original hotel is a wood affair



with a bit of atmosphere. Trekking details are available, including a good trekking map. There is also a little eating area. The rooms are bare but spacious with shared bathrooms. The bungalows are much more comfortable, and have private bathrooms and cable TV. It is noisy in the morning when calls to prayer (from the mosque behind the guesthouse) start up.

**Akha Mae Salong Guest House** (☎ 0 5376 5103; Th Mae Salong; s/d/tr 50/100/150B) Next door to Shin Sane, this guesthouse occupies a rambling building and is run by a friendly, non-English-speaking Akha family. Shared bathroom rooms are clean and large. Horseback trekking and hiking can be arranged.

☎ **Saeng A Roon Hotel** (☎ 0 5376 5029; Th Mae Salong; r 200-300B) Next to the teashop of the same name, this brand new hotel has friendly staff, spacious tiled-floor rooms and great views of the hills. The cheaper rooms share spick-and-span hot-water bathrooms.

**Golden Dragon Inn** (☎ 0 5376 5009; 13/1 Th Mae Salong; dm 50B, r 300-500B) The Golden Dragon has accommodation ranging from dorm beds in basic A-frame bungalows, newer more comfortable bungalows with private bathrooms and balconies, as well as large neat rooms in a concrete building. The more expensive rooms have cable TV. The owner has her own coffee plantation and coffee shop at the hotel. Sample the Arabica coffee in the manicured garden or go visit her plantation 2km away. It's worth a look.

## MIDRANGE

☎ **Mae Salong Villa** (☎ 0 5376 5114/9; maesalongvilla@thaimail.com; 5 Mu 1; r 800-1500B; 📺) Stunning views are the highlight of this collection of well-furnished bungalow-style rooms. Floor-to-ceiling windows and terraces make the most of the garden setting. The on-site Chinese restaurant has high-backed red chairs and lanterns, and the food is good. High-quality tea, grown on the proprietor's tea estate, is for sale.

☎ **Khumnaiphol Resort** (☎ 0 5376 5001/3; fax 0 5376 5004; 58 Mu 1; r & bungalows 1200B) On the road to Tha Ton, 1km south of town near the afternoon market, this resort has bungalows perched on the hillside. The covered porches give great views of the tea plantations. Further back are some older, hotel-style rooms with mattresses that are distinctly Thai in 'softness' (or the lack thereof).

## Eating

*Pàa-thàwng-kōh* (Chinese doughnut) and hot soybean milk at the morning market are an inspiring way to start the day. Don't miss the many street noodle vendors who sell *khànmōm jīn nām ngiaw*, a delicious Yunnanese rice-noodle concoction topped with a spicy pork sauce – Mae Salong's most famous local dish and a gourmet bargain at 15B per bowl.

Around town you'll find a variety of places serving simple Chinese snacks such as fluffy *mantou* (plain steamed Chinese buns) and *saalaapao* (pork-stuffed Chinese buns) served with delicious pickled vegetables. Many of the Chinese in Mae Salong are Muslims so you'll find Muslim Chinese restaurants serving *khào sawy* (egg noodles in a curried broth).

In town, several teahouses sell locally grown teas and offer complimentary tastings in very traditional, elaborate procedures, involving the pouring of tea from a tall, narrow cup into a round cup, said to enhance the tea's fragrance.

**Mini Restaurant** (Th Mae Salong 25-60B) Further south from Salema, Mini has western breakfasts, as well as Chinese and Thai dishes. There is an English language menu.

**Salema Restaurant** (Th Mae Salong; dishes 40-120B) Halfway between the Shin Sane Guest House and the day market, Salema serves tasty Yunnanese dishes using locally grown shiitake mushrooms at moderate prices.

## Getting There & Away

Mae Salong is accessible via two routes. The original road, Rte 1130, winds west from Ban Basang. Newer Rte 1234 approaches from the south, allowing easier access from Chiang Mai. The older route is definitely more spectacular.

To get to Mae Salong by bus, take Mae Sai bus from Chiang Rai to Ban Basang (20B, 30 minutes, every 15 minutes between 6am and 4pm). From Ban Basang, *sāwngthāew* head up the mountain to Mae Salong (per person 60B, one hour). It's a little cheaper on the way down from Mae Salong – pick up a *sāwngthāew* from outside the 7-Eleven in town. *Sāwngthāew* stop running at around 5pm but you can charter one in either direction for about 400B.

You can also reach Mae Salong by road from Tha Ton (see p333).

## BAN THOET THAI

บ้านเท็ดไทย

Those with an interest in Khun Sa history (p362) can make a side trip to this Yunnanese-Shan village, 12km off the road between Ban Basang and Mae Salong.

Today, many of Ban Thoet Thai's 3000 residents – a mix of Shan, Yunnanese, Akha, Lisu and Hmong – claim to have fond memories of the man once hunted (but never captured) by heroin-consuming countries. The warlord's former camp headquarters, a simple collection of wood and brick buildings on a hillside overlooking the village, has been turned into a free rustic museum. There are no set opening hours, and admission is free so you simply have to turn up and ask one of the caretakers to open the exhibition room for you.

Inside, the walls are hung with maps of the Shan States and Mong Tai (the name the Shan use for the independent nation they hope to establish in the future) homelands, a photograph of the former Kengtung (East Shan State) palace and a few political posters. It's not much considering Khun Sa's six years (1976-82) in the area and, of course, there is no mention of opium.

A busy morning market, part of which was once used to store the Shan United Army arsenal, trades in products from Thailand, Myanmar and China. Khun Sa was also responsible for the construction of **Wat Phra That Ka Kham**, a Shan-style monastery near his former camp.

## MAE SAI

เมืองชาย

pop 25,800

Thailand's northernmost town, Mae Sai can be used as a starting point for exploring the Golden Triangle, Doi Tung and Mae Salong. It's also a good spot to observe border life, as Mae Sai is one of the few official overland crossings between Myanmar and Thailand. Don't come expecting loads of atmosphere; the town is little more than a modern trading post.

Foreigners are permitted to cross the border to Tachileik (the town opposite Mae Sai, spelt Thakhilek by the Thais), then continue to Kengtung, and as far as Mengla on the Thai/China border. It is now possible to travel from Mengla on to Daluo and Jinghong in China, if you have arranged the appropriate visas beforehand (see p371). Chiang Saen to China via boat is another, and relatively easier,

route (see p372). In spite of these opening, Thai tourists are much more commonly seen in Mae Sai than *faràng* (Westerners).

In February 2001 Burmese forces, apparently in pursuit of Shan State Army rebels, shelled and fired on parts of Mae Sai, invoking retaliatory shelling from the Thai army. During the fighting the whole of Mae Sai was evacuated and the border area was subsequently closed for a time. The crossing closed again between May and October 2002 following a political spat between the Thai and Myanmar governments. More recently, the border crossing was closed for a few days immediately after the September 2006 military coup. At the time of writing the border was open again, but it's always a good idea to check the current situation before travelling to Mae Sai.

## Information

**Immigration** (☎ 0 5373 3261; 🕒 8am-5.30pm) At the entrance to the border bridge.

**Internet Café** (40B per hour) Behind the Wang Thong Hotel by its car park.

**Monkey Island Guesthouse** (☎ 0 5373 4060; www.monkeyisland.biz; 40/5 Th Sailomjoi) Has internet and free wi-fi if you have your own laptop.

**Overbrook Clinic** (☎ 0 5373 4422; 20/7 Th Phahonyothin; 🕒 9am-3pm) Connected to the modern hospital in Chiang Rai, this small clinic on the main road has doctors who can speak English.

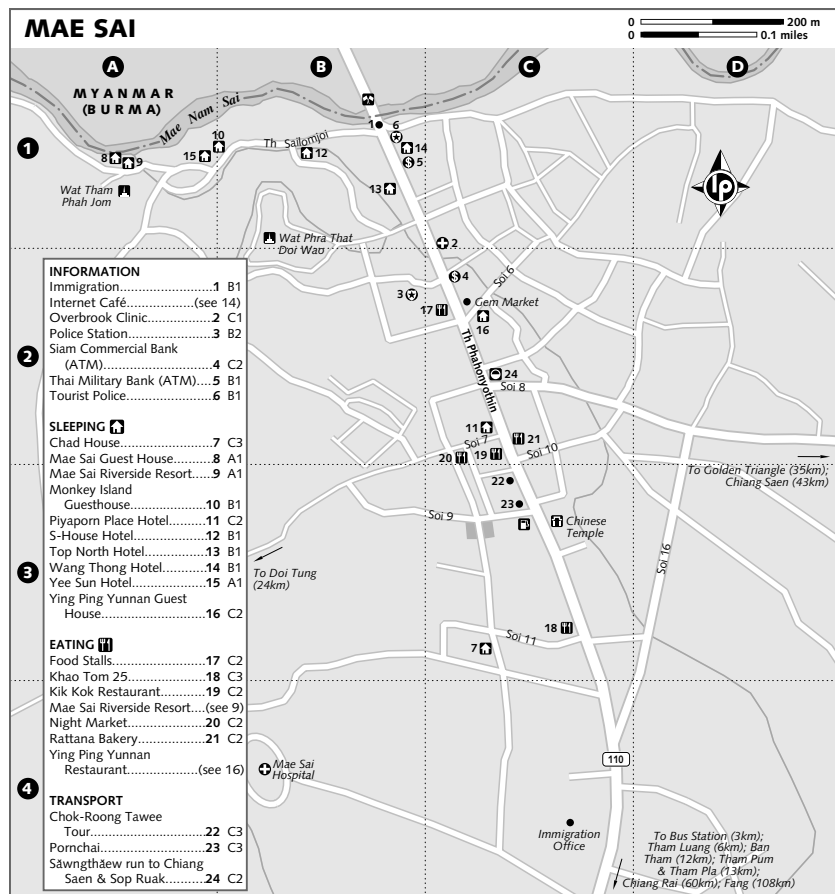
**Tourist police** (☎ 115) They have a booth in front of the border crossing before immigration.

## Sights & Activities

Take the steps up the hill near the border to **Wat Phra That Doi Wao**, west of the main street, for superb views over Mae Sai and Myanmar. This wat was reportedly constructed in memory of a couple of thousand Burmese soldiers who died fighting the KMT here in 1965 (you'll hear differing stories around town, including a version wherein the KMT are the heroes).

There are also some interesting trails in the cliffs and hills overlooking Mae Sai Guest House and the river. Monkey Island Guesthouse (p366) can give out maps detailing motorbike rides and walks to do in the area.

A persistent rumour says there's a gated cave tunnel that crosses to Myanmar beneath Mae Nam Sai; the entrance is supposedly hidden in the grounds of **Wat Tham Phah Jom**. If it's there it must be for locals only, and those staying at Mae Sai Guest House are treated to a constant parade of Burmese guys stripping



off their *longyi* (sarongs) and wading up to their necks across the river.

If interested in **volunteering**, a company called **I to I International** ([www.i-to-i.com](http://www.i-to-i.com)) organises community projects around Mae Sai (and in other parts of Thailand), where volunteers teach and look after hill-tribe children. The minimum stay is four weeks and needs to be arranged before leaving your home country. The US\$1895 fee includes Teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) training, orientation and insurance.

## Sleeping

### BUDGET

**Chad House** (☎ 0 5373 2054; Th Phahonyothin, off soi 11; dm/s/d 60/100/150B, bungalows 250B) In an awkward

location in a residential neighbourhood, this guesthouse feels like a homestay. The English-speaking Thai-Shan owners are friendly and helpful and the food is good. Simple, clean rooms have shared hot-water shower facilities. There are a couple of bungalows with private cold-water bathrooms. Look for the sign on the left when coming into town.

**Monkey Island Guesthouse** (☎ 0 5373 4060; [www.monkeyisland.biz](http://www.monkeyisland.biz); 40/5 Th Sailomjoi; r with shared bathroom 100-200B, 4-person family room 400B; ☑) This guesthouse has become a gathering point for travellers. Partly because of the English guy who runs it and his in-depth knowledge of the Mae Sai area and Myanmar, but also because of the huge, cheap rooms, the bar/restaurant area with pool table, plus the large terrace

facing Myanmar. Maps are available, trips to Myanmar organised, and motorbikes and mountain bikes rented here.

**Mae Sai Guest House** (☎ 0 5373 2021; 688 Th Wiengpangkam; bungalows s 100-200B, d 300-500B) This collection of A-frame bungalows ranges from simple rooms with shared cold water showers, to bungalows on the river with terraces and private bathrooms. It is up a narrow, one lane stretch behind Mai Sai Riverside Resort. There is a riverside restaurant on site serving Thai and Western dishes.

**Mae Sai Riverside Resort** (☎ 0 5373 2630; Th Wiengpangkam; r 350B) Right at the end of Th Sailomjoi, this riverside hotel looks grand from the outside but is disappointing inside. The simple rooms with hot water shower bathrooms could do with a repaint. However, their restaurant overlooking the river serves tasty Thai dishes (see right).

**Ying Ping Yunnan Guest House** (☎ 0 5364 0507; Th Phahonyothin, Soi 6; r 350B) Above the Ying Ping Yunnan Chinese restaurant (right) are nine sparklingly clean, simple white rooms with pictures of Chinese goddesses on the walls. It's good value.

**Top North Hotel** (☎ 0 5373 1955; 306 Th Phahonyothin; d 400-600B, tr 900B; ☑) A five-minute walk to the bridge to Myanmar, this older hotel has spacious rooms and friendly staff – and a very auspicious red theme going on. Some of the rooms look newer than others and have cable TV; choose the ones at the back of the building to avoid street noise.

**S-House Hotel** (☎ 0 5364 0670; s\_house43234@yahoo.com; Mu 1, 384 Th Sailomjoi; r 500-600B; ☑) At the end of the covered part of Th Sailomjoi, away from the border crossing, this hotel has spacious rooms with balconies overlooking the hills.

**Yee Sun Hotel** (☎ 0 5373 3455; 816/13 Th Sailomjoi; r 600B; ☑) This new, 11-room Chinese-run hotel has great value if rather characterless rooms. Find four-star level furnishings with bath, shower and a view of the river.

## TOP END

**Piyaporn Place Hotel** (☎ 0 5373 4511-3; [www.piyapornplacehotel.com](http://www.piyapornplacehotel.com); Th Phahonyothin; r/ste 1000/1800B; ☑) On the main road by Soi 7, this seven-storey hotel is the best place in town and good value. The large, contemporary-styled rooms have wooden floors, a small sofa, and the usual four/five-star amenities like bath, cable TV and minibar. There is a conference room and

a smart, stylish restaurant serving Thai and European food.

**Wang Thong Hotel** (☎ 0 5373 3389-95; [wangthong-hotel@hotmail.com](mailto:wangthong-hotel@hotmail.com); 299 Th Phahonyothin; r 1200-2500B, ste 4500B; ☑) The nine-storey Wang Thong is a comfortable choice and great for its convenient location by the border crossing. The rooms are nothing special but they're spacious and come with amenities you'd expect at this price. In addition to the pool there is a pub, disco and a popular restaurant. Off-street parking is guarded. Discounts are available in low season.

## Eating

Many **food stalls** offering everything from *khao sawy* to custard set up at night on the footpaths along Th Phahonyothin. The **night market** is rather small but the Chinese vendors do good *küaytiaw phat sii-lu* (rice noodles stir-fried in soy sauce) and other noodle dishes. You can also get fresh *pàa-thàwng-kòh* and hot soy milk.

**Rattana Bakery** (☎ 0 5373 1230; 18 Th Phahonyothin; dishes 10-35B; ☎ 8am-5pm) Head here for baked snacks, but don't expect a full meal.

**Khao Tom 25** (Th Phahonyothin; dishes 20-45B; ☎ noon-4am) Near Chad House, this is your best bet for late-night eats.

**Kik Kok Restaurant** (Th Phahonyothin; dishes 25-60B; ☎ 6am-8pm) This simple place serves a good selection of Thai dishes; its rice noodles are particularly good.

**Mae Sai Riverside Resort** (☎ 0 5373 2630; Th Wiengpangkam; dishes 40-139B) Recommended for its Thai dishes, like the tasty lemongrass fried fish, this restaurant has a great location looking out over the river to Myanmar.

**Ying Ping Yunnan Restaurant** (☎ 0 5364 0507; Th Phahonyothin, Soi 6; dishes 100-300B) This smart, bustling and authentic Chinese restaurant serves dishes like 'eight hero salad' with prawns, octopus and shiitake mushrooms, as well as Yunnan-style fried duck. Its slow-cooked pork leg in garlic is the house speciality.

## Shopping

Burmese lacquerware, gems, jade and other goods from Laos and Myanmar are sold in shops along the main street. Many Burmese come over during the day from Tachileik to work or do business, hurrying back by sunset. Gem dealers from as far away as Chanthaburi frequent the gem market that is opposite the police station.

## Getting There & Away

Mae Sai's government **bus station** (☎ 0 5364 437) is 4km south of the frontier immigration office, or an 8B shared *sǎwngthǎew* ride from the city centre. Buses to Mae Sai leave frequently from Chiang Rai (ordinary/air-con 33B/55B, 1½ hours).

To/from Chiang Mai there are ordinary (126B, at 8.15am and 2pm), 1st class air-con (227B, at 7am, 10.45am and 1.45pm), and VIP (350B, at 9.15am and 3.15pm) buses daily; this trip takes four to five hours.

There is a 2nd-class air-con bus (402B, 6.15am) and a 1st-class air-con bus (516B, 7am) that goes to Mae Sot daily. Six departures go to Nakhon Ratchasima (2nd class air-con 507B, 1st class air-con 652B, VIP 760B, 15 hours) daily.

There is also a direct bus from Mae Sai to Fang (61B, two hours, 7am) and one to Tha Ton (51B, 1½ hours, 7am). Hop on any of the buses to Chiang Rai for Mae Chan (27B, 30 minutes).

For Doi Tung take a bus to Ban Huay Khrai (15B), then a *sǎwngthǎew* to Doi Tung (60B, one hour).

On the main Th Phahonyothin road, by Soi 8 is a sign saying 'bus stop'. From here blue *sǎwngthǎew* run to Chiang Saen (40B) and Sop Ruak (40B) every 40 minutes, between 9am and 2pm daily.

## BANGKOK

Second-class air-conditioned buses run to Bangkok (483B, 13 hours, depart 5.20pm and 5.45pm). VIP buses (965B, depart 7am, 5pm and 5.45pm) and 1st-class air-con buses (621B, depart 4.30pm, 5pm and 5.45pm) are also available.

**Chok-Roong Tawee Tour** (☎ 0 5364 0123) With the same prices as the bus station you can buy tickets in advance here. There is no sign in English so look for the large red 'International Telephone' sign.

## Getting Around

*Sǎwngthǎew* around town are 5B shared. Motorcycle taxis cost 20B to 30B. Honda Dreams can be rented between Chok-Roong Tawee Tour and the Shell petrol station at **Pornchai** (☎ 0 5373 1136; 4/7 Th Phahonyothin) for 150B a day. **Monkey Island Guesthouse** (☎ 0 5373 4060; www.monkeyisland.biz; 40/5 Th Sailomjoi) also rents out motorbikes from 200B a day and mountain bikes from 50B a day.

## AROUND MAE SAI

### Tham Luang

ถ้ำหลวง

About 6km south of Mae Sai off Rte 110, this large cave extends into the hills for at least a couple of kilometres, possibly more. The first cavern is huge, and a narrow passage at the back leads to a series of other chambers and side tunnels of varying sizes. The first kilometre is fairly easy-going, but after that you have to do some climbing over piles of rocks to get further in. At this point the roof formations become more fantastic and tiny crystals make them change colour according to the angle of the light. For 40B you can borrow a gas lantern from the caretakers in front of the cave or you can take someone along as a guide (for which there's no fixed fee; just give them whatever you feel they deserve). Apparently, guides sometimes have better things to do during the week. Charter a *sǎwngthǎew* or rent a bike in Mae Sai to get to Tham Luang.

### Tham Pum & Tham Pla

ถ้ำปุม/ถ้ำปลา

Only 13km south of Mae Sai, just off Rte 110 at Ban Tham, these two caves have freshwater lakes inside. Bring a torch to explore the caves, as there are no lights. Another attraction here is the unique cakelike *chedi* in front of the cave entrance. It's a very large, multi-tiered structure stylistically different from any other in Thailand.

There is a police checkpoint at Ban Tham so bring some ID. To get here either rent a motorbike or charter a *sǎwngthǎew* to the turn-off on Rte 110 at Ban Tham; from there it is a 1km walk down to the caves.

### Doi Tung

ดอยตุง

About halfway between Mae Chan and Mae Sai on Rte 110 is the west turn-off for **Doi Tung**. The name means 'Flag Peak', from the northern Thai word for flag (*tung*). King Achutarat of Chiang Saen ordered a giant flag to be flown from the peak to mark the spot where two *chedi* were constructed in AD 911; the *chedi* are still there, a pilgrimage site for Thai, Shan and Chinese Buddhists.

But the main attraction at Doi Tung is getting there. The 'easy' way is via Rte 1149, which is mostly paved to the peak of Doi Tung. But it's winding, steep and narrow,

so if you're driving or riding a motorcycle, take it slowly.

Along the way are Shan, Akha and Musoe (Lahu) villages. It is not safe to trek in this area without a Thai or hill-tribe guide, simply because you could be mistaken for a United States Drug Enforcement Agency agent (by the drug traders) or drug dealer (by the Thai army rangers who patrol the area). However, under the royal project development, this area has got safer.

On the theory that local hill tribes would be so honoured by a royal presence that they will stop cultivating opium, the late Princess Mother (the king's mother) built the **Doi Tung Royal Villa** (☎ 0 5376 7011; www.doitung.org; admission 70B; ☎ 6.30am-5pm), a summer palace on the slopes of Doi Tung near Pa Kluay Reservoir, which is now open to the public as a museum. The royal initiative also educated on new agricultural methods to stop slash and burn practices. Opium has now been replaced by crops such as, coffee, teak and various fruits. The rest of the property, including the **Mae Fah Luang Garden** and **Mae Fah Luang Arboretum** (admission 80B; ☎ 7am-5pm), is also open to the public. There is also a top-end hotel (see right), a classy restaurant, coffee kiosk and a Doi Tung craft shop up here. This place is popular with bus tour groups.

Another nearby royal project, **Doi Tung Zoo** (admission free; ☎ 8am-6pm) covers an open space of over 32 hectares. The zoo was first established as a wildlife breeding and animal conservation station, to help reintroduce many species to a reforested Doi Tung. These include Siamese fireback pheasants, peacocks, bears, sambar deer, barking deer and hog deer.

At the peak, 1800m above sea level, **Wat Phra That Doi Tung** is built around the twin Lanna-style *chedi*. The *chedi* were renovated by famous Chiang Mai monk Khruba Siwichai early in the 20th century.

Pilgrims bang on the usual row of temple bells to gain merit. Although the wat isn't that impressive, the high forested setting will make the trip worthwhile. From the walled edge of the temple you can get an aerial view of the snaky road you've just climbed.

A walking path next to the wat leads to a spring and there are other short walking trails in the vicinity.

A bit below the peak is the smaller **Wat Noi Doi Tung**, where food and beverages are available from vendors.

## SLEEPING & EATING

If you want to spend the night, **Doi Tung Lodge** (☎ 0 5376 7003; www.doitung.org; Doi Tung Development Project, Mae Fah Luang District; r incl full breakfast per person per 1/2/3 nights 2600/3850/5050B; ☎) is an elegant mountain lodge with 47 deluxe rooms. A semi-outdoor **restaurant** (☎ 7am-9pm; dishes 80-250B) offers excellent meals made with local produce, including lots of fresh mushrooms.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

Buses to the turn-off for Doi Tung are 15B from either Mae Chan or Mae Sai. From Ban Huay Khrai, at the turn-off, *sǎwngthǎew* run to Ban Pakha (30B, 30 minutes), or all the way to Doi Tung (60B, one hour).

Road conditions to Doi Tung vary from year to year depending on the state of repair; during the bad spells, the section above Baa Pakha can be quite a challenge to negotiate, whether you're in a truck, 4WD or riding a motorcycle.

You can also travel by motorcycle between Doi Tung and Mae Sai along an even more challenging, 16km, unevenly sealed road. It starts in the Akha village of Ban Phame, 8km south of Mae Sai (4km south along Rte 110, then 4km west) and joins the main road about two-thirds of the way up Doi Tung – about 11km from the latter. You can also pick up this road by following the dirt road that starts in front of Mae Sai's Wat Phra That Doi Wao. West of Ban Phame the road has lots of tight curves, mud, rocks, precipitous drops, passing trucks and occasional road-repair equipment – figure on at least an hour by motorcycle or 4WD from Mae Sai.

Although now paved, this is a route for experienced bikers only. The road also runs high in the mountains along the Myanmar border and should not be travelled alone or after 4pm. Ask first in Mae Sai about border conditions. If you want to do a full loop from Mae Sai, ride/drive via Rte 110 south of Mae Sai, then Rte 1149 up to Doi Tung. Once you've had a look around the summit, return to Mae Sai via the Ban Bang Phame aforementioned roads; this means you'll be travelling downhill much of the way.

## Cross-Border Trips to Tachileik & Beyond

Foreigners are ordinarily permitted to cross the bridge over Nam Ruak into Tachileik. On occasion the border may close temporarily



for security reasons, so be prepared for possible disappointment if the political situation between Thailand and Myanmar deteriorates again.

Head to the immigration office just before the bridge on the Thai side and state how far you will be going in Myanmar – Tachileik, Kengtung or Mengla. Cross the bridge and enter the Myanmar immigration office, where for a payment of US\$10 or 500B you can enter Myanmar at Tachileik, and travel onto Kengtung or Mengla for a period of 14 days. Whether staying for a few hours or 14 days the fee is the same. At this immigration office your picture is taken for your temporary ID card that has your final destination marked on it. If going further afield than Tachileik, this ID card is stamped at every checkpoint along the route. On your return to Thailand, the Thai immigration office at the bridge will give you a new 30-day tourist visa (see p753).

There is little to do in **Tachileik** apart from shop – the prices are about the same as on the Thai side and everyone accepts baht. Around 4000 people cross the bridge to this market town daily; most of these are Thais shopping for dried mushrooms, herbal medicines, swords and daggers, antlers, X-rated DVDs, and other cheap and bootlegged imports from China that could get you loads of attention back home from customs. Shan handicrafts, fake designer bags, gems, CDs and DVDs are some of the other things on offer in this market. Be wary of cheap cartons of Marlboros and other Western-brand cigarettes, as many are filled with Burmese cigarettes instead of the real thing. Also, Thai police have been known to fine travellers in possession of these cigarettes.

If travelling on, money can be changed into Burmese *kyat* for Kengtung and Chinese *yuan* for Mengla at Tachileik. Ask at the **Tourist Office** next to immigration. This same office also gives out free rough maps of Kengtung and Mengla.

## KENG TUNG

Kengtung (called Chiang Tung by the Thais and usually spelt Kyninetong by the Burmese), 163km north, is a sleepy but historic capital for the Shan State's Khün culture. The Khün speak a northern Thai language related to Shan and Thai Lü, and use a writing script similar to the ancient Lanna script. It's a bit over halfway between the Thai and Chinese

borders. Built around a small lake and dotted with ageing **Buddhist temples** and crumbling British **colonial architecture**, it's a much more scenic town than Tachileik and one of the most interesting towns in Myanmar's entire Shan State. About 70% of all foreign visitors are Thais seeking a glimpse of ancient Lanna. Few Westerners are seen in town save for contract employees working for the UN Drug Control Project (UNDCP).

Five-day, four-night excursions to the town of Kengtung and/or Mengla can be arranged through Monkey Island Guesthouse (p366) on the Thai side. To get to Kengtung independently see opposite.

**Harry's Guest House & Trekking** (☎ 0 1012 1418; 132 Mai Yang Lan; r per person US\$5-10) rents basic rooms in a large house. Harry is an English-speaking Kengtung native who spent many years as a trekking guide in Chiang Mai. The downside is that it is about 2km out of town. **Sam Yawt** (r US\$5-10), on the east side of the market and by the lake, is the cheaper, centrally located choice, while **Princess Hotel** (☎ 9 5842 1319; kengtung@mail4u.com; 21 Th Zaydankalay; r US\$20-30), in a convenient location by the morning market and restaurants, is the relatively up-market option in Kengtung.

In order to proceed on to Mengla from Kengtung, you must first register at the Kengtung immigration office. The staff at Harry's Guest House can help you accomplish this or you can stay at the other guesthouses recommended, which are closer to the immigration office.

## MENGLA

Eighty-five kilometres north of Kengtung is the Sino-Burmese border district of Mengla (or Mong La as it is sometimes spelt). Although Mengla is mainly a Thai Lü district, in a deal worked out with the Myanmar military it's currently controlled by ethnic Wa, who once fought against Yangon troops but now enjoy peaceful relations with Yangon (it's suspected this is in return for a sizeable share in the Wa's thriving amphetamine and opium trade).

A **Drug Free Museum** contains an exhibit on how to refine heroin from opium. It is worth going up to the hilltop **Wat Jon Kam** for heady views across the border to China.

The district receives lots of Chinese tourists who come to gamble in the district's several casinos. There are also plenty of karaoke bars,

discos and other staples of modern Chinese entertainment life. Mengla's well-known wildlife market, which sells animals such as reptiles and bears, is best avoided.

For a complete description of Kengtung and Mengla, see Lonely Planet's *Myanmar (Burma)* guidebook.

## MENGLA TO CHINA?

The obvious question is, can you cross the border from Mengla into Daluo or further afield in China? The answer is now yes, if you have Burmese and Chinese visas arranged in advance, and go through one company. Based in Mengla, **Lyaung Daw Mu Garden** (☎ 186 691 55 69331; shwelinstar@vip.sina.com; Mengla) picks clients up from the border and arranges tours and hotels in China, as far as Jinghong. Email Shwe Lin Star, who speaks English, for more information.

## Getting There & Away

Once through immigration at Tachileik, go to the **tourist office** (next to immigration) to organise a seat on a bus or in a taxi for the 163km stretch to Kengtung. The 45-seat buses

go at 9am and 1pm, take around four hours and cost 350B per person. The four-seater taxis go between 9am and 6pm, take around three hours and cost 450B per person. Make sure the price includes fuel, and photocopies of your itinerary that the driver shows at checkpoints along the way. The price is the same from Kengtung to Mengla. Toll fees from Tachileik to Kengtung are approximately 120B (one way). There is a toll when entering Mengla province – 36 yuan per person and 42 yuan for a small passenger vehicle. The road trip allows glimpses of Shan, Akha, Wa and Lahu villages along the way.

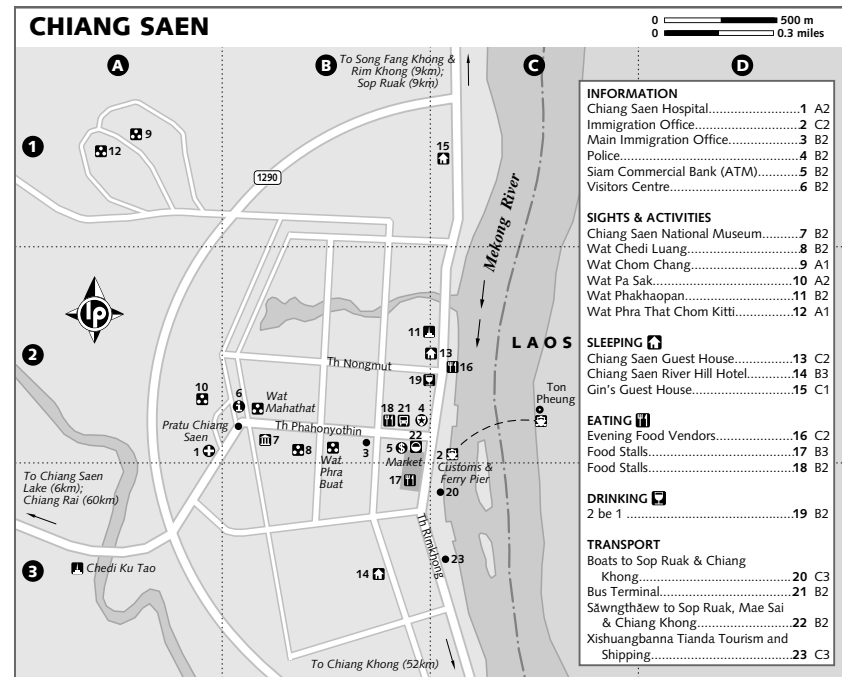
Alternatively, you can organise a tour through Monkey Island Guesthouse in Mae Sai (see p366). According to the tourist office in Tachileik, it is not possible to organise tours from the Myanmar side at this point.

## CHIANG SAEN

เชียงใหม่

pop 55,000

A sleepy crossroads town on the banks of the Mekong River. Chiang Saen was once the site of an important northern Thai kingdom.



Scattered throughout the town today are the ruins of the 14th-century Chiang Saen kingdom – surviving architecture includes several *chedi*, Buddha images, *wihān* pillars and earthen city ramparts. A few of the old monuments still standing predate Chiang Saen by a couple of hundred years; legend says this pre-Chiang Saen kingdom was called Yonok. Formerly loosely affiliated with various northern Thai kingdoms, as well as 18th-century Myanmar, Chiang Saen didn't really become a Siamese possession until the 1880s.

Yunnanese trade routes extended from Simao, Yunnan, through Laos to Chiang Saen and then on to Mawlamyine in Burma, via Chiang Rai, Chiang Mai and Mae Sariang. A less-used route proceeded through Utaradit, Phayao and Phrae.

Nowadays huge river barges from China moor at Chiang Saen, carrying fruit, engine parts and all manner of other imports, keeping the old China–Siam trade route open. Despite this trade, and despite commercialisation of the nearby Golden Triangle, the town hasn't changed too much over the last decade.

Chiang Saen is an official border crossing for Thai and Lao citizens travelling by ferry to and from the Lao People's Democratic Republic town of Ton Pheung on the opposite side of the river.

## Information

Chiang Saen's immigration office has two branches: the main office on the southwest corner of the town's main intersection, and a smaller one next to the Mekong River pier (for crossings to Ton Pheung).

**Chiang Saen Hospital** (☎ 0 5377 7017-035) This government hospital is just south of Wat Pa Sak. Staff speak little English. The best hospital nearby is in Chiang Rai (see p352).

**Siam Commercial Bank** (Th Phahonyothin) On the main street leading from the highway to the Mekong River. Has an ATM and currency exchange.

**Visitors Centre** (Th Phahonyothin; ☎ 8.30am–4.30pm Mon–Sat) Has a good relief display showing the major ruin sites as well as photos of various *chedi* before, during and after restoration.

## Sights & Activities

Near the town entrance, the small **Chiang Saen National Museum** (☎ 0 5377 7102; 702 Th Phahonyothin; admission 30B; ☎ 8.30am–4.30pm Wed–Sun) displays artefacts from the Lanna period and prehistoric

stone tools from the area, as well as hill-tribe crafts, dress and musical instruments.

Behind the museum to the east are the ruins of **Wat Chedi Luang**, which feature an 18m octagonal *chedi* in the classic Chiang Saen or Lanna style. Archaeologists argue about its exact construction date but agree it dates to some time between the 12th and 14th centuries.

About 200m from the Pratu Chiang Saen (the historic main gateway to the town's western flank) are the remains of **Wat Pa Sak**, where the ruins of seven monuments are visible in a **historical park** (admission 20B). The main mid-14th-century *chedi* combines elements of the Hariphunchai and Sukhothai styles with a possible Bagan influence.

The remains of **Wat Phra That Chom Kitt** and **Wat Chom Chang** can be found about 2.5km north of Wat Pa Sak on a hilltop. The round *chedi* of Wat Phra That Chom Kitt is thought to have been constructed before the founding of the kingdom. The smaller *chedi* below it belonged to Wat Chom Chang. There is nothing much to see at these *chedi*, but there is a good view of Chiang Saen and the river.

Inside the grounds of **Wat Phakhaopan**, a living wat near the river, stands a magnificent Lanna-period *chedi*. The large, square base contains Lanna-style walking Buddhas in niches on all four sides. The Buddha facing east is sculpted in the *mudra* ('calling for rain') pose, with both hands held pointing down at the image's sides – a pose common in Laos but not so common in Thailand.

## MEKONG RIVER TRIPS

Boats from China, Laos and Myanmar can be seen unloading their cargoes in the mornings at a boat landing near the customs station stand on the Chiang Saen waterfront.

Six-passenger speedboats jet to Sop Ruak (per boat one way/return 500/600B, 35 minutes), or all the way to Chiang Khong (per boat one-way only 2000B, 1½ hours). Eight-passenger slower boats go to Sop Ruak (per boat one way/return 600/700B, 50 minutes) or Chiang Khong (per boat one way/return 3000/3500B, two hours).

Although it was once possible to travel by cargo ship from Chiang Saen to Jinghong in China, now it's only permitted via passenger boat through **Xishuangbanna Tianda Tourism and Shipping** (☎ 0 5365 1136; 08 9637 1178; one way/return

4000/7000B; ☎ 8am–5pm daily). The office is located on the main road opposite the Chiang Saen port (1km south of the ferry pier). The 50-seater speedboat goes through Myanmar and Laos but passengers stay on board. To do this trip you must already have your visa for China (quicker to arrange from Chiang Mai or Bangkok). The people at Chiang Saen Guest House (below) can book you a ticket and help you get a visa for China. It takes at least four work days to get the visa.

The trip from Chiang Saen to Jinghong takes 15 hours when conditions are good. During drier months the going is slower, as rocks and shallows can hamper the way. When this is the case a night's stay in Guanlei is included. Boats depart from Chiang Saen on Monday, Wednesday and Saturday at 5am.

## Sleeping

**Chiang Saen Guest House** (☎ 0 5365 0196; s/d 200/250B, bungalows 250B) In a handy location opposite the river and night stalls, this long-running place has basic but good-value rooms and A-frame bungalows. It can get noisy in the evening so choose rooms at the back. Boat tickets to China and visa can be arranged here (see opposite).

**Bin's Guest House** (☎ 0 5365 0847/1023; 71 Mu 8; r 250-700B) On the northern side of town (about 2km north of the bus terminal), this place has a variety of possibilities (all with attached bathroom) and a variety of prices. Rooms are simple, with those more expensive having more charm. The upstairs veranda is a good place from which to watch the Mekong flow by. Mountain bike and motorcycle rentals are available, as are a variety of tours.

**Chiang Saen River Hill Hotel** (☎ 0 5365 0826; 714 Mu 3 Tambon Wiang; r incl breakfast 1200B) This clean, four-storey hotel features good service and some nice northern-Thai furnishing touches. All the rooms have a fridge and TV along with a floor sitting area furnished with Thai axe cushions, a Thai umbrella and a small rattan table.

## Eating & Drinking

Cheap noodle and rice dishes are available at food stalls in and near the market on the river road and along the main road through town from the highway, near the bus stop. Evening food vendors set up at the latter location and stay open till around midnight.

☎ **Evening food vendors** (dishes 30-60B; ☎ 4-11pm) During the dry months these vendors sell

sticky rice, green papaya salad, grilled chicken, dried squid and other fun foods for people to eat while sitting on grass mats along the river bank in front of Chiang Saen Guest House – a very pleasant way to spend an evening. Local specialities include fish or chicken barbecued inside thick joints of bamboo, eaten with sticky rice and *sôm-tam* (green papaya salad).

**2 be 1** (☎ 4pm-1am) By the river, this funky bar with inside and outside seating, has colourful lamps and plays house music.

**Song Fang Khong** (dishes 35-100B; ☎ 11am-11pm) and **Rim Khong** (dishes 35-100B; ☎ 11am-11pm) are two *sūan aahān* (food garden-style) riverside restaurants in Sop Ruak, off the river road from Chiang Saen. Both offer extensive menus of Thai, Chinese and Isan food. Bring your Thai-language skills.

## Getting There & Away

There are frequent buses between Chiang Rai and Chiang Saen (32B, 1½ hours).

Be sure to ask for the *sāi mài* (new route) via Chiang Rai from Chiang Mai (ordinary/air-con 126/227B, five hours). The ordinary bus leaves at 7.15am and the air-con bus leaves at 8.30am daily. The *sāi kào* (old route) meanders through Lamphun, Lampang, Ngao, Phayao and Phan; a trip that takes between seven and nine hours. Alternatively, you can take a bus first to Chiang Rai then change to a Chiang Saen bus (about 4½ hours).

Opposite the bus terminal are blue *sāwngthāew* that travel to Sop Ruak (20B), Mae Sai (40B) and Chiang Khong (60B).

If you're driving from Mae Sai to Chiang Saen there's a choice of two scenic paved roads (one from the centre of Mae Sai and one near the town entrance), or a wider, busier paved road via Rte 110 to Mae Chan and then Rte 1016 to Chiang Saen.

The roads out of Mae Sai are considerably more direct but there are several forks where you have to make educated guesses on which way to go (signs are occasional). The two roads join not far from the Golden Triangle village of Mae Ma, where you have a choice of going east through Sop Ruak or south through Pa Thon. The eastern route is more scenic.

## LAOS

Although boats do travel from here to Laos, the closest crossing open to foreigners is in Chiang Khong (see p379).

## Getting Around

Motorbike taxis and *sāamlāw* do short trips around town for 20B. They gather opposite the bus terminal.

A good way to see the Chiang Saen–Mae Sai area is on two wheels. Mountain bikes (per day 50B) and motorcycles (per day 200B) can be rented at **Gin's Guest House** (☎ 05365 0847/1023; 71 Mu 8). If you are heading southwards to Chiang Khong, Rte 1129 along the river is the road to take.

## AROUND CHIANG SAEN

### Sop Ruak

ສອນຮຸກ

The borders of Myanmar, Thailand and Laos meet 9km north of Chiang Saen at Sop Ruak, the official 'centre' of the Golden Triangle, at the confluence of Nam Ruak and the Mekong River.

In historical terms, 'Golden Triangle' actually refers to a much larger geographic area, stretching thousands of square kilometres into Myanmar, Laos and Thailand, within which the opium trade is prevalent. Nevertheless hoteliers and tour operators have been quick to cash in on the name by referring to the tiny village of Sop Ruak as 'the Golden Triangle', conjuring up images of illicit adventure even though the adventure quotient here is close to zero. In northern Thai this village is pronounced 'Sop Huak'; many out-of-town Thais don't know either Thai name and simply call it 'Sam Liam Thong Kham' (*sāam liam thawng kham*; Thai for 'Golden Triangle').

Tourists have replaced opium as the local source of wealth. Sop Ruak has in fact become something of a tourist trap, with souvenir stalls, restaurants, a massage place and bus loads of package-tour visitors during the day. In the evenings things are quieter.

There is a Commercial Bank of Siam ATM machine next to the House of Opium.

### SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

The **House of Opium** (☎ 0 5378 4060; www.houseofopium.com; admission 50B; ☎ 7am–8pm), a small museum with historical displays pertaining to opium culture, is worth a peek. Exhibits include all the various implements used in the planting, harvest, use and trade of the *Papaver somniferum* resin, including pipes, weights, scales and so on, plus photos and maps with labels in English. The museum is at Km 30, at the southeastern end of Sop Ruak.

Next to the House of Opium are some steps up to **Wat Phra That Phu Khao**. From here is the best viewpoint to see the Mekong meeting of Laos, Myanmar and Thailand.

On the Burmese side of the river junction stands the **Paradise Resort's Golden Triangle** (☎ 053 652 111; r2500B), a huge hotel and casino financed by Thai and Japanese business partners who have leased nearly 480 hectares from the Myanmar government. Only two currencies – baht and dollars – are accepted at the hotel and casino.

Ten kilometres north of Chiang Saen on a plot of about 40 hectares opposite the Anantara Resort & Spa, the Mah Fah Luang Foundation has established the 5600-sq-metre **Hall of Opium** (☎ 0 5378 4444; www.goldentrianglepark.com; Mu 1 Baan Sobruak; admission 300B; ☎ 10am–3.30pm). The goal of this impressive facility is to become the world's leading exhibit and research facility for the study of opiate use around the world. This multimedia exhibition includes a fascinating history of opium, and examines the effects of abuse on individuals and society. Well balanced and worth seeing.

For **Mekong River Cruises** (40min cruise max 5 people per boat 400B; Chiang Saen/Chiang Khong per boat 400/1700B, 40min/1½hrs), local long-tail boat trips can be arranged through several local agents. The typical trip involves a circuit around a large island and upriver for a view of the Burmese casino hotel. Longer trips head downriver as far as Chiang Khong. There's a fee of 500B to go onto the casino island for the day (they'll stamp you in and out at the same time).

On longer trips you can stop off at a Lao village on the large river island of **Don Sao**, roughly halfway between Sop Ruak and Chiang Saen. The Lao immigration booth here is happy to allow day visitors onto the island without a Lao visa. A 20B arrival tax is collected from each visitor. There's not a lot to see, but there's an official post office where you can mail letters or postcards with a Lao PDR postmark, a few shops selling T-shirts and Lao handicrafts, and the Sala Beer Lao, where you can quaff Lao beer and munch on Lao snacks.

### SLEEPING & EATING

Most budget travellers now stay in Chiang Saen. Virtually all the former budget places in Sop Ruak have given way to souvenir stalls and larger tourist hotels.

**Greater Mekong Lodge** (☎ 0 5378 4450; www.mae-fahluang.org; s/d 1600/1800B; ☎ ☎) This hotel is part of the Doi Tung Hall of Opium project. There are well-equipped rooms with cable TV in the cavernous, stark main building. Its spacious, modern bungalows are the better choice and are perched on the slope of a hill overlooking the museum. Views are 1st class and so is the buffet lunch (130B).

**Imperial Golden Triangle Resort** (☎ 0 5378 4001/5; www.imperialhotels.com; 222 Ban Sop Ruak; r from 3500B; ☎ ☎ ☎) Another 1st-class option, this is closer to the cluster of tourist services. Most rooms have impressive river views.

There are several tourist-oriented restaurants overlooking the Mekong River in Sop Ruak.

☐ **Anantara Golden Triangle Resort & Spa** (☎ 0 5378 4084; www.anantara.com; r/ste from 9164/12,219B; ☎ ☎) Anantara sits on a secluded hillside off the road between Sop Ruak and Mae Sai, directly opposite the Hall of Opium (opposite). The 90-room complex combines classic northern-Thai design motifs with recycled teak floors and stylish modern touches such as Jim Thompson fabrics and cathedral ceilings. A Jacuzzi, squash and tennis courts, gym, sauna, library, medical clinic and spa round out the luxury amenities. Special attractions include the King's Cup Elephant Polo Tournament and one- to three-day mahout-training packages. Rates include two tickets to the Hall of Opium.

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

From Chiang Saen to Sop Ruak a *sāwngthāew* or share taxi costs 20B; these leave every 20 minutes or so throughout the day. It's an easy bicycle ride from Chiang Saen to Sop Ruak.

## CHIANG KHONG

เชียงคอง

pop 9000

At one time Chiang Khong was part of a small river-bank *meuang* (city-state) called Juon, founded in AD 701 by King Mahathai. Over the centuries Juon paid tribute to Chiang Rai, then Chiang Saen and finally Nan before being occupied by the Siamese in the 1880s. The territory of Chiang Khong extended all the way to Yunnan Province in China until the French turned much of the Mekong River's northern bank into French Indochina in 1893.

More remote yet more lively than Chiang Saen, Chiang Khong is an important market

town for local hill tribes and for trade with northern Laos. Nearby are several villages inhabited by Mien and White Hmong. Among the latter are contingents who fled Laos during the 1975 communist takeover and who are rumoured to be involved in an organised resistance movement against the current Lao government.

Huay Xai, opposite Chiang Khong on the Lao side of the river, is a legal point of entry for Laos. Anyone with a valid visa for Laos may cross by ferry. From Huay Xai it's 250km to Luang Nam Tha, a short distance from Boten, a legal border crossing to and from China – see p379 for more information.

Trade between Thailand and China via Chiang Khong is steady. Thai goods going north include dried and processed food and beverages, cosmetics, machinery, spare parts and agro-industrial supplies.

### Information

Si Ayuthaya, Kasikornbank and Siam Commercial Bank have branches in town with ATMs and foreign-exchange services.

**Easy Trip** (☎ 0 5365 5174, 08 9922 2030; www.discoverylaos.com; Th Sai Klang) On the main street opposite Easy Bar and Restaurant, this very professional travel agency organises boats and buses to Laos (see p379), as well as minibuses to Chiang Mai (220B) and Pai (400B). Flights in Thailand and to Laos can be booked here. Many guesthouses in Chiang Khong offer similar services, including SP Guest House (p376).

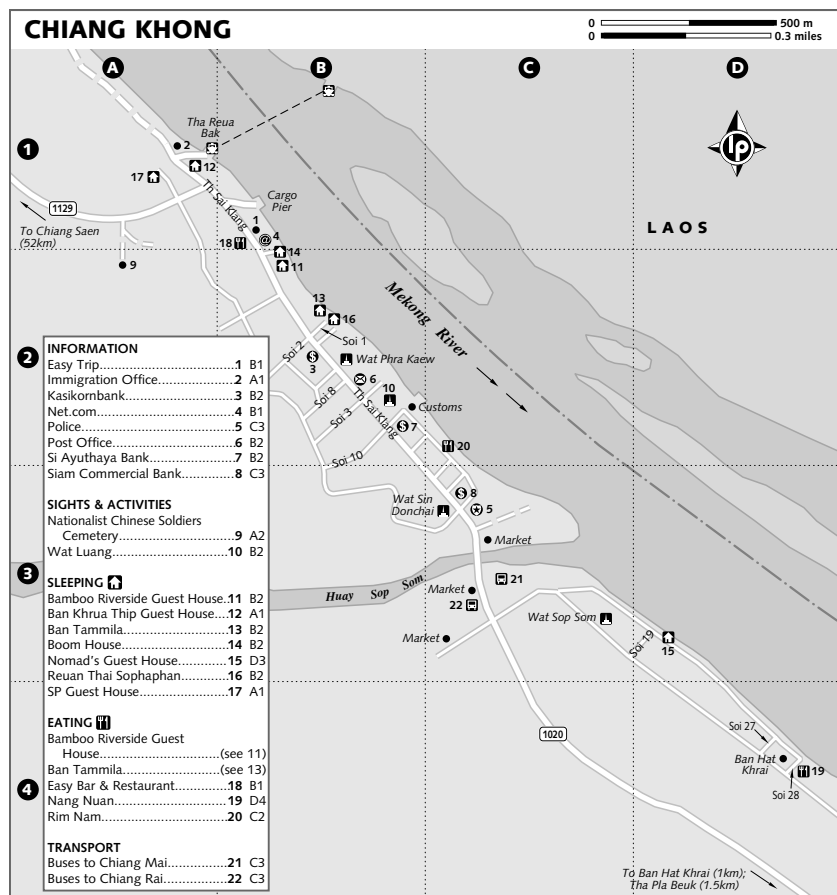
**Net.com** (per hr 40B; ☎ 10am–11pm) Next door to Easy Trip, which also has internet services.

### Sights & Activities

The current town of Chiang Khong has several northern Thai-style wats of minor interest. **Wat Luang**, on the main road, was once one of the most important temples in Chiang Rai Province and features a *chedi* dating from the 13th century, which was restored in 1881.

On a hill overlooking the town and the river is a **Nationalist Chinese Soldiers Cemetery**, where more than 200 KMT soldiers are buried. The grave mounds are angled on the hill so that they face China. A shrine containing old photos of KMT soldiers-in-arms stands at the top of the hill.

The village of **Ban Hat Khrai**, about 1km south of Chiang Khong, is famous as being one of the few places where *plaa bèuk* (giant Mekong catfish) are still occasionally caught. During the *plaa bèuk* season, mid-April to



May, you can watch the small fishing boats coming and going from **Tha Pla Beuk**, about 2km south of Chiang Khong on the Mekong; the turn-off is near Km 137.

**Mountain bikes** can be rented from Ban Tammila (opposite) and Easy Trip (p375).

### Sleeping

**SP Guest House** (☎ 0 5379 1767; www.spguesthouse.com; dm 80, r100-200B; 📍) The popular SP is a quiet place off the road on a wooded hillside. Rates for rooms vary depending on the number of beds and whether or not there's an en suite bathroom. A laundry service and a restaurant are on site. The owner organises trips through Laos and has a van shuttle that runs twice daily to Chiang Mai (250B; five hours).

**Boom House** (☎ 0 5379 1310; r 200-400B; 📍) This new place down a side road by Net.com internet café has large, clean, if slightly stark, rooms facing the river. There is a pleasant restaurant right on the riverbank. Rooms are 200B if you just use the fan, air-con costs 400B.

**Nomad's Guest House** (☎ 0 5365 5537; www.nomadshg.com; 153/4 Mu 3, Baan Sop Som; r 200-500B; 📍) Good rooms, good views, good food and a great philosophy – travel hard, rest easy – are the backbone to this guesthouse. Downside is its inconvenient location.

**Reuan Thai Sophaphan** (☎ 0 5379 1023; p\_dura sawang@hotmail.com; 8 Th Sai Klang; r 200-600B; 📍) This guesthouse is a beautiful, multifloor teak building with heaps of character. Rooms are spacious, simply but carefully decorated and all

have their own bathrooms. The cheaper rooms just have cold water though. There are several places to sit and watch the river roll by.

**Ban Tammila** (☎ 0 5379 1234; baantammila@hotmail.com; 113 Mu 8 Th Sai Klang; garden side/riverside bungalows 250/450B, r 350B) Facing a lush garden and the river, the stylish rooms and well-designed bungalows are decorated in warm colours. This relaxing place has lovely hosts, who also organise bicycle trips. Try their delicious homemade bread at the dining/seating area by the river.

**Bamboo Riverside Guest House** (☎ 0 5379 1621; 71 Mu 1 Hua Wiang; bungalow 300B) This guesthouse has a chilled-out, bohemian atmosphere. Its collections of bungalows are set on a slope that lead down to a restaurant overlooking the river. The simple bamboo, thatched bungalows are surrounded by palms and plants and have hammocks outside.

**Ban Khrua Thip Guest House** (☎ 0 5379 2010; kruathip2006@hotmail.com; bungalows 300B) This col-

lection of basic, sparsely decorated A-frame wooden bungalows near the pier fills up mostly because of location. Each hut has an attached hot-water shower and towels.

### Eating

**Easy Bar & Restaurant** (☎ 08 6913 1144; Th Sai Klang; dishes 20-100B; 🕒 7am-11pm) On the main street opposite Easy Trip travel agency, this lively place serves fresh, tasty Thai dishes, as well as Western food. It prepares packed lunches for the ferry too. Movies are played here every night at 6pm.

**Rim Nam** (dishes 30-90B; 🕒 11am-9pm) On a narrow road down beside the river, is this simple indoor-outdoor restaurant that overlooks the Mekong. The bilingual menu is much shorter than the Thai menu; *yam* (spicy salads) are the house specialities, but the kitchen can whip up almost anything.

**Ban Tammila** (☎ 0 5379 1234; 113 Mu 8 Th Sai Klang; dishes 40-100B; 🕒 7am-11pm) With a terrace on the

### MEKONG'S GIANT CATFISH

The Mekong River stretch that passes Chiang Khong is an important fishing ground for the *plaa bèuk* (giant Mekong catfish, *Pangasianodon gigas* to ichthyologists), probably the largest freshwater fish in the world. A *plaa bèuk* takes at least six and possibly 12 years (no-one's really sure) to reach full size, when it will measure 2m to 3m in length and weigh up to 300kg. Locals say these fish swim all the way from Qinghai Province (where the Mekong originates) in northern China. In Thailand and Laos its meaty but mild-tasting flesh is revered as a delicacy.

These fish are taken only between mid-April and May when the river depth is just 3m to 4m and the fish are swimming upriver to spawn in Erhai Lake, Yunnan Province, China. Before netting them, Thai and Lao fishermen hold a special annual ceremony to propitiate Chao Mae Pla Beuk, a female deity thought to preside over the giant catfish. Among the rituals comprising the ceremony are chicken sacrifices performed aboard the fishing boats. After the ceremony is completed, fishing teams draw lots to see who casts the first net, and then take turns casting.

Only a few catfish are captured in a typical season, and the catfish hunters' guild is limited to natives of Ban Hat Khrai. Fishermen sell the meat on the spot for up to 500B or more per kilo (a single fish can bring 100,000B in Bangkok); most of it ends up in Bangkok, since local restaurants in Huay Xai and Chiang Khong can't afford such prices. During harvest season dishes made with giant catfish may be sold in a makeshift restaurant near the fishermen's landing in Ban Hat Khrai.

Although the *plaa bèuk* is on the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) list of endangered species, there is some debate as to just how endangered it is. Because of the danger of extinction, Thailand's Inland Fisheries Department has been taking protective measures since 1983, including a breed-and-release programme. Every time a female is caught, it's kept alive until a male is netted, then the eggs are removed (by massaging the female's ovaries) and put into a pan; the male is then milked for sperm and the eggs are fertilised in the pan. As a result, well over a million *plaa bèuk* have been released into the Mekong since 1983. Of course, not all of the released fish survive to adulthood. Reservoirs elsewhere in Thailand have had moderate success breeding this fish, however.

At the moment the greatest threat to the catfish's survival is the blasting of Mekong River rapids in China, which is robbing the fish of important breeding grounds.

river Ban Tammila does one of the best breakfasts in town with delicious homemade bread, as well as a good selection of Thai dishes with many vegetarian options.

**Bamboo Riverside Guest House** (☎ 0 5379 1621; 71 Mu 1 Hua Wiang; dishes 40-100B; 🕒 7am-11pm) The restaurant, perched on a riverside deck with views of Laos, serves good Thai and *faràng* food, as well as a few Mexican dishes. It's worth seeking out for a meal or dessert even if you're not staying there.

**Nang Nuan** (dishes 80-170B; 🕒 9am-midnight) There's no smoking allowed in this pleasant, open-air eating place overlooking the Mekong. Nang Nuan specialises in fresh river fish, including *plaa bèuk*.

### Getting There & Away

From Chiang Saen, graded and paved 52km-long Rte 1129 is the quickest way to arrive from

the west. A second 65km road curving along the river has also been paved and provides a slower but less trafficked alternative. With mountains in the distance and the Mekong River to one side, this road passes through picturesque villages and tobacco and rice fields before joining Rte 1129 just outside Chiang Khong.

Buses depart hourly from Chiang Khong to Chiang Rai (57B, 2½ hours) from around 4am to 5pm; the same for going to/from Chiang Saen. Buses from Chiang Rai and beyond use roads from the south (primarily Rte 1020) to reach Chiang Khong.

Daily buses going to Bangkok (2nd class air-con/1st class air-con/VIP 493/634/985B, 12 hours) leave at 3pm or 4pm daily. Book tickets with Easy Trip (see p375).

Boats taking up to 10 passengers can be chartered up the Mekong River from Chiang Khong to Chiang Saen for 2700B. Boat crews

can be contacted near the customs pier behind Wat Luang, or further north at the pier for ferries to Laos.

### BORDER CROSSING (LAOS)

Ferries to Huay Xai, Laos (one way 20B), leave frequently between 8am and 6pm from Tha Reua Bak, a pier at the northern end of Chiang Khong.

Foreigners can now purchase a 30-day visa for Laos upon arrival in Huay Xai for 1500B or US\$30. There is an extra US\$1 or 50B charge after 4pm and on weekends. Be sure to get an exit stamp from Thai officials before heading to Laos. Travellers who forget to do this find themselves in uncomfortable situations later on. On your return to Thailand, immigration will stamp your passport with a new 30-day tourist visa (see p753 for limits on the amount of times you can do this).

Once on the Lao side you can continue by road to Luang Nam Tha and Udomcai, or by boat down the Mekong River to Luang Prabang and Vientiane. At the time of writing the road trip from Huay Xai to Luang Nam Tha was taking eight to 10 hours due to a new road being constructed. This should be finished around mid-2007, and then the journey should take around four hours.

The more pleasant trip is by slow boat down the Mekong to Luang Prabang. Starting from Huay Xai it takes two days, including staying at a guesthouse in Pak Beng, before continuing on to Luang Prabang. Book with an agent like Easy Trip (p375) or a guesthouse, like SP (900B; p376) or pick up a slow boat (700B) at Huay Xai between 9am and 11am in the morning. Avoid the noisy fast boats (1400B, six to seven hours) that ply the Huay Xai to Luang Prabang route, as there have been reports of bad accidents. From Luang Prabang it's possible to get a boat to Vientiane, which takes another two days. The quicker route is a 13-hour bus ride.

At the time of writing Huay Xai airport was closed for renovation, but it is expected that when it reopens, **Lao Airlines** (☎ 211026, 211494; www.laoairlines.com) will fly from Huay Xai to Vientiane three times a week for US\$84.

## PHRAE PROVINCE

Phrae Province is probably most famous for the distinctive *séua mâw hâwm*, the indigo-dyed cotton farmer's shirt seen all over Thai-

land. 'Made in Phrae' has always been a sign of distinction for these staples of rural Thai life, and since the student-worker-farmer political solidarity of the 1970s, even Thai university professors like to wear them. The cloth is made in Ban Thung Hong outside the town of Phrae.

The annual Rocket Festival kicks off the rice-growing season in May. In Phrae, the biggest celebrations take place in Amphoe Long and Amphoe Sung Men. Look for launching towers in the middle of rice fields for the exact location.

Amphoe Sung Men is also known for **Talat Hua Dong**, a market specialising in carved teak wood. Phrae has long been an important teak centre. Along Rte 101 between Phrae and Nan you'll see a steady blur of teak forests (they are the thickest around the Km 25 marker). Since the 1989 national ban on logging, these forests are protected by law. Most of the provincial teak business now involves recycled timber from old houses. Specially licensed cuts taken from fallen teak wood may also be used for decorative carvings or furniture (but not in house construction).

The province of Phrae and its neighbouring province of Nan are often overlooked by tourists and travellers because of their remoteness from Chiang Mai, but from Den Chai – on the train route north – they're easily reached by bus on Rte 101.

### PHRAE

๙๙๙

pop 21,200

Like Chiang Mai and Lampang, Phrae has an old city partially surrounded by a moat beside a river (here it's the Mae Nam Yom). Unlike Chiang Mai, Phrae's old city still has lots of quiet lanes and old teak houses – if you're a fan of traditional Thai teak architecture, you'll find more of it here than in any other city of similar size anywhere in Thailand. The local temple architecture has successfully resisted central-Thai influence over the centuries as well. It's a bit unusual: you'll find a mix of Burmese, northern-Thai (Nan and Lanna) and Lao styles.

Southeast of the old city, the newer, more modern Phrae looks like any other medium-sized town in Thailand.

### Information

**Bangkok Bank** (Th Charoen Meuang; 🕒 8.30am-3.30pm Mon-Fri) Foreign-exchange service and ATM.

### NORTHERN THAILAND TO YUNNAN, CHINA

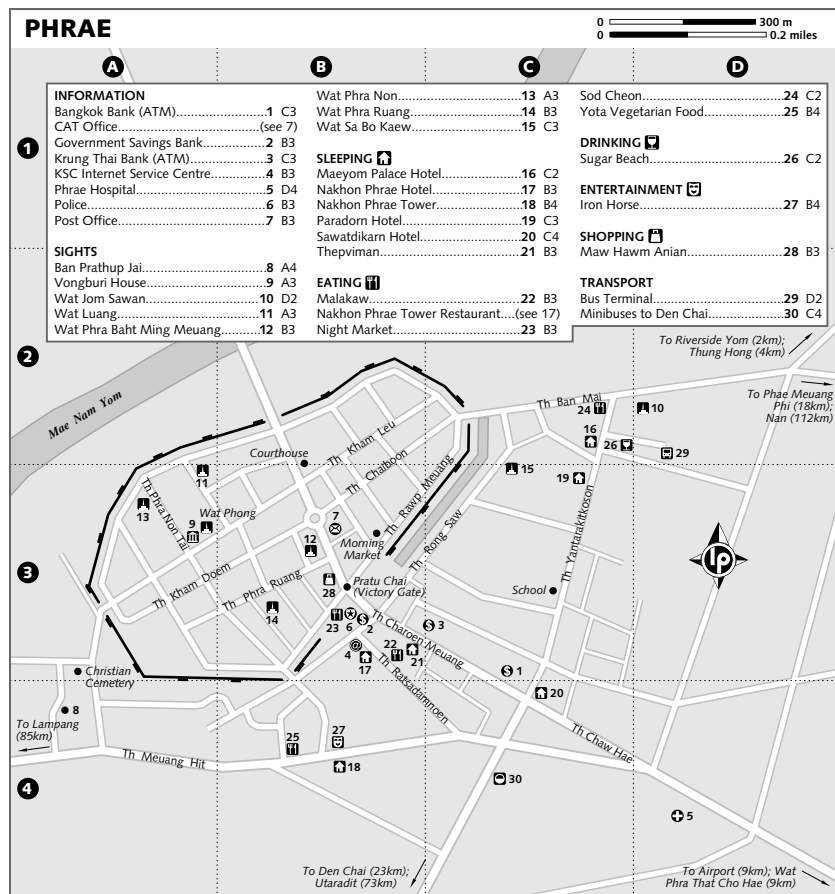
If you have already arranged a visa for China in Bangkok, it's possible to travel from Thailand to China's Yunnan Province by road via Laos, a land route that ties together the Golden Triangle and Yunnan's Xishuangbanna district (called Sipsongpanna in Thailand) in southwest China. The Thais, Shan and Lao all consider Xishuangbanna to be a cultural homeland.

One can now cross into Laos from Thailand via five legal border crossings. Once in Laos, head to Luang Nam Tha or Udomxai, then proceed north to the Lao village of Boten on the Chinese border, close to the Xishuangbanna town of Mengla (Mong La). From Mengla an existing road leads to Jinghong.

To reach Luang Nam Tha from northern Thailand you may cross by ferry from Chiang Khong on the Thai side to Huay Xai on the Lao side. Here you can obtain a 30-day Laos visa-on-arrival. From Huay Xai a bus goes to Luang Nam Tha. At the time of writing this road was under construction, and it took eight to 10 hours to do the journey. The road works will be finished around mid-2007, with the trip then taking only four hours. The Boten crossing is legal for all nationalities if you have a pre-arranged visa for China.

Another way to reach Boten is via Pakbeng in Laos' Udomxai Province. Pakbeng is midway along the Mekong River route between Huay Xai and Luang Prabang; from Pakbeng a Chinese-built road system continues all the way to Boten. To facilitate trade and travel between China and Thailand, the Chinese have offered to build a new road directly south to the Thai border (Nan Province) from the riverbank opposite Pakbeng. This has not happened as yet, as for now Thai authorities are not too happy about this proposed road extension, which is seen as a push towards an 'invasion' of Thailand. During the years of Thai communist insurgency, Communist Party of Thailand cadres used the Pakbeng road to reach Kunming, China, for training in revolutionary tactics.

The Mekong River route is also promising. It is now possible to take a speedboat from Chiang Saen in Thailand to Jinghong in China (see p372), which takes around 15 hours when the water is high enough. Chinese barges weighing up to 100 tonnes ply the Mekong eight months a year; from the Chinese border to Chiang Khong and Chiang Saen, Thailand, the trip takes about five days. During the drier months, however, river transport north of Luang Prabang is hampered by rocks and shallows. Blasting and dredging could make way for boats of up to 500 tonnes to travel year-round, but could have devastating effects on the watercourse and the lands downstream.

**CAT office** (Th Charoen Meuang; ☎ 8am-8pm)

Attached to the main post office. Long-distance calls can be made and you can use a T-card to access the internet.

**Government Savings Bank** (Th Rong Saw; ☎ 8.30am-3.30pm Mon-Fri) The ATM is next to the police station.

**Krung Thai Bank** (Th Charoen Meuang; ☎ 8.30am-3.30pm Mon-Fri) Foreign-exchange service and ATM.

**KSC Internet Service Centre** (Th Ratchadamnoen; per 30min 10B; ☎ 8am-9pm)

**Phrae Hospital** (☎ 0 5452 2444) Just east of Th Chaw Hae, southeast of town.

**Post office** (Th Charoen Meuang; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat) Close to the centre of the old city near the traffic circle.

**Sights****WAT LUANG**

วัดหลวง

This is the oldest wat in Phrae, probably dating from the founding of the city in the 12th or 13th century. **Phra That Luang Chang Kham**, the large octagonal Lanna-style *chedi*, sits on a square base with elephants supporting it on all four sides, surrounded by *kuti* and coconut palms. As is sometimes seen in Phrae and Nan, the *chedi* is swathed in Thai Lü fabric.

The veranda of the main *wihāan* is in the classic Luang Prabang-Lan Xang style but has unfortunately been bricked in with laterite. Opposite the front of the *wihāan* is **Pratu Khong**, part of the city's original entrance

gate. No longer used as a gate, it now contains a statue of Chao Pu, an early Lanna ruler. The image is sacred to local residents, who leave offerings of fruit, flowers, candles and incense.

Also on the temple grounds is a **museum** displaying temple antiques, ceramics and religious art dating from the Lanna, Nan, Bago and Mon periods. A 16th-century, Phrae-made sitting Buddha on the 2nd floor is particularly exquisite. There are also some 19th-century photos with English labels on display, including some gruesome shots of a beheading. The museum is usually open weekends only, but the monks will sometimes open it on weekdays on request.

**WAT PHRA NON**

วัดพระนอน

Southwest a few hundred metres from Wat Luang is a 300-year-old wat named after its highly revered reclining *phrā nawn* (Buddha image). The *bôt* (central sanctuary) was built around 200 years ago and has an impressive roof with a separate, two-tiered portico and gilded, carved, wooden façade with Ramayana scenes. The *wihāan* behind the *bôt* contains the Buddha image, swathed in Thai Lü cloth with bead and foil decoration.

**WAT JOM SAWAN**

วัดจอมสวรรค์

Outside the old city on Th Ban Mai, this temple was built by local Shan in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and shows Shan and Burmese influence throughout. The well-preserved wooden *wihāan* and *bôt* have high, tiered, towerlike roofs like those in Mandalay. A large copper-crowned *chedi* has lost most of its stucco to reveal the artful brickwork beneath. A prized possession in the main *wihāan* is a Tripitaka section of 16 ivory 'pages' engraved in Burmese.

**OTHER TEMPLES**

Across from the post office within the old city, **Wat Phra Baht Ming Meuang** houses a Buddhist school, an old *chedi*, an unusual octagonal drum tower made entirely of teak and the highly revered Phra Kosai, which closely resembles the Phra Chinnarat in Phitsanulok. Just outside the northeastern corner of the moat, **Wat Sa Bo Kaew** is a Shan-Burmese-style temple similar to Wat Jom Sawan. **Wat Phra Ruang**, inside the old city, is

typical of Phrae's many old city wats, with a Nan-style, cruciform-plan *bôt*, a Lao-style *wihāan* and a Lanna *chedi*. Perhaps this unique mix is actually a coherent design of local (Nan-Phrae) provenance that has yet to be identified.

**VONGBURI HOUSE**

บ้านวงศ์บุรี

This private **museum** (☎ 0 5462 0153; Th Phra Non Tai; admission 20B; ☎ 8am-5pm) in the two-storey teak house of the last prince of Phrae, is rather worn but still interesting. It was constructed between 1897 and 1907 for Luang Phongphibun and his wife Chao Sunantha, who once held a profitable teak concession in the city. Elaborate carvings on gables, eaves, balconies and above doors and windows are in good condition. Inside, many of the house's 20 rooms display late-19th-century teak antiques, documents (including early-20th-century slave concessions), photos and other artefacts from the bygone teak-dynasty era. Most are labelled in English as well as Thai.

**BAN PRATHUP JAI**

บ้านประทีปใจ

On the outskirts of the town is **Ban Prathup Jai** (Impressive House; ☎ 0 5451 1008; admission 30B; ☎ 8am-5pm), also called Ban Sao Roi Ton (Hundred Pillar-Filled House), a large northern Thai-style teak house that was built using more than 130 teak logs, each over 300 years old. Opened in 1985, the house took four years to build, using timber taken from nine old rural houses. The interior pillars are ornately carved. The house is also filled with souvenir vendors and is rather tackily decorated, so don't take the moniker 'impressive' too seriously.

**Sleeping****BUDGET**

**Thepviman** (☎ 0 1595 0153; 226-228 Th Charoen Meuang; r 90-120B) These very basic rooms with cold water showers, some of which come with Western toilets, are a reasonable choice for baht-pinching travellers.

**Sawatdikarn Hotel** (☎ 0 5451 1032; 76-78 Th Yantarakitsakon; s/d 100/150B) This place has similar basic rooms to the Thepviman, but these come with squat toilets.

**Nakhon Phrae Hotel** (☎ 0 5451 1122; fax 0 5452 1937; 29 Th Ratsadamnoen; r 290-400B; ☎) A two-minute

walk from the old city, this hotel's two wings are on opposite sides of the street. Rooms are large with some furniture; the more expensive ones have air-conditioning. Some tourist information and maps are available in the lobbies of both wings.

**Paradorn Hotel** (Pharadon; ☎ 0 5451 1177; www.phrae-paradorn.com; 177 Th Yantarakitkoson; r 290-540B, ste 800B; 🍽️) By far the best budget option in Phrae, you can't miss this white hotel with the sign 'absolutely clean' outside. All rooms, whether the cheapest fan rooms or the more expensive suites, are decorated in teak furnishings, have cable TVs, hot water and are pristine. There is a wi-fi hot-spot in the lobby, and rates include a simple breakfast.

#### MIDRANGE & TOP END

**Maeyom Palace Hotel** (☎ 0 5452 1029-35; wccphrae@hotmail.com; 181/6 Th Yantarakitkoson; r incl breakfast 1200-1400B, ste incl breakfast 3000-3500B; 🍽️ 🍷 📺) Opposite the bus terminal, Phrae's top end option has all the modern amenities: carpeted rooms with cable TV, sofa and minibar; although some could do with a few pictures. The pool is a good size and there is a pleasant restaurant on decking outside, as well as an air-conditioned option inside. Discounts of up to 30% are typical in the low season.

**Nakhon Phrae Tower** (☎ 0 5452 1321; nakomphrae@yahoo.com; 3 Th Meuang Hit; r incl breakfast 650-750B, ste incl breakfast 1800B; 🍽️ 🍷 📺) Not as luxurious as the Maeyom Palace, it is certainly nicer than other places in town. Rooms are large and tastefully decorated. There is a piano bar and the restaurant has been recommended (right).

#### Eating

A very good **night market** convenes just outside the Pratu Chai (Victory Gate) intersection every evening. Several food vendors also set up nightly in the lane opposite the Sawatdikarn Hotel. There's another night market a block or two behind the Paradorn Hotel on weekday evenings only. On Th Ratsadamnoen, near the Nakhon Phrae Hotel are several eating options.

**Yota Vegetarian Food** (Th Saisibut; dishes 15-40B; 🍽️ 7am-7pm) This is a reliable Thai vegetarian place.

**Sod Cheon** (Th Yantarakitkoson; dishes 25-90B; 🍽️ 11am-4am) On the crossroads, 50m north of the Maeyom Palace Hotel, is this simple but very popular Chinese/Thai restaurant. Choose from the big pots of Chinese-style soups or

duck, or go for your usual Thai dishes. All are superfresh and tasty. Good for late night eats. The menu is in Thai only.

**Malakaw** (Th Ratsadamnoen; meals 40-80B; 🍽️ 6pm-1am) This rustic hole-in-the-wall with its rough-cut tables and chairs is a popular place for socialising with locals. The ceiling is low and so are the lights, but the menu features fresh, seasonal goodies. Locals rave about the *sôm-tam* here.

**Nakhon Phrae Tower Restaurant** (☎ 0 5452 1321; nakomphrae@yahoo.com; 3 Th Meuang Hit; dishes 40-160B) This recommended restaurant offers tasty Thai dishes, seafood, steaks and sandwiches. Live music is played here from 8pm.

#### Drinking & Entertainment

**Iron Horse** (Th Meuang Hit) Opposite the Nakhon Phrae Tower, the Iron Horse has country- and western décor and plays live music most nights.

**Riverside Yom** (🍽️ 4pm-12am) This cluster of pavilions fashioned from grass thatch and pine fronts the river and features live bluegrass and *phleng phèua chii-wit* (Thai folk music) nightly. It's about 2km northeast of the city centre amid a maze of roads, and thus quite difficult to find; it's best to take a *säämláw* or *sääwngthäew*.

**Sugar Beach**, one of the more salubrious local nightspots, is a large, open-air pavilion near the bus terminal. It's basically just a bar-restaurant but on some nights there's live music.

#### Shopping

A good place to buy *mâw hâwm* in Phrae is **Maw Hawm Anian** (no roman-script sign; 36 Th Chareon Muang; 🍽️ 6.30-8.30pm), a shop about 60m from the southeastern gate (Pratu Chai) into the old city.

#### Getting There & Away

**BUS**  
Most of the buses that depart from Bangkok's Northern and Northeastern bus terminals (2nd class air-con/1st class/VIP 318/409/635B) leave in the evening.

From Chiang Mai's Arcade bus terminal, buses leave at regular intervals (ordinary/2nd class air-con/1st class/VIP 105/147/189/290B, four hours) for Phrae. From Chiang Rai, bus services also take four hours to reach Phrae (ordinary/2nd class air-con/1st class/VIP 105/160/205/239B).

Buses leave from the bus station to Den Chai every hour from 3.30pm to 6.30pm (20B, 30 minutes). Minibuses travel to Den Chai hourly from 6am to 6pm (30B) and depart next to the vocational college. From Den Chai you can catch the northern train line.

There are hourly buses to Nan from the bus station (ordinary/2nd class air-con, 1st class/VIP 62/87/112/170B, two hours), with the last one leaving at 8.30pm.

#### TRAIN

Tickets to Den Chai station from Bangkok cost 200B for 3rd class. In second class there is the option of a fan seat/fan sleeper lower bunk/fan sleeper upper bunk/air-con sleeper. They cost 317/467/431/767B. There are no 1st-class seats only sleepers, these cost 1191B.

Trains that arrive at a decent hour are the rapid 111 (2nd and 3rd class only, departs Bangkok at 7am and arrives in Den Chai at 5.10pm), the express 9 diesel (2nd class only, leaves at 8.30am and arrives at 3.53pm), and the express 51 (2nd and 3rd class, departs at 10pm and arrives at 7.14am). On the latter service you can get a 2nd-class sleeper. Tickets can be reserved by calling **Den Chai station** (☎ 0 5461 3260), where English is spoken.

Blue *sääwngthäew* and red buses leave the Den Chai station frequently for the 23km jaunt to Phrae (20-30B). You can catch them anywhere along the southern end of Th Yantarakitkoson.

#### Getting Around

A *säämláw* anywhere in the old town costs 30B; further afield to somewhere like Ban Prathup Jai it can cost up to 40B. Motorcycle taxis are available at the bus terminal; a trip from here to, say, Pratu Chai should cost around 25B.

Shared *sääwngthäew* ply a few of the roads (mainly Th Yantarakitkoson) and cost 5B to 10B, depending on the distance.

#### AROUND PHRAE

##### Wat Phra Thai Cho Hae

วัดพระธาตุช่อแฮ

On a hill about 9km southeast of town off Rte 1022, this wat is famous for its 33m-high gilded *chedi*. Cho Hae is the name of the cloth that worshippers wrap around the *chedi* – it's a type of satin thought to have originated in Xishuangbanna (Sipsongpanna, literally '12,000 Rice Fields' in northern Thai), China.

Like Chiang Mai's Wat Doi Suthep, this is an important pilgrimage site for Thais living in the north. The **Phra Jao Than Jai** Buddha image here, which is similar in appearance to Phra Chinnarat in Phitsanulok, is reputed to impart fertility to women who make offerings to it.

The *bôt* has a gilded wooden ceiling, rococo pillars and walls with lotus-bud mosaics. Tiered *naga* (a mythical serpentlike being with magical powers) stairs lead to the temple compound. The hilltop is surrounded by a protected forest of mature teak trees.

*Sääwngthäew* between the city and Phra That Cho Hae (15B) are frequent.

#### Phae Meuang Phi

แพะเมืองผี

The name Phae Meuang Phi means 'Ghost-Land', a reference to this strange geological phenomenon approximately 18km northeast of Phrae off Rte 101. Erosion has created bizarre pillars of soil and rock that look like giant fungi. The area has been made a provincial park; a few walking trails and viewpoints are recent additions. There are picnic pavilions in the park and food vendors selling *kài yâang* (grilled, spiced chicken), *sôm-tam* and sticky rice near the entrance – you may need a drink after wandering around the baked surfaces between the eroded pillars.

Getting to Phae Meuang Phi by public transport entails a bus ride 9km towards Nan, getting off at the signposted turn-off for Phae Meuang Phi, and then catching a *sääwngthäew* another 6km to a second right-hand turn-off to the park. From this point you must walk or hitch about 2.5km to reach the entrance. Alternatively, charter a *sääwngthäew* for around 250B. *Sääwngthäew* drivers seem to hang out at the front of the school.

## NAN PROVINCE

Formerly a government-designated 'remote province', Nan before the early 1980s was so choked with bandits and People's Liberation Army of Thailand (PLAT) insurgents that travellers were discouraged from visiting.

With the successes of the Thai army and a more stable political machine in Bangkok during the last two decades, Nan has opened up considerably. The roads that link the provincial capital with the nearby provinces of Chiang Rai, Phrae and Utaradit pass through



exquisite scenery of rich river valleys and rice fields. Like Loei in the northeast, this is a province to be explored for its natural beauty and its likeable people.

Nan remains a largely rural province with not a factory or condo in sight. Most of the inhabitants are agriculturally employed, growing sticky rice, beans, corn, tobacco and vegetables in the fertile river plains. Nan is also famous for two fruits: *fai jiin* (a Chinese version of Thailand's indigenous *máfai*) and *sôm sũ thawng* (golden-skinned oranges). The latter are Nan's most famous export, commanding high prices in Bangkok and Malaysia. Apparently, the cooler winter weather in Nan turns the skin orange (lowland Thai oranges are mostly green) and imparts a unique, sweet, tart flavour. Amphoe Thung Chang supposedly grows the best *sôm sũ thawng* in the province. Nan is also famous for its *phrik yài haeng* (long, hot chillies) similar to those grown in China's Sichuan Province. During the hot season, you'll see heaps of these chillies drying by the roadside.

## Geography

Nan shares a 227km border with Laos. Only 25% of the land is arable (and only half of that is actively cultivated), as most of the province is covered by heavily forested mountains; **Doi Phu Kha**, at 2000m, is the highest peak. Half the forests in the province are virgin upland monsoon forest. Most of the province's population of 364,000 live in the Mae Nam Nan Valley, which is a bowl-shaped depression ringed by mountains on all sides.

The major river systems in the province include the Nan, Wa, Samun, Haeng, Lae and Pua. At 627km, Mae Nam Nan is Thailand's third-longest river after the Mekong and Mae Nam Mun.

## Population & People

Nan is a sparsely populated province and the ethnic groups found here differ significantly from those in other northern provinces. Outside the Mae Nam Nan valley, the predominant hill tribes are Mien (around 8000), with smaller numbers of Hmong. During the Vietnam War, many Hmong and Mien from Nan (as well as Chiang Rai and Phetchabun) were recruited to fight with the communist Pathet Lao, who promised to create a Hmong-Mien kingdom following a Pathet Lao victory in

Laos. Some of these so-called 'Red Meos' even trained in North Vietnam.

Along the southwestern provincial border with Phrae are a few small Mabri settlements. What makes Nan unique, however, is the presence of three lesser-known groups seldom seen outside this province: the Thai Lü, Htin and Khamu.

## THAI LÜ

Originally from Xishuangbanna in China's Yunnan Province, the Thai Lü migrated to Nan in 1836 in the wake of a conflict with a local lord. Phra Jao Atityawong, ruler of the Nan kingdom at the time, allowed the Thai Lü to stay and grow vegetables in what is now Amphoe Tha Wang Pha. Their influence on Nan (and to a lesser extent, Phrae) culture has been very important. Like most Siamese Thai, the Thai Lü are Theravada Buddhists, and the temple architecture at Wat Phra That Chae Haeng (p388), Wat Phumin (p388) and Wat Nong Bua – typified by thick walls with small windows, two- or three-tiered roofs, curved pediments and *naga* lintels – is a Thai Lü inheritance. Thai Lü fabrics are among the most prized in northern Thailand and the weaving motifs show up in many Nan handicrafts.

The Thai Lü build traditional wooden or bamboo-thatched houses on thick wooden stilts, beneath which they place their kitchens and weaving looms. Many still make all their own clothes, typically sewn from indigo-dyed cotton fabrics. Many Thai Lü villages support themselves by growing rice and vegetables. In Nan they maintain a strong sense of tradition; most Thai Lü communities still recognise a *jão meuang* (lord) and *mãw meuang* (state astrologer), two older men in the community who serve as political and spiritual consultants.

## HTIN

Pronounced 'Tin', this Mon-Khmer group of about 3000 live in villages of 50 or so families spread across remote mountain valleys of Amphoe Chiang Klang, Amphoe Pua and Amphoe Thung Chang. A substantial number also live across the border in neighbouring Sayaburi Province, Laos. They typically subsist by hunting for wild game, breeding domestic animals, farming small plots of land and, in Ban Bo Kleua, by extracting salt from salt wells.

Htin houses are usually made of thatched bamboo and raised on bamboo or wooden



stilts. No metal – including nails – is used in the construction of houses because of a Htin taboo.

The Htin are particularly skilled at manipulating bamboo to make everything needed around the house; for floor mats and baskets the Htin interweave pared bamboo with a black-coloured grass to create bold geometric patterns.

They also use bamboo to fashion a musical instrument of stepped pipes (similar to the *angklung* of central Thailand and Indonesia), which is shaken to produce musical tones. The Htin don't weave their own fabrics, often buying clothes from neighbouring Mien.

### KHAMU

Like the Thai Lü, the Khamu migrated to Nan around 150 years ago from Xishuangbanna and Laos. There are now more than 5000 in Nan (more than anywhere else in Thailand), mostly in the Wiang Sa, Thung Chang, Chiang Klang and Pua districts. Their villages are established near streams; their houses have dirt floors like those of the Hmong but their roofs sport crossed beams similar to the northern-Thai *kālae* (locally called *kapkri-aak*).

The Khamu are skilled at metalwork and perform regular rituals to placate Salok, the spirit of the forge. Khamu villages are usually very self-sufficient; villagers hold fast to tradition and are known to value thrift and hard work. Ban Huay Sataeng in Amphoe Thung Chang is one of the largest and easiest Khamu villages to visit.

### NAN

นาน

pop 24,300

Just over 668km from Bangkok, little-known Nan is steeped in history. For centuries it was an isolated, independent kingdom with few ties to the outside world. Ample evidence of prehistoric habitation exists, but it wasn't until several small *meuang* consolidated to form Nanthaburi on Mae Nam Nan in the mid-14th century – concurrent with the founding of Luang Prabang and the Lan Xang (Million Elephants) kingdom in Laos – that the city became a power to contend with. Associated with the powerful Sukhothai kingdom, the *meuang* took the title Waranakhon and played a significant role in the development of early Thai nationalism.

Parts of the old city wall and several early walls dating from the Lanna period can be seen in present-day Nan. Meuang Nan's wats are distinctive: some temple structures show Lanna influence, while others belong to the Thai Lü legacy brought from Xishuangbanna, the Thai Lü's historical homeland.

### History

Towards the end of the 14th century Nan became one of the nine northern Thai-Lao principalities that comprised Lan Na Thai (now known simply as Lanna). The city-state flourished throughout the 15th century under the name Chiang Klang (Middle City), a reference to its position approximately midway between Chiang Mai (New City) and Chiang Thong (Golden City, which is today's Luang Prabang).

The Burmese took control of the kingdom in 1558 and transferred many of the inhabitants to Burma as slaves; the city was all but abandoned until western Thailand was wrested from the Burmese in 1786. The local dynasty then regained local sovereignty and it remained semi-autonomous until 1931, when Nan finally accepted full Bangkok sponsorship.

### Information

Internet services are available around town for 40B per hour.

**Bangkok Bank** (Th Sunonthewarat) Near the Nan Fah and Dhevaraj hotels. Operates foreign-exchange services and has ATMs.

**CAT office** (Main post office, Th Mahawong; ☎ 7am–10pm) Has a Home Country Direct Phone.

**Kasikornbank** (Th Sunonthewarat) As Bangkok Bank.

**Main post office** (Th Mahawong; ☎ 8.30am–4.30pm Mon–Fri, 9am–noon Sat, Sun & holidays) In the centre of town.

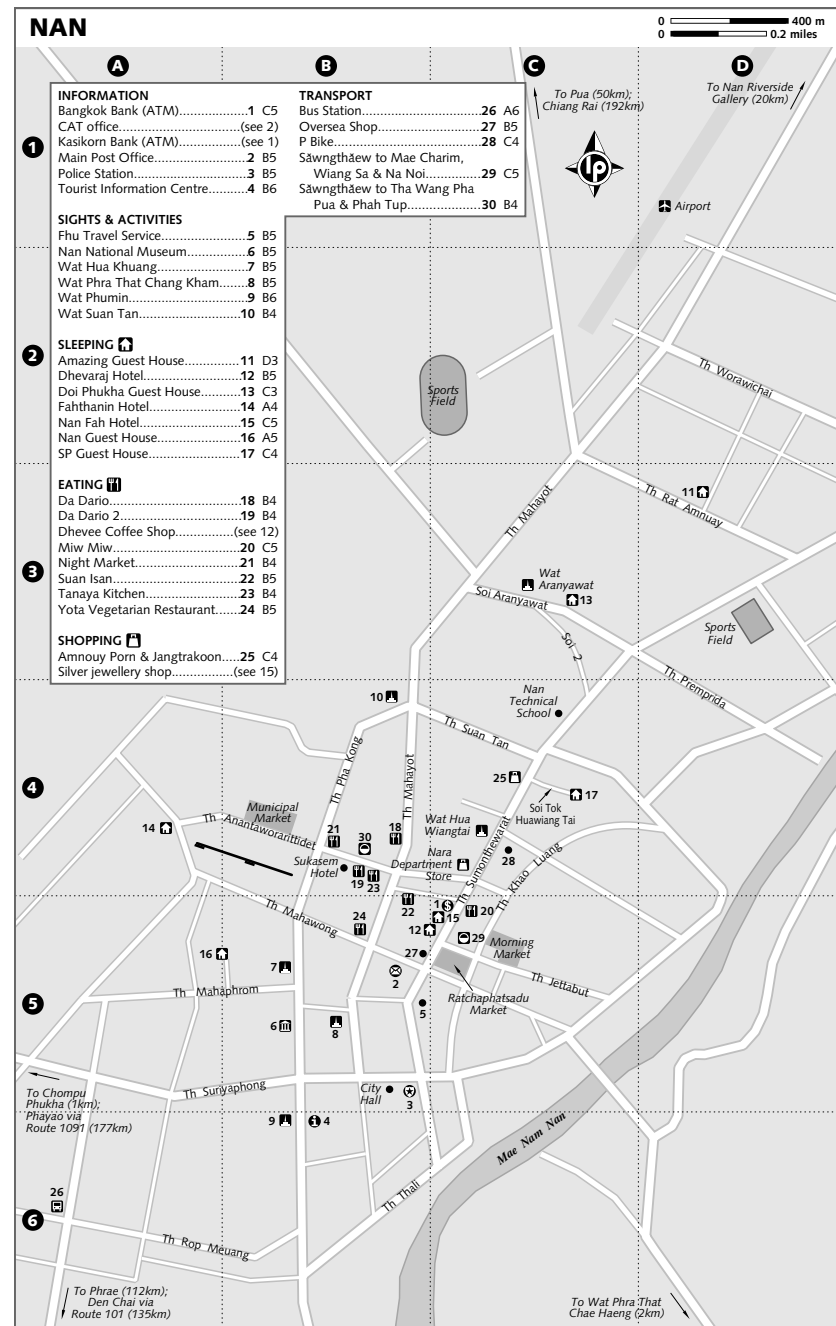
**Tourist Information Centre** (☎ 0 5471 0216; Th Pha Kong; ☎ 8am–5pm) New centre, complete with coffee shop. Opposite Wat Phumin. Fhu Travel is also a good source of information (p389).

### Sights

#### NAN NATIONAL MUSEUM

พิพิธภัณฑ์สถานแห่งชาตินาน

Housed in the 1903-vintage palace of Nan's last two feudal lords (Phra Jao Suriyapongpalidet and Jao Mahaphrom Surathada), this **museum** (☎ 0 5477 2777, 0 5471 0561; Th Pha Kong; admission 30B; ☎ 9am–12pm, 1–4pm) first opened its doors in 1973. Relatively recent renovations have



made it one of Thailand's most up-to-date provincial museums and, unlike most, this one also has English labels for many items on display.

The ground floor is divided into six exhibition rooms, with ethnological exhibits covering the various ethnic groups found in the province, including the northern Thais, Thai Lü, Htin, Khamu, Mabri, Hmong and Mien. Among the items on display are silverwork, textiles, folk utensils and tribal costumes. On the 2nd floor are exhibits on Nan history, archaeology, local architecture, royal regalia, weapons, ceramics and religious art.

The museum's collection of Buddha images includes some rare Lanna styles as well as the floppy-eared local styles. Usually made from wood, these standing images are in the 'calling for rain' posture (with hands at the sides, pointing down) and they show a marked Luang Prabang influence. The astute museum curators posit a Nan style of art in Buddhist sculpture; some examples on display seem very imitative of other Thai styles, while others are quite distinctive, with the ears curving outwards.

Also on display on the 2nd floor is a rare 'black' (actually reddish-brown) elephant tusk said to have been presented to a Nan lord over 300 years ago by the Khün ruler of Chiang Tung (Kengtung). Held aloft by a wooden *garuda* (mythical bird) sculpture, the tusk measures 97cm long and 47cm in circumference.

The museum sells a few books on Thai art and archaeology at the entrance.

### WAT PHUMIN

วัดภูมินทร์

Nan's most famous temple is celebrated for its cruciform *bòt* that was constructed in 1596 and restored during the reign of Chao Anantavorapitthidit (1867–74). Murals depicting the *Khatta Kumara* and *Nimi Jatakas* were executed during the restoration by Thai Lü artists; the *bòt* exterior exemplifies the work of Thai Lü architects as well.

The murals have historic as well as aesthetic value since they incorporate scenes of local life from the era in which they were painted. As well as hell and heavenly realms, Buddha's previous incarnations and Nan's legends and history, the bright, fluid figures refreshingly depict more mundane aspects of life. You'll find scenes like a group of gossips, people

enjoying a smoke, women fixing their hair and amorous lovers.

The ornate altar sitting in the centre of the *bòt* has four sides, with four Sukhothai-style sitting Buddhas in *maan wichai* ('victory over Mara' – with one hand touching the ground) posture, facing in each direction.

### WAT PHRA THAT CHAE HAENG

วัดพระธาตุแช่แห้ง

Two kilometres past the bridge that spans Mae Nam Nan, heading southeast out of town, this temple dating from 1355 is the most sacred wat in Nan Province. It's set in a square, walled enclosure on top of a hill with a view of Nan and the valley. The Thai Lü-influenced *bòt* features a triple-tiered roof with carved wooden eaves and dragon reliefs over the doors. A gilded Lanna-style *chedi* sits on a large square base next to the *bòt* with sides 22.5m long; the entire *chedi* is 55.5m high.

### WAT PHRA THAT CHANG KHAM

วัดพระธาตุช้างค้ำ

This is the second-most important temple (Th Pha Kong) in the city after Wat Phra That Chae Haeng; the founding date is unknown. The main *wihāan*, reconstructed in 1458, has a huge seated Buddha image and faint murals in the process of being painstakingly uncovered. (Sometime in the mid-20th century an abbot reportedly ordered the murals to be whitewashed because he thought they were distracting worshippers from concentrating on his sermons!)

Also in the *wihāan* is a set of Lanna-period scrolls inscribed (in Lanna script) not only with the usual Buddhist scriptures but with the history, law and astrology of the time. A *thammāat* (a 'dhamma seat' used by monks when teaching) sits to one side.

The magnificent *chedi* behind the *wihāan* dates to the 14th century, probably around the same time the temple was founded. It features elephant supports similar to those seen in Sukhothai and Si Satchanalai.

Next to the *chedi* is a small, undistinguished *bòt* from the same era. Wat Chang Kham's current abbot tells an interesting story involving the *bòt* and a Buddha image that was once kept inside. According to the venerable abbot, in 1955 art historian AB Griswold offered to purchase the 145cm-tall Buddha inside the small *bòt*. The image appeared to be a crude Sukhothai-style walking Buddha moulded

of plaster. After agreeing to pay the abbot 25,000B for the image, Griswold began removing the image from the *bòt* – but as he did it fell and the plaster around the statue broke away to reveal an original Sukhothai Buddha of pure gold underneath. Needless to say, the abbot made Griswold give it back, much to the latter's chagrin. The image is now kept behind a glass partition, along with other valuable Buddhist images from the area, in the abbot's *kùti*. Did Griswold suspect what lay beneath the plaster? The abbot refuses to say.

Wat Phra That Chang Kham is also distinguished by having the largest *hāw trai* (Tripitaka library) in Thailand. It's as big as or bigger than the average *wihāan*, but now lies empty.

The wat is located across from the Nan National Museum.

### WAT HUA KHUANG

วัดหัวขวง

Largely ignored by art historians, this small wat diagonally opposite Wat Phra That Chang Kham features a distinctive Lanna/Lan Xang-style *chedi* with four Buddha niches, a wooden *hāw trai* – now used as a *kùti* – and a noteworthy *bòt* with a Luang Prabang-style carved wooden veranda.

Inside is a carved wooden ceiling and a huge *naga* altar. The temple's founding date is unknown, but stylistic cues suggest this may be one of the city's oldest wats.

### WAT SUAN TAN

วัดสวนตาล

Reportedly established in 1456, **Wat Suan Tan** (Palm Grove Monastery; Th Suan Tan) features an interesting 15th-century *chedi* (40m high) that combines *prang* (Hindu/Khmer-style *chedi*) and lotus-bud motifs of obvious Sukhothai influence. The heavily restored *wihāan* contains an early Sukhothai-style bronze sitting Buddha.

### Activities

Nan has nothing like the organised trekking industry found in Chiang Rai and Chiang Mai, but there is one company that leads two- or three-day excursions into the mountains. **Fhu Travel Service** (☎ 0 5471 0636, 08 1287 7209; www.fhuttravel.com; 453/4 Th Sumonthewarat; per person (2-person min) 'soft' trek 1 day 800–1300B, 2 days & 1 night 1400–2500B, 3 days & 2 nights 1800–3200B) offers treks to Mabri, Hmong, Mien, Thai Lü and Htin villages. The

operators have been leading tours for 17 years, and are professional, honest and reliable.

The trekking fees include transport, meals, accommodation, sleeping bag and guide services; and prices vary depending on the number of participants.

Fhu also runs boat trips on Mae Nam Nan in December and January, when the water level is high enough. One-day white-water rubber-rafting trips on the Nam Wa in Mae Charim are offered. The prices run from 1000B per person (for trips of six to eight people) to 2300B per person (for trips of two people). This price includes transport, guide, lunch and safety equipment. Three-day rubber-rafting trips are 4500B to 6000B per person, depending on the number of people. Elephant tours are also available for 1000B per person for half a day. Tours of the city and surrounding area (500B per person), as well as cycling tours are offered (300B per person, three hours). Fhu also runs two-hour kayaking trips on the Mae Nam Nan (1000B).

### Festivals & Events

It is worth being in Nan for the **boat races**, held at the end of the rainy season and during the robe-giving ceremonies at Wat Phra That Chang Kham (opposite), between mid-October and mid-November. Even if you arrive too early for the official races, it's possible to see participants practising along the Mae Nam Nan from 5pm to 6pm each evening. It's an impressive sight to watch around 50 oarsmen race in the long, dragon prow boats, decorated with coloured, fluttering flags and paper.

### Sleeping

#### BUDGET

**Doi Phukha Guest House** (☎ 0 5475 1517; 94/5 Soi 1 Th Aranyawat; s/d 100/150B) This rambling old house in a residential neighbourhood is awkward to get to but offers basic sleep space with clean cold-water bathrooms. It's fairly quiet and the English-speaking owner is very helpful.

**Amazing Guest House** (☎ 0 5471 0893; 23/7 Th Rat Amnuay; s/d 120/350B; ☒) In a tidy, two-storey wooden house on a quiet lane off Th Rat Amnuay, this intimate place is a bit like staying with your long-lost Thai grandparents. The hosts are sweet, but may be too personable for some. All rooms have wooden floors, clean beds and hot shared showers. Rooms in concrete rooms out the back have en suite bathrooms. Bicycles and motorbikes can be

rented here, and free pick-up from the bus station is available.

**Nan Guest House** (☎ 0 5477 1849; www.nan-guest-house.com; 57/16 Th Mahaphrom; r 230-350B; 📶 📺 🚿) This well maintained place has spotless spacious rooms, most with en suite hot water bathrooms. It can be hard to get service and you should not count on eating meals here despite the readily available menus. But for a clean, comfortable place to sleep, it's an excellent choice. It also organises tours, has an international call service and rents out mountain bikes.

**[JP] Guest House** (☎ 0 5477 4897; Soi Tok Huawiang Tai; r 250-350B; 📶 📺) Excellent value and well situated, this guesthouse is the best deal in town. The six rooms have large, well-equipped bedrooms and bathrooms, with wooden or tiled floors. All come with hot water and cable TV, and a choice of fan or air-con. It's just off Th Sumonthewarat. Eight new rooms were being built at the time of writing.

**Nan Fah Hotel** (☎ 0 5471 0284; 438-440 Th Sumonthewarat; s/d/tr 350/500/600B; 📶 📺) This all-wooden hotel feels like a rooming house, with neat, large rooms. They all come with cable TV, fridge and hot-water showers. Being a wooden house you will hear all of your neighbour's movements, so try and get a room away from the road. There's a good restaurant attached, and bicycles, motorbikes and pick-ups can be rented here.

## MIDRANGE

**Fahthanin Hotel** (☎ 0 5475 7322-3; 303 Th Anantaworarittdet; r 600-800B; 📶 📺) Seven stories tall, modern but tattered, this hotel is a good deal during the low season when rates hover around 500B. Some rooms have excellent views, and all have cable TV, hot shower and mini fridge. Heavy, ugly headboards let them down though. Slightly larger versions have bathtubs.

**[D]hevaraj Hotel** (☎ 0 5471 0078; 466 Th Sumonthewarat; r incl breakfast 700-1200B; 📶 📺 🚿) This four-storey hotel potentially looks good but details have been overlooked. Rooms are built around a tiled courtyard but where seating areas could be, instead there are people dealing with the sorting and folding of laundry. Still, it is the best place in Nan for location and comfort. Rooms are clean with the amenities you'd expect at this price, and there's a restaurant and massage centre on site.

## Eating

**Yota Vegetarian Restaurant** (Th Mahawong; dishes 10-35B; 📶 7am-3pm) Run by the friendliest lady in town who will not let you leave hungry, this is perhaps the best deal in Nan. It's popular and once the food is gone after lunch, that's it for the day.

**Miw Miw** (no Roman-script sign; 347/3 Th Sumonthewarat; dishes 20-50B; 📶 8am-10pm) Opposite Kasikornbank, this place has good *jók* (broken-rice congee), noodles, and real coffee, and it is popular in the afternoon for ice-cold *chaa yen* (Thai iced tea).

**Tanaya Kitchen** (☎ 0 5471 0930; 75/23-24 Th Anantaworarittdet; dishes 30-80B; 📶 7am-9.30pm) Neat and tidy, with a creative selection of dishes made without MSG, and a variety of vegetarian (and nonvegetarian) options, Tanaya is a good choice for any diet. It caters to a mostly tourist clientele.

**Suan Isan** (☎ 0 5477 2913; Th Sumonthewarat; dishes 30-90B; 📶 11am-11pm) For Isan food, this semi-outdoor spot is 200m up the lane off Th Sumonthewarat past the Bangkok Bank.

**Dhevee Coffee Shop** (☎ 0 5471 0094; Dhevaraj Hotel, 466 Th Sumonthewarat; dishes 40-140B; 📶 6am-2am) Modest, clean and reliable, Dhevaraj Hotel's restaurant does good buffets (lunch buffet 59B) and is open when many other places are closed.

**Da Dario** Th Mahayot (☎ 08 7184 5436; Th Mahayot; dishes 40-160B; 📶 9am-5pm); Th Anantaworarittdet (Th Anantaworarittdet; 📶 5pm-10pm) With two locations in town, this Italian restaurant makes great breakfasts, delicious pizza and pasta, as well as other Western treats and some Thai dishes. Prices are reasonable, service is excellent, atmosphere is homey and the food attracts a cadre of regulars. The Th Anantaworarittdet branch sits above the Chinese restaurant Poom Sam.

The **night market**, on Th Anantaworarittdet by the junction with Th Pha Kong, has some tasty food stall offerings.

## Shopping

Good buys include local textiles, especially the Thai Lü weaving styles from Xishuangbanna. Typical Thai Lü fabrics feature red and black designs on white cotton in floral, geometric and animal designs; indigo and red on white is also common. A favourite is the *lai nám lái* (flowing-water design) that shows stepped patterns representing streams, rivers and waterfalls. Local Hmong appliqué

and Mien embroidery are of excellent quality. Htin grass-and-bamboo baskets and mats are worth a look, too. The best shops for textiles are **Amnoui Porn** and **Jangtrakoon**, next to each other on Th Sumonthewarat.

There's a silver jewellery shop attached to Nan Fah Hotel (☎ 0 5471 0284; 438-440 Th Sumonthewarat). For more choice, and to see the items being made, head to **Chompu Phukha** (☎ 0 5471 0177; www.phukhasilver.com; 254 Mu 4, Th Nan-Phayao), a silver showroom and workshop. It's 1km out of town on the road to Phayao (Rte 1091), opposite a PT petrol station.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

**PB Air** (☎ 0 5477 1729; www.pbair.com; Nan Airport) runs flights from Bangkok to Nan (3160B, once a day). Flights can be booked at the travel agency at **Fahthanin Hotel** (☎ 0 5475 7321-4; 303 Th Anantaworarittdet), online or at its airport office.

### BUS

Buses travel from Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai and Phrae to Nan. The fare from Chiang Mai's Arcade terminal is ordinary bus/2nd class air-con/1st class/VIP 158/221/284/440B, six to seven hours. From and to Chiang Rai there's one daily bus at 9am (150B) that takes five to six gruelling hours via treacherous mountain roads – get a window seat as there's usually lots of motion sickness. Buses from Phrae to Nan leave frequently (ordinary/2nd class air-con/1st class/VIP 62/87/112/170B, two to 2½ hours). From Nan all buses, including privately run buses, leave from the main terminal at the southwestern edge of town.

Regular air-con buses to Bangkok cost 388B for 2nd class (7.20am, 8am, 8.30am, 9am, 6.30pm and 7pm), 497B for 1st class (8am, 9am, 7pm) and 770B for VIP (7.30pm). The journey takes 10 to 11 hours. The private Sombat Tour buses are also at the bus terminal. To reserve tickets call **Sombat Tour** (☎ 0 5471 1078) or go to the bus terminal.

### SÁWNGTHÁEW

Pick-ups to districts in the northern part of the province (Tha Wang Pha, Pua, Phah Tup) leave from the petrol station opposite the Sukasem Hotel on Th Anantaworarittdet. South-bound *sáwngtháew* (for Mae Charim, Wiang Sa, Na Noi) depart from the car park opposite Ratchaphatsadu Market on Th Jettabut.

## TRAIN

The northern railway makes a stop in Den Chai, a 55B, three-hour bus ride from Nan.

A Bangkok-bound Sprinter leaves Den Chai at 12.50pm and arrives in Bangkok at 8.15pm. There are also a couple of evening rapid-train departures each day; to be sure of meeting any of these trains, take an early afternoon (1pm or 2pm) Den Chai-bound bus from the Nan bus terminal.

Trains bound for Chiang Mai depart Den Chai at 3.31pm (2nd and 3rd class, arrives 7.45pm), 3.53pm (2nd class, arrives 8.20pm) and 7.14am (2nd and 3rd class, arrives 12.25pm). The 2nd- and 3rd-class fares to/from Chiang Mai are 208/153B.

Tickets can be reserved by calling the **Den Chai station** (☎ 0 5461 3260), where English is spoken.

See Phrae (p383) for more Den Chai train details.

## Getting Around

**Oversea Shop** (☎ 0 5471 0258; 488 Th Sumonthewarat; bicycles per day 50-80B, motorcycles per day 150B) rents out better bicycles and motorcycles than other places in town. It can also handle repairs.

**P Bike** (no roman-script sign; ☎ 0 5477 2680; 331-3 Th Sumonthewarat; Honda Dreams incl helmet & 3rd-party insurance per day 150B), opposite Wat Hua Wiangtai, rents out Honda Dreams and bicycles, and also does repair work.

Sáamláw around town cost 20B to 30B. Green *sáwngtháew* circulating around the city centre charge 5B to 10B per person, depending on distance.

## AROUND NAN

### Doi Phu Kha National Park

อุทยานแห่งชาติดอยภูคา

This **national park** (☎ 0 5473 1362; www.dnp.go.th; child/adult 200/400B) is centred on 2000m-high Doi Phu Kha in Amphoe Pua and Amphoe Bo Kleua in northeastern Nan (about 75km from Nan). There are several Htin, Mien, Hmong and Thai Lü **villages** in the park and vicinity, as well as a couple of **caves** and **waterfalls**, and endless opportunities for forest **walks**. At the time of writing there were no maps at park headquarters but it's possible to hire a guide (300B a day) there. The park is often cold in the cool season and especially wet in the wet season.

The park offers A-frame **bungalows** (☎ 0 2562 0760; reserve@dnp.go.th; for 2-7 people 300-2500B).

You must bring food and drinking water in from town, as the park office no longer offers food service.

**Bamboo Hut** (☎ 08 1883 7687; 103 Mu 10, Tambon Phu Kha, Amphoe Pua, Nan 55120; r 200B) in Ban Toei, a Lava-Thai village near the summit at the edge of the park, is a much better choice than the park bungalows. Bamboo Hut offers five simple and clean, well-spaced bamboo-thatch huts with shared bathroom and stupendous mountain and valley views. It leads guests on one- to three-day treks (600B per day, including all meals). Treks visit local waterfalls, limestone caves (Tham Lawng is the biggest cave – about a one-day walk from the guest-house) and hill-tribe villages. This area can get quite cool in the winter months – evening temperatures of 5°C to 10°C are not uncommon – so dress accordingly.

To reach the national park by public transport you must first take a bus or *sǎwngthǎew* north of Nan to Pua (30B), and then pick up one of the infrequent *sǎwngthǎew* to the park headquarters or Bamboo Hut (35B). The one that goes from Nan to Pua leaves about 6am, the one from Pua to Ban Toei at about 7am.

**Ban Bo Kleua** is a Htin village southeast of the park where the main occupation is the extraction of salt from local salt wells. It's easy to find the main community salt well, more or less in the centre of the village. Many small shops and vendor stands sell the local salt in 2kg bags for 25B; it's delicious stuff. Rte 1256 meets Rte 1081 near Ban Bo Kleua; Rte 1081 can be followed south back to Nan (107km) via a network of unpaved roads.

## Nong Bua

หนองบัว

This neat and tidy Thai Lü village near the town of Tha Wang Pha, approximately 30km north of Nan, is famous for Lü-style **Wat Nong Bua**. Featuring a typical two-tiered roof and carved wooden portico, the *bòt* design is simple yet striking – note the carved *naga* heads at the roof corners. Inside the *bòt* are some noteworthy but faded *jataka* murals thought to have been painted by the same mural artists as Wat Phumin. The building is often locked when religious services aren't in progress, but there's usually someone around to unlock the door. Be sure to leave at the altar a donation for temple upkeep and for its restoration.

You can also see Thai Lü weavers at work in the village. The home of **Khun Janthasom Phrompanya**, a few blocks behind the wat, serves as a local weaving centre – check there for the locations of looms or to look at fabrics for purchase. Large *yàam* (hill-tribe-style shoulder bags) are available for around 60B, while nicely woven neck scarves cost more. There are also several weaving houses just behind the wat.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

*Sǎwngthǎew* to Tha Wang Pha (20B) leave from opposite Nan's Sukasem Hotel. Or take a bus from the main bus station. Get off at Samyak Longbom, a three-way intersection before Tha Wang Pha, and walk west to a bridge over Mae Nam Nan, then left at the dead end on the other side of the bridge to Wat Nong Bua. It's 3.1km from the highway to the wat.

If you're coming from Nan via your own transport on Rte 1080, you'll cross a stream called Lam Nam Yang just past the village of Ban Fai Mun but before Tha Wang Pha. Take the first left off Rte 1080 and follow it to a dead end; turn right and then left over a bridge across Mae Nam Nan and walk until you reach another dead end. Turn left and continue for 2km until you can see Wat Nong Bua on the right.

## Tham Phah Tup Forest Reserve

ถ้ำผาตูบ

This limestone cave complex is about 10km north of Nan and is part of a relatively new wildlife reserve. Some 17 **caves** have been counted, of which nine are easily located by means of established (but unmarked) trails.

From Nan you can catch a *sǎwngthǎew* bound for Pua or Thung Chang; it will stop at the turn-off to the caves for 15B. The vehicles leave from the petrol station opposite the Sukasem Hotel.

## Sao Din

เสาหิน

Literally 'Earth Pillars', Sao Din is an erosional phenomenon similar to that found at Phae Meuang Phi in Phrae Province – tall columns of earth protruding from a barren depression. The area covers nearly 3.2 hectares off Rte 1026 in Amphoe Na Noi, about 60km south of Nan.

Sao Din is best visited by bike or motor-bike since it's time consuming to reach by

public transport. If you don't have your own wheels, take a *sǎwngthǎew* to Na Noi from the southbound *sǎwngthǎew* station opposite Ratchaphatsadu Market in Nan. From Na Noi you must get yet another *sǎwngthǎew* bound for Fak Tha or Ban Khok, getting off at the entrance to Sao Din after 5km or so. From here you'll have to walk or hitch 4km to Sao Din itself. There are also occasional direct *sǎwngthǎew* from Na Noi.

Northwest of Sao Din, off Rte 1216, is a set of earth pillars called **Hom Chom**.

## Other Attractions

Twenty kilometres north of Nan on Route 1080 is the **Nan Riverside Gallery** (☎ 0 5479 8046; www.nanartgallery.com; Km 20 Rte 1080; admission 20B; ☎ 9am–5pm Wed–Sun), where contemporary Nan-influenced art is exhibited in a peaceful setting. Established in 2004 by Nan artist Winai Prabipoo, this two-storey building holds the more interesting temporary exhibitions downstairs – sculpture, ceramics and drawings – as well as a permanent painting collection upstairs – which seems to be mainly inspired by the Wat Phumin murals. The unusual building is a light-filled converted rice barn with an arrow shaped turret. The shop and café have seats right on the Mae Nam Nan and the beautiful manicured gardens are nice to wander around. From Nan, take a bus (20B) or a *sǎwngthǎew* (30B) to the gallery.

There are a couple of interesting destinations in and around the Thai Lü village of **Pua**, roughly 50km north of Nan. In Pua itself you can check out another famous Thai Lü temple, **Wat Ton Laeng**, which is admired for its classic three-tiered roof. **Nam Tok Silaphet** (Silaphet Waterfall) is southeast of Pua just off the road between Pua and Ban Nam Yao. The water falls in a wide swath over a cliff and is best seen at the end of the monsoon season in November. On the way to the falls and west of the road is the Mien village of **Ban Pa Klang**, worth a visit to see silversmiths at work. This village supplies many silver shops in Chiang Mai and Bangkok. Other silverwork Mien villages can be found on Rte 101 between Nan and Phrae.

In the northwest of the province, off Rte 1148 and north of the village of Ban Sakoen, is a huge, 200m-wide cave called **Tham Luang**. The path to the cave is not signposted, but if you ask at the police checkpoint in Ban

Sakoen you should be able to get directions or you might even find a guide.

To the south about 100km, **Thaleh Sap Neua** (Northern Lake) formed by Kheuan Sirikit is an important freshwater fishery for Nan, as well as a recreational attraction for Nan residents. **Ban Pak Nai** on its northwestern shore is the main fishing village. Just before Mae Nam Nan feeds into the lake at its extreme northern end, there is a set of river rapids called **Kaeng Luang**.

Every Saturday morning from around 5am to 11am there's a lively Lao-Thai **market** in Thung Chang.

## Border Crossing (Laos)

There have been rumours for years that Ban Huay Kon (140km north of Nan) in Amphoe Thung Chang may some day be open to foreigners. For now, it's for Thais and Lao only.

# PHITSANULOK PROVINCE

## PHITSANULOK

พิจิตร โลก

pop 100,300

Under the reign of Ayuthaya King Borom Trailokanat (1448–88), Phitsanulok served as the capital of Thailand for 25 years. Because the town straddles Mae Nam Nan near a junction with Mae Nam Khwae Noi, it's sometimes referred to as Song Khwae (Two Tributaries). The city was associated with floating houseboats lining the banks, as it's the only city in Thailand where it's legal to reside on a houseboat within municipal boundaries. However, most have now been moved to the outskirts of the city. The central Ekathotsarn Bridge is lit up with blinging red and blue lights, and each night a lively night market lines the banks south of here.

Due to large parts of the town being burned down by a massive fire in 1957, the architecture of the city is pretty nondescript. Yet, this vibrant and extremely friendly city boasts some interesting sites and museums, chief of which is Wat Phra Si Ratana Mahathat, which contains one of Thailand's most revered Buddha images.

Phitsanulok makes an excellent base from which to explore the attractions of historical Sukhothai, Kamphaeng Phet and Si

Satchanalai, as well as the national parks and wildlife sanctuaries of Thung Salaeng Luang and Phu Hin Rong Kla, the former strategic headquarters of the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT). All of these places are within 150km of Phitsanulok.

The name Phitsanulok is often abbreviated as 'Philok'.

## Information

Shops offering internet access dot the streets around the railway station, near the Topland Hotel and on the western bank of the river near Saphan Ekathotsarot. Prices range from 15B per hour for slow connections to 60B per hour for the slightly faster connections. Several banks in town offer foreign-exchange

services and ATMs. There's also an ATM inside the Wat Phra Si Ratana Mahathat compound.

**Bangkok Bank** (35 Th Naresuan; ☎ to 8pm) An after-hours exchange window.

**CAT office** (Th Phuttha Bucha; ☎ 7am-11pm) At the post office. Offers phone and internet services.

**Left-luggage storage** (train station; per day 10B; ☎ 7am-10pm)

**Main post office** (Th Phuttha Bucha; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat & Sun)

**TAT office** (☎ 0 5525 2742-3; tatphlok@tat.or.th; 20/7-8 Th Borom Trailokanat; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm)

Off Th Borom Trailokanat, with knowledgeable, helpful staff (some of TAT's best) who hand out free maps of the town and a walking-tour sheet. It also runs a sightseeing tram (see p399). This is the official information office for Sukhothai and Phetchabun Provinces as well. If you plan to do the trip from Phitsanulok to Lom Sak, ask for the 'Green Route' map of Hwy 12, which marks several national parks, waterfalls and resorts along the way.

**Tourist Police** (☎ 1155; Th Ekathotsarot) 300m north of Topland Hotel.

## Sights

### WAT PHRA SI RATANA MAHATHAT

วัดพระศรีรัตนมหาธาตุ

The full name of this temple is Wat Phra Si Ratana Mahathat, but the locals call it Wat Phra Si or Wat Yai. The wat stands near the east end of the bridge over Mae Nam Nan (on the right as you're heading out of Phitsanulok towards Sukhothai). The main *wihāan* contains the Chinnarat Buddha (Phra Phuttha Chinnarat), one of Thailand's most revered and copied images. This famous bronze image is probably second in importance only to the Emerald Buddha in Bangkok's Wat Phra Kaew. In terms of total annual donations collected (around 12 million baht a year), Wat Yai follows Wat Sothon in Chachoengsao, east of Bangkok.

The image was cast in the late Sukhothai style, but what makes it strikingly unique is the flamelike halo around the head and torso that turns up at the bottom to become dragon-serpent heads on either side of the image. The head of this Buddha is a little wider than standard Sukhothai, giving the statue a very solid feel.

The story goes that construction of this wat was commissioned under the reign of King Li Thai in 1357. When it was completed, King Li Thai wanted it to contain three high-quality bronze images, so he sent

for well-known sculptors from Si Satchanalai, Chiang Saen and Hariphunchai (Lamphun), as well as five Brahman priests. The first two castings worked well, but the third required three attempts before it was decreed the best of all. Legend has it that a white-robed sage appeared from nowhere to assist in the final casting, then disappeared. This last image was named the Chinnarat (Victorious King) Buddha and it became the centrepiece in the *wihāan*. The other two images, Phra Chinnasi and Phra Si Satsada, were later moved to the royal temple of Wat Bowonniwet in Bangkok. Only the Chinnarat image has the flame-dragon halo.

The walls of the *wihāan* are low to accommodate the low-swept roof, typical of northern temple architecture, so the image takes on larger proportions than it might in a central or northeastern wat. That the brilliant interior architecture is such that when you sit on the Italian marble floor in front of the Buddha, the lacquered columns draw your vision towards the image and evoke a strong sense of serenity. The doors of the building are inlaid with mother-of-pearl in a design copied from Bangkok's Wat Phra Kaew.

Another sanctuary to one side has been converted into a free **museum** (☎ 9am-5.30pm Wed-Sun), displaying antique Buddha images, ceramics and other historic artefacts. Tūktūk line the entrance street, souvenir stands line the walkways, and there's an ATM and notable tourist police within the walls of the complex. Dress appropriately when visiting this most sacred of temples – no shorts or sleeveless tops.

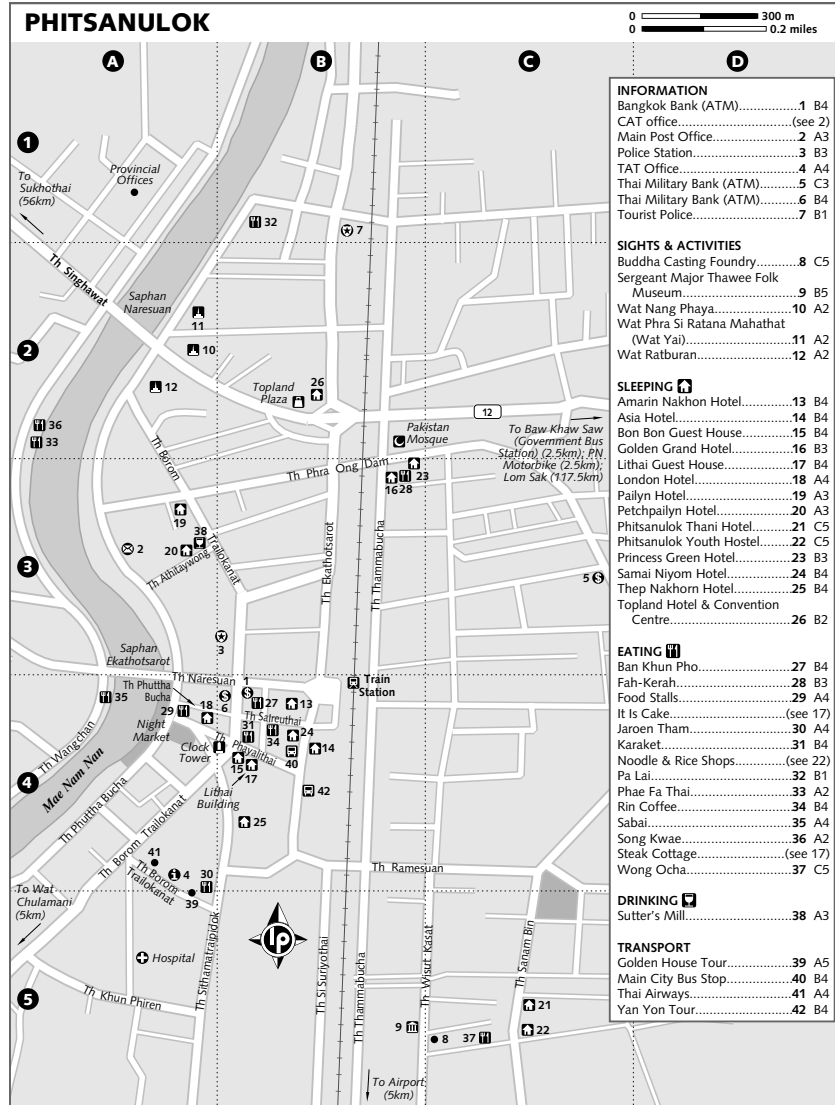
Near Wat Yai, on the same side of the river, are two other temples of the same period – **Wat Ratburan** and **Wat Nang Phaya**.

### WAT CHULAMANI

วัดจุฬามณี

Five kilometres south of the city (bus 5 down Th Borom Trailokanat, 4B), Wat Chulamani harbours some ruins dating to the Sukhothai period. The original buildings must have been impressive, judging from what remains of the ornate Khmer-style tower. King Borom Trailokanat was ordained as a monk here and there is an old Thai inscription to that effect on the ruined *wihāan*, dating from the reign of King Narai the Great.

The tower has little left of its original height, but Khmer-style lintels remain,



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including one with a Sukhothai walking Buddha and a *dharmacakka* (Buddhist wheel of law) in the background.

As well as the tower and the *wihān*, the only original structures left at Wat Chulamani are the remains of the monastery walls. Still, there is a peaceful, neglected atmosphere about the place.

### FOLK MUSEUM, BUDDHA-CASTING FOUNDRY & BIRD GARDEN

พิพิธภัณฑ์พื้นบ้านนายทวี/วิโรจน์หอพระ

The **Sergeant Major Thawee Folk Museum** (26/43 Th Wisut Kasat; bus 8; admission 50B; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Tue-Sun) displays a remarkable collection of tools, textiles and photographs from Phitsanulok Province. Sergeant Thawee was a military cartographer turned Buddha caster who recognised that old ways of life were dying so he started collecting items to preserve their place in Thailand. The museum is spread throughout five traditional-style Thai buildings with well-groomed gardens. There's a small, kids' play area behind the two far buildings. Some of the more impressive objects are the bird traps, ceremonial clothing, ancient kitchen utensils and basketry. Perhaps the most unique exhibit is that of a traditional birthing room.

Across the street is a small **Buddha Casting Foundry** (☎ 8am-5pm) where bronze Buddha images of all sizes are cast. Most are copies of the famous Phra Chinnarat Buddha at Wat Yai. Visitors are welcome to watch and there are even detailed photo exhibits demonstrating the lost-wax method of metal casting. Some of the larger images take a year or more to complete. The foundry is also owned by Dr Thawee, an artisan and nationally renowned expert on northern-Thai folklore. There is a small gift shop at the foundry where you can purchase bronze images of various sizes.

In addition to the foundry, there is a display of fighting cocks, which are bred and sold all over Thailand. (The official English name for this part of the facility is 'The Centre of Conservative Folk Cock'.)

Attached to the foundry is Dr Thawee's new project, the **Thai Bird Garden** (☎ 0 5521 2540; child/adult 20/50B; ☎ 8.30am-5pm). This small collection of aviaries contains indigenous Thai birds and some endangered species, like the very pretty pink-chested jama fruit-dove, and the prehistoric-looking helmeted hornbill. Unfortunately, the cages look too small and most of the birds are caged alone.

### Sleeping BUDGET

Phitsanulok has a good selection of budget lodgings. However, the large hotels in the budget category tend to have a problem with maintenance.

**Phitsanulok Youth Hostel** (☎ 0 5524 2060; www.tyha.org; 38 Th Sanam Bin; dm/tr/q 120/450/600B, s 200-300B, d 300-400; ☎) This is a good choice during the high season when backpackers fill the place. It has a lot of character, with rooms made of salvaged teak, and many intricate details on antique doors and furniture. The outdoor seating area has hammocks and is surrounded by greenery. Rates include breakfast. Starting around January 2007, a one-year renovation is planned – call to check if it is open. To get here take bus 12 or 4 from the train station, and bus 1 from the bus terminal. Buses stop outside the large hotel next door.

**London Hotel** (☎ 0 5522 5145; 21-22 Soi 1, Th Phuttha Bucha; r 150B) This old, wooden, Thai-Chinese hotel is as close to an early-20th-century rooming house as you'll find. These eight clean and colourfully tiled rooms share three cold-water bathrooms.

**Lithai Guest House** (☎ 0 5521 9626; 73 Th Phayalithai; s 240-350B, d 460B; ☎) This place is so clean it gleams. The light-filled 60 or so rooms don't have much character but they are the best value in town. Most have large en suite bathrooms with hot water, cable TV, plentiful furniture and a fridge. Rates include breakfast and free bottled water. There is an air ticket agent, coffee shop and restaurant on site.

**Bon Bon Guest House** (☎ 0 5521 9058; Th Phayalithai; r 300B; ☎) Don't be discouraged by the building out front, it is worth going inside. The quiet, spotless rooms have some charm and all feature hot-water showers and cable TVs. The communal area is very cutey with its collection of ceramic pigs and chickens.

**Princess Green Hotel** (☎ 0 5530 4988; Th Phra Ong Dam; r 390-490B; ☎) This brand new 28-room hotel has spacious, spotless rooms that are well furnished, and have cable TVs and minibars. Some rooms could do with a few more lights, and the mosque is not far, so early morning wake-up calls may be an issue. There is a restaurant and bar attached.

**Petchpailyn Hotel** (☎ 0 5525 8844; 4/8 Th Athitaywong; s/d 400/450B; ☎) The rooms here are

spacious and clean, but a little dark. A Chinese-style buffet breakfast is included in the rates. Rooms towards the back are considerably quieter.

Both the **Asia** (☎ 0 5525 8378; Th Ekathotsarot; r 250-380B; ☎) and the **Samai Niyom** (☎ 0 5525 8575; 175 Th Ekathotsarot; r 250-380B; ☎) hotels are conveniently located by the train station. Unfortunately, their posh looking lobbies don't reflect the state of the rooms inside. Most are in serious need of a revamp, especially the cheaper rooms. Asia Hotel's rooms have the edge with better furnishings.

### MIDRANGE

**Golden Grand Hotel** (☎ 0 5521 0234; 66 Th Thammabucha; r 690-850B; ☎ ☎ ☎) A solid midrange hotel, the rooms here are a vision of green, mint and white, and are large, well maintained and feature a private balcony. Staff are friendly and there's a restaurant on site.

**Thep Nakhorn Hotel** (☎ 0 5524 4070; www.geocities.com/thepnakhorn\_hotel; 43/1 Th Sithamatraipidok; s/d incl US breakfast 750/840B, ste 3500B; ☎) This six-storey hotel offers great-value, superclean, smart rooms with spacious bathrooms. Professional service but little English is spoken.

### TOP END

Discounts at Phitsanulok's top-end hotels are usually available online. Prices below are for walk-in guests.

**Pailyn Hotel** (☎ 0 5525 2411; 38 Th Borom Trailokanet; s/d/ste incl breakfast 1000/1200/2000B; ☎ ☎) The conveniently located, thirteen-storey Pailyn has an enormous lobby with an unfortunate looking catfish squashed in a tank. The rooms are spacious, have cable TV, minibars, and are well decorated apart from very loud batik panels above the beds. Some have great river views. There are several restaurants and lounges downstairs, and the staff members are professional and helpful.

**Phitsanulok Thani Hotel** (☎ 0 5521 1065; www.phitsanulokthani.com; Th Sanam Bin; r/ste incl breakfast 1200/2000-4000B; ☎ ☎ ☎) At the Folk Museum end of town, this hotel is part of the Dusit chain and offers all the basics, plus a few extras. The rooms are large yet cosy and tastefully decorated. There's a restaurant and cocktail lounge, and the spa is over the road.

**Topland Hotel & Convention Centre** (☎ 0 5524 7800; www.toplandhotel.com; cnr Th Singhawat & Th Ekathotsarot; r incl breakfast 1400-1600B, ste incl breakfast 2400-4800B;

☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) The luxurious and well-run Topland has a beauty salon, café, snooker club, fitness centre, several restaurants and other facilities. The upper-floor rooms afford great views of Phitsanulok. Rooms are comfortable, large and have cable TV.

### Eating

Phitsanulok takes its cuisine seriously. In addition to one of the most active night markets, there's a solid collection of high-quality restaurants.

### DOWNTOWN

As well as the **night market** (see p398) market-style **food stalls** (dishes 20-40B) cluster just west of the London Hotel.

**Fah-Kerah** (786 Th Phra Ong Dam; dishes 5-20B; ☎ 6am-2pm) There are several Thai-Muslim cafés near the mosque on Th Phra Ong Dam, and this is a popular one. Thick *rotii* is served up with *kaeng mátsàman* (Muslim curry), fresh yogurt is made daily and the *rotii kaeng* (set plate) is a steal at 20B.

**Jaroen Tham** (Vegetarian Food; Th Sithamatraipidok; dishes 15-20B; ☎ 8am-3pm) Around the corner from the TAT office, this simple place serves a choice of vegetarian dishes paired with husky brown rice. Look for a sign saying 'Vegetarian Food'.

**Rin Coffee** (☎ 0 5525 2848; 20 Th Salreuthai; dishes 15-50B; ☎ 7.30am-9pm, Sat-Sun 9.30am-9pm) This light-filled, glass-fronted café is popular with young Thais. Whole menu pages are dedicated to various green tea, coffee and chocolate drink concoctions. Sit in the brightly coloured seats or perch at the bar and sample the ice cream, hearty breakfasts, waffles, sandwiches or salads.

**Karaket** (Thai Food; ☎ 0 5525 8193; Th Phayalithai; dishes 20-30B; ☎ 1-8pm) Opposite Bon Bon Guest House, this simple restaurant has a variety of fresh curries and vegetables on display. Choose from the dishes in the metal trays out front. On the walls, there are interesting pictures of Phitsanulok before the 1957 fire.

**Steak Cottage** (☎ 0 5521 9626; dishes 40-150B; ☎ 7am-2pm & 5-9pm Mon-Sat) In the Lithai Building complex, this air-conditioned eatery serves salmon, beef and chicken steaks. It also serves other high-quality European and Thai dishes.

**It is Cake** (☎ 9am-9pm) In the same building as the Steak Cottage, this place sells decent cakes, tarts and pies as well as good sandwiches,

salad and pasta. It has an outside seating area, plus a squeaky clean air-con section.

**Ban Khun Pho** (Th Chao Phraya; dishes 50-90B; ☎ 11am-2pm, 6-11pm) Opposite the Amarin Nakhon Hotel, this clean, cosy place is decorated with antiques. On the menu are Thai, Japanese and Western selections.

Near the Phitsanulok Youth Hostel are some small **noodle and rice shops**. Around the corner, **Wong Ocha** (no roman-script sign; Th Sanam Bin; dishes 15-30B; ☎ 8am-10pm) is a permanent stall dishing delicious *kai yaang*, *khao niaw* (sticky rice) and *yam phak krachet* (water mimosa salad).

For snacks and self-catering, there's a huge supermarket in the basement of the Topland Shopping Plaza.

### ON THE RIVER

**Night market** (dishes 40-80B; ☎ 5pm-3am) Several street vendors specialise in *phak bung lawy faa* (literally 'floating-in-the-sky morning glory vine'), which usually translates as 'flying vegetable'. Originated in Chonburi, this food fad has somehow taken root in Phitsanulok. The dish isn't especially tasty – basically water spinach stir-fried with garlic in soya-bean sauce – but the preparation is a performance: the cook fires up a batch of *phak bung* in the wok and then flings it through the air to a waiting server who catches it on a plate. Some of the places are so performance-oriented that the server climbs to the top of a van to catch the flying vegetable! If you're lucky, you'll be here when a tour group is trying to catch the flying vegetables, but is actually dropping *phak bung* all over the place.

**Pa Lai** (no roman-script sign; Th Phuttha Bucha; dishes 20-60B; ☎ 10am-4pm) Opposite the river, north of Wat Phra Si Ratana Mahathat, this popular open-air restaurant serves *kua-yaiaw hawy khua* (literally, legs-hanging rice noodles). The name comes from the way customers sit on a bench facing the river, with their legs dangling below. There are several copycats nearby.

Floating restaurants light up Mae Nam Nan at night. Good choices include **Phae Fa Thai** (☎ 0 5524 2743; Th Wangchan; dishes 30-120B; ☎ 11am-11pm) and **Sabai** (Th Wangchan; dishes 40-140B; ☎ 11am-11pm), the latter is located by the massive Grand Riverside hotel. Just north of Phae Fa Thai is **Song Kwae** (☎ 0 5524 2167; Th Wangchan; boarding fee 40B; dishes 50-150B; ☎ 11am-11pm) a restaurant boat that cruises Mae Nam Nan

nightly. You pay a fee to board the boat and then order from a menu as you please.

### Drinking & Entertainment

Along Th Borom Trailokanat near the Pailyn Hotel is a string of popular, rockin' Thai pubs.

**Sutter's Mill** (Th Borom Trailokanat) Opposite the entrance to Petchpailyn Hotel, this bar has a cowboy theme going on. It has outdoor and indoor seating areas and features live Thai-folk and pop. Food is available and music starts at 8pm.

### Getting There & Away

#### AIR

**Thai Airways** (☎ 0 5524 2971-2; 209/26-28 Th Borom Trailokanat; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri) operates daily connections (55 minutes) to Phitsanulok from Bangkok (2185B). Tickets can also be booked at the travel agent attached to Lithai Guest House (p396).

#### BUS

Transport options out of Phitsanulok are good, as it's a junction for bus routes both north and northeast. Bangkok is six hours away by bus and Chiang Mai is 5½ hours. Phitsanulok's Baw Khaw Saw bus terminal is 2km east of town on Hwy 12. Second and 1st class air-con buses go to Bangkok every hour from 7.30am to 11.30pm daily (2nd class/1st class air-con 240/297B). VIP buses to Bangkok depart once a day at 11.30pm (347B). Buses to destinations in other northern and northeastern provinces leave regularly from the Baw Khaw Saw bus terminal. See the table (opposite) for fares.

**Van Yon Tour** (☎ 0 5525 8647; Th Ekathotsarot) runs 1st class air-con and VIP buses to Bangkok (1st class/VIP 297/407B, 9.15am-12.30pm) from the centre of town.

#### TRAIN

For most people, reaching Phitsanulok from Bangkok via train rather than bus is more economical and convenient, since you don't have to go out to Bangkok's Northern and Northeastern bus station. Timetables and prices are readily available at Bangkok's Hualamphong station. To check the most up-to-date timetables and prices in advance call the State Railway of Thailand or look at their website ([www.railway.co.th](http://www.railway.co.th)); ☎ 0 2220 4334, free 24-hr hotline 1690.

### BUS DESTINATIONS FROM PHITSANULOK

Destination	Bus	Fare (B)	Duration (hr)	Destination	Bus	Fare (B)	Duration (hr)	
Chiang Mai (via Uttaradit)	ordinary	162	5	Mae Sot	air-con minivan	167	5	
	2nd class air-con	227	5		Nakhon Ratchasima (Khorat)	2nd class air-con	263	6
	1st class air-con	292	5			1st class air-con	338	6
	VIP	340	5			VIP	395	6
Chiang Mai (via Tak)	ordinary	191	6	Nan	1st class air-con	199	9	
	2nd class air-con	267	6		VIP	258	8	
	1st class air-con	344	6	Sukhothai**	ordinary	30	1	
Chiang Rai (via Sukhothai)	ordinary	246	6		air-con	42	1	
	2nd class air-con	267	5	Tak*	ordinary	68	3	
	1st class air-con	344	5		air-con	95	3	
	VIP	401	5	Udon Thani	ordinary	167	7	
Kamphaeng Phet*	ordinary	57	3		1st class air-con	234	7	
	air-con	80	3		VIP	301	7	
Khon Kaen	ordinary	154	6	*Buses to Kamphaeng Phet & Tak leave every hour.				
	2nd class air-con	215	6	**Buses to Sukhothai leave every half-hour.				
	1st class air-con	277	5					

Rapid trains (2nd class/3rd class 309/219B) depart from Bangkok five times each day at 5.50am, 7am, 2.30pm, 7.50pm and 8.10pm and take seven hours. There are also three air-con, 2nd-class, express-diesel trains (or 'Sprinter'), at 8.30am, 10.50pm and 7.20pm daily (449B, five hours), which are about two hours quicker than the rapid service. A 1st- and 2nd-class sleeper train (1064/629-699B, six hours) departs at 7.35pm.

If you're continuing straight to Sukhothai from Phitsanulok, take the city bus 10 (fan/air-con 8B/11B) or a tük-tük (50B) from the train station to the bus station 4km away. From there you can catch a bus to Sukhothai.

### Getting Around

Sāmlāw rides within the town centre should cost no more than 50B. Outside the train station there's a sign indicating tük-tük prices for different destinations around town: bus terminal 50B, airport 150B, temples 50B, TAT

office 50B, Folklore Museum 50B, post office 50B.

Ordinary city buses cost 8B and there are 18 routes, making it easy to get just about anywhere by bus. A couple of the lines also feature air-con coaches for 11B. The main bus stop for city buses is south of the train station, on Th Ekathotsarot.

To get to the bus terminal from town take bus 1 or 8 (ordinary/air-con 8/11B). There is no city bus to the airport but tük-tük go there for 150B. Bus 1 also goes to Wat Phra Si Ratana Mahathat (or Wat Yai) and bus 8 also goes to the Folk Museum and Buddha Foundry.

Run by the TAT, the Phitsanulok Tour Tramway (PTT) is a quick way to see many sights. The ride takes around 45 minutes, with the first departing at 9am and the last at 3pm. The **tram** (child/adult 20/30B) leaves from Wat Yai and stops at 15 sights before returning to the same temple.

The only place in town to rent motorcycles is **PN Motorbike** (☎ 0 5530 3222; Th Mittraphap; 125cc

motorbike per day 200B; ☎ 8.30am-5.30pm Mon-Sat) located next to the bus terminal.

Phitsanulok's **airport** (☎ 0 5530 1002) is 5km south of town. Thai Airways has a door-to-door van service that shuttles incoming flight passengers to accommodation in Phitsanulok (50B per person). **Golden House Tour** (☎ 0 5525 9973; 55/37 Th Borom Trailokanant), has a board at the airport indicating its mini-van service from the airport to hotels (150B per person). Tuk-tuk go to the airport from town for 150B.

**Budget** (☎ 0 5525 8556; www.budget.co.th) and **Avis** (☎ 0 5524 2060; www.avisthailand.com) have car-rental offices at the airport. They charge from 1350B per day.

## PHU HIN RONG KLA NATIONAL PARK

อุทยานแห่งชาติภูหินร่องกล้า

Between 1967 and 1982, the mountain that is known as Phu Hin Rong Kla served as the strategic headquarters for the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) and its tactical arm, the People's Liberation Army of Thailand (PLAT). The remote, easily defended summit was perfect for an insurgent army. Another benefit was that the headquarters was only 50km from the Lao border, so lines of retreat were well guarded after 1975 when Laos fell to the Pathet Lao. China's Yunnan Province is only 300km away and it was here that CPT cadres received their training in revolutionary tactics. (This was until the 1979 split between the Chinese and Vietnamese communists, when the CPT sided with Vietnam.)

For nearly 20 years the area around Phu Hin Rong Kla served as a battlefield for Thai troops and the communists. In 1972 the Thai government launched an unsuccessful major offensive against the PLAT. The CPT camp at Phu Hin Rong Kla became especially active after the Thai military killed hundreds of students in Bangkok during the October 1976 student-worker uprising. Many students subsequently fled here to join the CPT, setting up a hospital and a school of political and military tactics. By 1978 the PLAT ranks here had swelled to 4000. In 1980 and 1981 the Thai armed forces tried again and were able to recapture some parts of CPT territory. But the decisive blow to the CPT came in 1982, when the government declared an amnesty for all the students who had joined the communists after 1976. The departure of most of the students broke the spine of the movement, which had become dependent on their membership. A final military push in late 1982 effected the surrender of the PLAT, and Phu Hin Rong Kla was declared a national park in 1984.

## Orientation & Information

The **park** (www.dnp.go.th; admission 400B; ☎ 8.30am-5pm) covers about 307 sq km of rugged mountains and forest. The elevation at park headquarters is about 1000m, so the area is refreshingly cool even in the hot season. Attractions on the main road through the park include the remains of the CPT stronghold – a rustic meeting hall, the school of political and military tactics – and the CPT administration building. Across the road from the school is a water wheel designed by exiled engineering students.

## Sights & Activities

A trail leads to **Pha Chu Thong** (Flag Raising Cliff, sometimes called Red Flag Cliff), where the communists would raise the red flag to announce a military victory. Also in this area is an **air-raid shelter**, a **lookout** and the remains of the main **CPT headquarters** – the most inaccessible point in the territory before a road was constructed by the Thai government. The buildings in the park are made out of wood and bamboo and have no plumbing or electricity – a testament to how primitive the living conditions were.

There is a small **museum** at the park headquarters that displays relics from CPT days, including weapons and medical instruments. At the end of the road into the park is a small

**White Hmong village**. When the CPT was here the Hmong were its ally. Now the Hmong are undergoing 'cultural assimilation' at the hands of the Thai government.

If you're not interested in the history of Phu Hin Rong Kla, there are **waterfalls**, **hiking trails** and **scenic views**, as well as some interesting rock formations – jutting boulders called **Lan Hin Pum**, and an area of deep rocky crevices where PLAT troops would hide during air raids, called **Lan Hin Taek**. Ask at the Visitor Centre (☎ 8.30am-4.30pm) for maps.

Phu Hin Rong Kla can become quite crowded on weekends and holidays; schedule a more peaceful visit for midweek.

## Sleeping & Eating

**Thailand's Royal Forest Department** (☎ 0 5523 3527; reserve@dnp.go.th; bungalows 800-2400B; tent pitch 30B, 2-8 person tent 150-600B) Bungalows for two to eight people, in three different zones of the park, can be rented from this organisation. You can also pitch a tent or rent one. Sleeping bags (30B) and pillows (10B) are available.

**Golden House Tour** (☎ 0 5525 9973; 55/37 Th Trailokanant; ☎ 8am-6.30pm) Near the TAT office in Phitsanulok, it can help book accommodation.

Near the camping ground and bungalows are restaurants and food vendors. The best are **Duang Jai Cafeteria** – try its famous carrot *sôm-tam* – and **Rang Thong**.

## Getting There & Away

The park headquarters is about 125km from Phitsanulok. To get here, first take an early bus to Nakhon Thai (35B, two hours, hourly bus from 6am to 6pm). From there you can catch a *săwngthăew* to the park (30B, three times daily from 7.30am to 4.30pm). If you have your own vehicle, turn at Hwy 12's Km 86 stone to take Rte 2013, then go east on Route 2331 for the Visitor Centre entrance.

A small group can charter a pick-up and driver in Nakhon Thai for around 800B for the day. Golden House Tour (above) charges 1500B for car and driver; petrol is extra. This is a delightful trip if you're on a motorcycle since there's not much traffic along the way, but a strong engine is necessary to conquer the hills to Phu Hin Rong Kla.

## PHITSANULOK TO LOM SAK

Hwy 12 between Phitsanulok and Lom Sak is known as the 'Green Route', which parallels the scenic, rapid-studded Lam Nam Khek.

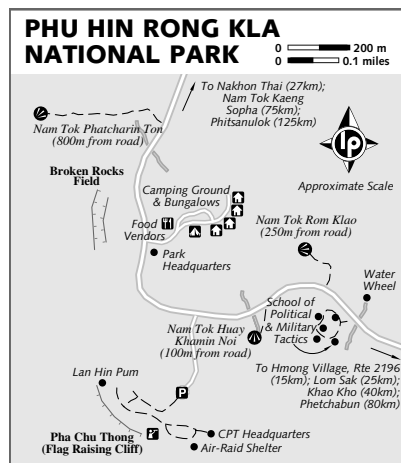
Off this route are waterfalls, resorts, the Phu Hin Rong Kla (opposite) and Thung Salaeng Luang National Parks. The sites tend to be more popular on weekends and holidays.

Any of the resorts along Hwy 12 can organise **white-water rafting** trips on the Lam Nam Khek along the section with the most rapids, which corresponds more or less between Km 45 and 52 of Hwy 12.

The Phitsanulok TAT office (p395) distributes a 'Green Route' map of the attractions along this 130km stretch of road. You may want to bypass the first two waterfalls, **Nam Tok Sakhuothayan** (at the Km 33 marker) and **Kaeng Song** (at the Km 45 marker), which are on the way to Phu Hin Rong Kla and therefore get overwhelmed with visitors. The third, **Kaeng Sopha** at the Km 72 marker, is a larger area of small falls and rapids where you can walk from rock formation to rock formation – there are more or fewer rocks depending on the rains. **Food vendors** provide inexpensive *sôm-tam* and *kăi yăang*. In between the Kaeng Song and Kaeng Sopha waterfalls, turning off at Km 49, is the **Dharma Abha Vipassana Meditation Center** (☎ 0 5526 8049; www.dhamma.org/en/schedules/schabha.htm), which does regular 10-day meditation retreats.

Further east along the road is the 1262-sq-km **Thung Salaeng Luang National Park** (www.dnp.go.th; admission 400bht; ☎ 8am-5pm), one of Thailand's largest and most important wildlife sanctuaries. Thung Salaeng Luang encompasses vast meadows, evergreen and dipterocarp forests, limestone hills and numerous streams. From November through to December the meadows bloom with carpets of wild flowers, and the best place to see wildlife is on these meadows and around the ponds and salt licks. There are over 190 bird species confirmed in the park, most significant of which for bird-watchers is the Siamese fireback pheasant. Thung Salaeng Luang was also once home to the PLAT. The entrance is at the Km 80 marker, where the park headquarters here has information on walks and accommodation.

If you have your own wheels, you can turn south at the Km 100 marker onto Rte 2196 and head for **Khao Kho** (Khao Khaw), another mountain lair used by the CPT during the 1970s. About 1.5km from the summit of Khao Kho, you must turn onto the very steep Rte 2323. At the summit, 30km from the highway, stands a tall **obelisk** erected in memory of the





Thai soldiers killed during the suppression of the communist insurgency. The monument is surrounded by an attractive garden. Gun emplacements and sandbagged lookout posts perched on the summit have been left intact as historical reminders. On a clear day, the 360-degree view from the summit is wonderful.

If you've made the side trip to Khao Kho you can choose either to return to the Phitsanulok–Lom Sak highway, or take Rte 2258, off Rte 2196, until it terminates at Rte 203. On Rte 203 you can continue north to Lom Sak or south to Phetchabun. On Rte 2258, about 4km from Rte 2196, you'll pass **Khao Kho Palace**. One of the smaller royal palaces in Thailand, it's a fairly uninteresting, modern set of structures but has quite a nice rose garden. If you've come all the way to Khao Kho you may as well take a look.

## Sleeping & Eating

**Thung Salaeng Luang National Park** (☎ 0 2562 0760; reserve@dnp.go.th; bungalows 1000-5000B, tent pitch 30B, 2-8 person tent 150-600B) In the park there are 15 well-equipped wooden bungalows that accommodate four to 10 people. Bungalows are available near the headquarters by the Km 80 entrance or in two other park zones. It's also possible to pitch a tent. There's a restaurant and food vendors in the park.

**Rainforest Resort** (☎ 0 5529 3085-6; www.rainforest-thailand.com; Km 42; 2-6 person cottages 1400-4800B; 🚰) There are several resorts just off Hwy 12 and this is the best of the lot. Spacious, tastefully designed cottages spread over a hillside facing Mae Nam Khlek accommodate from two to six people. An indoor-outdoor restaurant serves locally grown coffee and good Thai food. Another good choice is **Wang Thara Health Resort & Spa** (☎ 0 5529 3411-4; www.wanathara.com; Hwy 12, Km 46; r 1600-3800B; 🚰), which offers a stylish retreat with the added bonus of a reasonably priced spa. Both resorts have online discounts and arrange activities like white-water rafting and mountain biking.

## Getting There & Away

For more freedom it's best to do this route with your own wheels. Buses between Phitsanulok and Lom Sak cost 50B for ordinary and 70B for air-con, each way. So any stop along the way will cost less. During daylight hours it's easy to flag down another bus to continue your journey, but after 4pm it gets a little chancy.

# SUKHOTHAI PROVINCE

## SUKHOTHAI

สุโขทัย

pop 39,800

As Thailand's first capital, Sukhothai (Rising of Happiness) flourished from the mid-13th century to the late 14th century. The Sukhothai kingdom is viewed as the 'golden age' of Thai civilisation – the religious art and architecture of the era are considered to be the most classic of Thai styles. The *meuang kao* (old city) of Sukhothai features around 45 sq km of ruins, which are one of the most visited ancient sites in Thailand.

Almost 450km from Bangkok, the market town of New Sukhothai with the Mae Nam Yam running through it, is not particularly interesting. Yet its friendly and relaxed atmosphere, good transport links and attractive accommodation make it a good base from which to explore the old city ruins. These can also be visited via a day trip from Phitsanulok.

## History

Sukhothai was the first capital of Siam. Established in the 13th century, Sukhothai's dynasty lasted 200 years and had nine kings. The most famous was King Ramkhamhaeng, who reigned from 1275 to 1317 and is credited with developing the first Thai script – his inscriptions are considered the first Thai literature. He also expanded the kingdom to include almost all of present-day Thailand. But a few kings later in 1438, Sukhothai was absorbed by Ayuthaya. See Sukhothai Historical Park for more information (opposite).

## Information

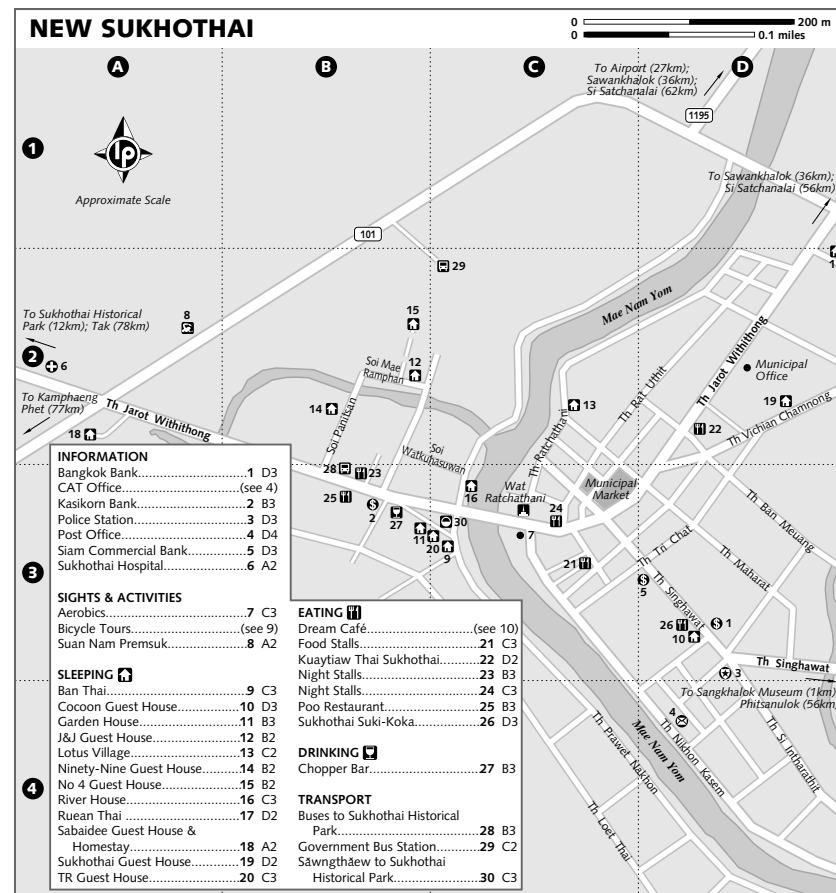
There are banks with ATMs scattered all around the central part of New Sukhothai, plus one in Old Sukhothai.

Internet is easy to find in New Sukhothai. Most places connections (40B per hour) are pretty quick. Some guesthouses also offer internet.

Sukhothai's best sources of tourist information are the guesthouses, especially Ban Thai (p406).

**CAT office** (Th Nikhon Kasem; ☎ 7am-10pm) Offers international phone services; attached to post office.

**Police station** (Map p403; ☎ 0 5561 1010) In New Sukhothai.



**Post office** (Th Nikhon Kasem; ☎ 8.30am-noon Mon-Fri, 1-4.30pm Sat & Sun, 9am-noon holidays)

**Sukhothai hospital** (☎ 0 5561 0280; Th Jarot Withithong)

**Tourist police** (Map p404; Sukhothai Historical Park) Call 1155 for emergencies or go to the tourist police station opposite the Ramkhamhaeng National Museum.

## Sights

### SUKHOTHAI HISTORICAL PARK

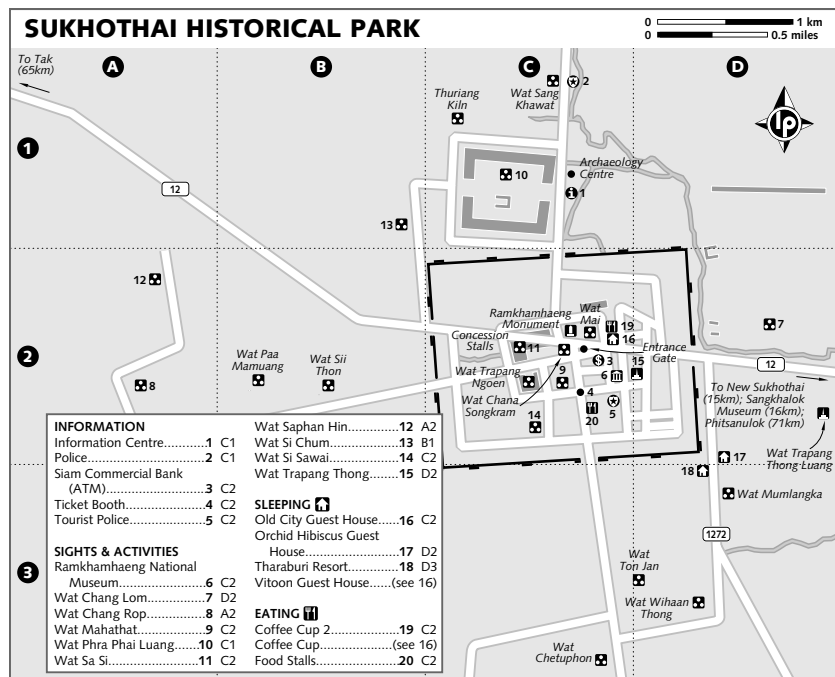
อุทยานประวัติศาสตร์สุโขทัย

The **Sukhothai ruins** (admission 30-150B, plus bicycles/motorcycles/cars 10/20/50B; ☎ 6am-6pm) are one of Thailand's most impressive World Heritage sites. The park includes remains of 21 historical sites and four large ponds within the old walls, with an additional 70 sites within

a 5km radius. The original capital of the first Thai kingdom was surrounded by three concentric ramparts and two moats bridged by four gateways.

The ruins are divided into five zones – central, north, south, east and west – each of which has a 30B admission fee, except for the central section, which costs 40B. For a reasonable 150B you can buy a single ticket (from the kiosk at the south entrance) that allows entry to all the Sukhothai sites, plus Sawanworanayok Museum (p410), Ramkhamhaeng National Museum (p404) and the Si Satchanalai and Chaliang (p408). The ticket is good for repeated visits over 30 days.

The architecture of Sukhothai temples is most typified by the classic lotus-bud *chedi*,



featuring a conical spire topping a square-sided structure on a three-tiered base. Some sites exhibit other rich architectural forms introduced and modified during the period, such as bell-shaped Sinhalese and double-tiered Srivijaya *chedi*. Some of the most impressive ruins are outside the city walls, so a bicycle or motorcycle is essential to fully appreciate everything.

See p408 for details on the best way to tour the park.

### Ramkhamhaeng National Museum

พิพิธภัณฑ์สถานแห่งชาติรามคำแหง

A good starting point for exploring the park ruins is **Ramkhamhaeng National Museum** (Map p404; ☎ 0 5561 2167; admission 30B; ☎ 9am-4pm). A replica of the famous Ramkhamhaeng inscription (see Wiang Kum Kam p289) is kept here among an impressive collection of the Sukhothai artefacts.

### Wat Mahathat

วัดมหาธาตุ

Finished in the 13th century, Sukhothai's largest wat is surrounded by brick walls (206m long and 200m wide) and a moat that is said to

represent the outer wall of the universe and the cosmic ocean. The *chedi* spires feature the famous lotus-bud motif, and some of the original stately Buddha figures still sit among the ruined columns of the old *wihāan*. There are 198 *chedi* within the monastery walls – a lot to explore in what many consider was the spiritual and administrative centre of the old capital.

### Wat Si Chum

วัดศรีชุม

This wat is northwest of the old city and contains an impressive *mondòp* with a 15m, brick-and-stucco seated Buddha. This Buddha's elegant, tapered fingers are much-photographed. Archaeologists theorise that this image is the 'Phra Atchana' mentioned in the famous Ramkhamhaeng inscription. A passage in the *mondòp* wall that leads to the top has been blocked so that it's no longer possible to view the *jataka* inscriptions that line the tunnel ceiling.

### Wat Saphan Hin

วัดสะพานหิน

Four kilometres to the west of the old city walls in the west zone, Wat Saphan Hin is

on the crest of a hill that rises about 200m above the plain. The name of the wat, which means 'stone bridge', is a reference to the slate path and staircase that leads up to the temple, which are still in place. The site gives a good view of the Sukhothai ruins to the southeast and the mountains to the north and south.

All that remains of the original temple are a few *chedi* and the ruined *wihāan*, consisting of two rows of laterite columns flanking a 12.5m-high standing Buddha image on a brick terrace.

### Wat Si Sawai

วัดศรีสวาย

Just south of Wat Mahathat, this shrine (dating from the 12th and 13th centuries) features three Khmer-style towers and a picturesque moat. It was originally built by the Khmers as a Hindu temple.

### Wat Sa Si

วัดสระศรี

Also known as 'Sacred Pond Monastery', Wat Sa Si sits on an island west of the bronze monument of King Ramkhamhaeng (the third Sukhothai king). It's a simple, classic Sukhothai-style wat containing a large Buddha, one *chedi* and the columns of the ruined *wihāan*.

### Wat Trapang Thong

วัดตระพังทอง

Next to the museum, this small, still-inhabited wat with its fine stucco reliefs is reached by a footbridge across the large lotus-filled pond that surrounds it. This reservoir, the original site of Thailand's **Loi Krathong** festival (p406), supplies the Sukhothai community with most of its water.

### Wat Phra Phai Luang

วัดพระพายหลวง

Outside the city walls in the northern zone, this somewhat isolated wat features three 12th-century Khmer-style towers, bigger than those at Wat Si Sawai. This may have been the centre of Sukhothai when it was ruled by the Khmers of Angkor prior to the 13th century.

### Wat Chang Lom

วัดช้างล้อม

Off Hwy 12 in the east zone, Wat Chang Lom (Elephant Circling Monastery) is about 1km

east of the main park entrance. A large bell-shaped *chedi* is supported by 36 elephants sculpted into its base.

### Wat Chang Rop

วัดช้างรอบ

On another hill west of the city, just south of Wat Saphan Hin, this wat features an elephant-base *chedi*, similar to that at Wat Chang Lom.

### SANGKHALOK MUSEUM

พิพิธภัณฑ์เครื่องปั้นดินเผา

If you love ancient, rustically decorated pottery, you might enjoy this **museum** (☎ 0 5561 4333; 203/2 Mu 3 Th Muangkao; child/adult 50/100B; ☎ 8am-5pm). It displays an impressive collection of original 700-year-old Thai pottery found in the area, plus some pieces traded from Vietnam, Burma and China. The 2nd floor features some impressive examples of non-utilitarian pottery made as art.

### Activities

#### BICYCLE TOURS

Belgian cycling enthusiast Ronnie of Ban Thai (p406) offers a variety of fun and educational **bicycle tours** (one hour 100B, half day/full day 400/700B, sunset tour 250B) of the area. Tours range from a 'coffee tour', where you visit plantations and villages, to the 'eccentric hermit tour', where you ride through hills to meet an entertaining hermit. There are tours for those who want to take it slowly (the turtle tour) or those who want a challenging ride (antelope and off-road tours). Rides include stops at lesser seen wats and villages. Personalised itineraries can also be arranged.

#### AEROBICS

Join the locals in open-air disco aerobics. Over the bridge and opposite Wat Rachthani, a stage is set up among the trees. Here, aerobics instructors put a crowd through their paces from 6.30pm to 7.30pm nightly.

#### SWIMMING

**Suan Nam Premasuk** (admission 40B; ☎ 7am-9pm), at Km 4 marker on Rte 101, is a modest sports complex with a clean swimming pool, tennis courts and ping-pong table. The admission includes use of all the facilities. Look for a couple of tall brick pillars supporting a blue-and-white sign. It can get crowded on the weekends.

## Festivals

The **Loi Krathong** festival in November is celebrated for five days in historical Sukhothai. In addition to the magical floating lights, there are fireworks, folk-dance performances and a light-and-sound production.

## Sleeping

Most accommodation is in New Sukhothai, and is dominated by budget options. A few upmarket choices are coming to town but they are gathered around the historical park. Prices tend to go up during the Loi Krathong festival. Most guesthouses rent motorcycles, bikes and have a laundry service.

## BUDGET

The local taxi mafia has its hooks in the guesthouse proprietors. Drivers may say a place is closed if the guesthouse is not paying them commission – check first. Many guesthouses offer free pick-up from the bus terminal. Most also rent bicycles and motorcycles.

## New Sukhothai

**Ban Thai** (☎ 0 5561 0163; banthai\_guesthouse@yahoo.com; 38 Th Prawet Nakhon; r with shared bathroom 150B, bungalows 250-450B; ☺) This ultrafriendly place is the closest you'll come to feeling like you are staying with a family. Rooms are in excellent shape and the shared bathrooms sparkle. There's also a choice of simple fan bungalows with private bathroom, or the new air-con ones that come with good furniture and towels. Both sit around an intimate garden. Ban Thai is a great resource for local information, and does a range of interesting bicycle tours. The restaurant is also good.

**Sabaidee Guest House & Homestay** (☎ 0 5561 6303, 08 9988 3589; www.sabaidee-guesthouse.com; 81/7 Mu 1 Tambol Bankloui; r 150-300B; ☺) On the way into town from the bus station, this homestay is down a lane off the main road. You can stay upstairs in the family house, where the large separate bathroom is just for guests, or cross a tiny bridge and stay in the spacious bungalows set in a garden. The friendly host speaks French, Thai and English, and offers free use of bicycles. The restaurant here is good too.

**River House** (☎ 0 5562 0396; riverhouse\_7@hotmail.com; 7 Soi Watkuhasuan; r 150-350B) Operated by a young Thai-French couple, this relaxing place has simple, tidy rooms in an old teak house overlooking the river. Hammocks are dotted about and there is a restaurant attached.

**Garden House** (☎ 0 5561 1395; tuigardenhouse@yahoo.com; 11/1 Th Prawet Nakhon; r 150B, bungalows 250-350B; ☺) This popular and great-value place has bungalows with character, large terraces and private bathrooms. There are also several well-kept rooms in a wooden two-storey house; the shared bathrooms are large and very clean. The restaurant screens movies nightly.

**TR Guest House** (☎ 0 5561 1663; tr\_guesthouse@thaimail.com; 27/5 Th Prawet Nakhon; r 200-350B; ☺) Set in a concrete building, the large rooms are well furnished and spotlessly clean. Although lacking the character of other options down this street, it is still one of the better choices.

**J&J Guest House** (☎ 0 5562 0095; jjguesthouse@hotmail.com; 122 Soi Mae Ramphan; r 300-400B, bungalows 500-700B; ☺) This place is set in a manicured garden, has a large and a small swimming pool plus a pleasant restaurant known for its fresh baguettes and croissants. There are brand new, tastefully decorated wooden bungalows with terraces, cable TV and minibars, as well as spotless, spacious rooms. The friendly staff are multilingual (English, French, Dutch and Thai) and a good source of information.

**Sukhothai Guest House** (☎ 0 5561 0453; www.sukhothaiguesthouse.com; 68 Th Vichien Chamnong; r 450-600B; ☺) This long-running guesthouse has 12 bungalows with terraces packed into a shaded garden. The communal area is filled with an eclectic mix of bric-a-brac and the owners are friendly and very helpful.

**Cocoon Guest House** (☎ 0 5561 2081; 86/1 Th Singhawatt; r from 500B; ☺) The four simple rooms at the back of Dream Café are down a path and set in a junglelike garden.

**No 4 Guest House** (☎ 0 5561 0165; 140/4 Soi Khlong Mae Ramphan; s/d 200/300B) and **Ninety-Nine Guest House** (☎ 0 5561 1315; 234/6 Soi Panitsan; s/d 120/150B) are managed by the same people. No 4 is by the fields and has bamboo-thatch bungalows. Ninety-nine's rooms are in a two-storey teak house surrounded by gardens. Both places run cookery courses.

## Sukhothai Historical Park

The following places are across from the historical park. Both rent out bicycles.

**Old City Guest House** (☎ 0 5569 7515; 28/7 Mu 3; r 120-600B; ☺) Set around an old teak house, rooms range from being small and quite dark to large and well-furnished enough to hold a family. A good choice if you want to stay close

to the historic park; unfortunately there isn't a garden area for relaxing.

**Vitton Guest House** (☎ 0 5569 7045; 49 Mu 3; r 300-600B; ☺) Rooms at Vitton are comfortable but cluttered and overpriced compared to its neighbour Old City.

## MIDRANGE

A number of the following options also offer budget-priced options.

**Ruean Thai Hotel** (☎ 0 5561 2444; www.ruean thaihotel.com; 181/20 Soi Pracha Ruammit, Th Jarot Withithong; concrete building 250-400B, other rooms 600-2500B; ☺) This antique-filled, two-storey hotel has heaps of character and prices to meet everyone's budget. The romantic-looking rooms that surround the pool have chunky recycled teak floorboards, some antique furniture, cable TV and large well-equipped bathrooms. A teak building has charming, very Thai style rooms, with carved room dividers and a lounging area. There's a concrete building with simple and cheaper air-con rooms out the back. Call for free pick-up from the bus station.

**Lotus Village** (☎ 0 5562 1484; www.lotus-village.com; 170 Th Ratchathan; r 500-1350B; ☺) Set in a lush garden and among lotus ponds is this collection of Thai-style houses. The modern rooms are tastefully decorated and are big enough to host a yoga class. The bungalows on stilts range from simple to super-chic. There's a spa, arty boutique and communal seating area.

**Orchid Hibiscus Guest House** (Map p404; ☎ 0 5563 3284; orchid\_hibiscus\_guest\_house@hotmail.com; 407/2 Rte 1272; r 800-1200B; ☺) Opposite Tharaburi resort, this collection of rooms is set in relaxing, manicured grounds. There are eight cosy rooms with four-poster beds by the pool; behind these are two new, huge multicoloured rooms that would suit families. Across a path away from the pool are teak houses with two floors, living rooms and veranda – another good family choice. The guesthouse is on Rte 1272 about 600m off Hwy 12 – the turn-off is between Km markers 48 and 49.

## TOP END

**Tharaburi Resort** (Map p404; ☎ 0 5569 7132; www.tharaburiresort.com; 113 Th Srisomboon; r 1200-3300B, ste 4600-5800B; ☺) One kilometre from the historical park, this new boutique hotel looks like something out of *Elle Decoration* magazine, with its 12 individually and beautifully styled rooms and villas. Some are themed (Su-

khothai, Japanese, Chinese) and this is done with fine antiques, lush silks and exquisite attention to detail. The cheaper rooms are simpler, the suites feel like a small home, and there are also two-floor family rooms. Definitely the most stylish hotel in Sukhothai.

## Eating

**Kuaytiaw Thai Sukhothai** (Th Jarot Withithong; dishes 20-30B; ☺ 9am-8pm) A good spot to try Sukhothai-style *kuaytiaw*, it's located about 20m south of the turn-off for Ruean Thai Guest House. The restaurant is in a nice wooden building with a fountain fashioned from ceramic pots out front.

**Poo Restaurant** (☎ 0 5561 1735; 24/3 Th Jarot Withithong; dishes 25-80B; ☺ 8am-12pm) Right in the centre of town, this new bar and restaurant is run by a very friendly Thai-Belgian couple. The décor is simple and spotlessly clean, and the menu offers great breakfasts, hearty sandwiches and very tasty Thai dishes. The owners are also really into chocolate – try the delicious *dame blanche* (ice cream covered in Belgian chocolate). A good source of information, this is also the place to rent motorbikes in town.

**Sukhothai Suki-Koka** (Th Singhawatt; dishes 30-90B; ☺ 10am-11pm) Specialising in Thai-style suki-yaki, this bright, homey place is popular for lunch. It serves plenty of Thai dishes but also does sandwiches and pasta.

**Coffee Cup** (Map p404; Mu 3, Old Sukhothai; dishes 30-150B; ☺ 7am-10pm) If you're staying in the old city or are an early riser, come here for breakfast; the coffee is strong and the bread is fresh. It also serves a variety of snacks and a whopping good hamburger. Internet service is 40B per hour. There's also Coffee Cup 2, just a few doors down, which has a bar inside.

**Dream Café** (☎ 0 5561 2081; 86/1 Th Singhawatt; dishes 60-140B; ☺ 10am-10pm) This romantic, eclectic café is a gem. Decorated with cabinets full of curiosities, and some Thai antiques, it serves a fabulous selection of desserts, pasta and sandwiches, as well as Thai dishes. The food is good and the staff attentive. Alternatively, just pop in for a 'stamina drink' corked in medicine vials. Formula 4 claims to cure insensitivity and increase capability.

Don't miss New Sukhothai's **night stalls**. Most are accustomed to accommodating foreigners and even have bilingual, written menus. On Tuesday nights, there are more lively **night stalls** in the square opposite Poo

Restaurant. Near the ticket kiosk in the historical park, there is a collection of **food stalls** and simple open-air restaurants.

### Drinking

**Chopper Bar** (Th Prawet Nakhon; ☎ 5-12.30pm) Travellers and locals congregate from dusk till hangover for food, drinks, live music and flirtation at this place, within spitting distance from the little guesthouse strip.

### Getting There & Away

#### AIR

The so-called ‘Sukhothai’ airport is 27km from town off Rte 1195, about 11km from Sawankhalok. It’s privately owned by Bangkok Airways and, like its Ko Samui counterpart, is a beautifully designed small airport using tropical architecture to its best advantage. **Bangkok Airways** (☎ 0 5563 3266/7, airport ☎ 0 5564 7224; www.bangkokair.com) operates a daily flight from Bangkok (1700B, 70 minutes). Bangkok Airways charges 120B to transport passengers between the airport and Sukhothai.

Bangkok Airways also flies daily from Chiang Mai to Sukhothai (1440B, 40 minutes). Fares for children are half the adult price.

#### BUS

Sukhothai is easily reached from Phitsanulok, Tak or Kamphaeng Phet. Buses to/from Phitsanulok (ordinary/2nd class air-con/1st class 30/42/54B, one hour), leave every half hour or so. Buses to Tak (ordinary/2nd class air-con/1st class 40/56/72B, 1½ hours) and Kamphaeng (ordinary/2nd class air-con/1st class 39/55/70B, 1½ hours) leave every 40 minutes.

Departures to Bangkok (2nd class air-con/1st class/VIP 273/349/407B, six to seven hours) leave half-hourly from 7am to 11pm.

Buses to and from Chiang Mai (ordinary/2nd class air-con 167/234B, 5½ hours) via Tak are frequent from 7pm to 2am.

Four air-con buses leave daily for Chiang Rai (ordinary/2nd class air-con 186/260B, nine hours). The 9am one is a good choice for Sawankhalok. Otherwise buses to Sawankhalok (40B, 45 minutes) and Si Satchanalai (38B, one hour) leave every hour from around 6am to 6pm.

Other destinations include Khon Kaen (ordinary/2nd class air-con/1st class 179/251/322B, 6½ hours), Phrae (ordinary/2nd class air-con 83/116B, three hours, four times daily), Lampang (2nd class air-con 162B, four

hours) and Nan (ordinary/2nd class air-con/1st class 132/185/238B, four hours). There are also eight 12-seat minivans to Mae Sot (125B, three hours) between 8.30am and 5.30pm.

### Getting Around

A ride by *sāmlāw* around New Sukhothai should cost no more than 40B. *Sāwngthāew* run frequently from 6.30am to 6pm between New Sukhothai and Sukhothai Historical Park (15B, 30 minutes), leaving from Th Jarot Withithong near Mae Nam Yom. The sign is on the north side of the street, but *sāwngthāew* actually leave from the south side.

The best way to get around the historical park is by bicycle, which can be rented at shops outside the park entrance for 20B per day, or at any guesthouse in New Sukhothai (30B). Don’t rent the first beater bikes you see at the bus stop in the old city as the better bikes tend to be found at shops around the corner, closer to the park entrance. The park operates a tram service through the old city for 20B per person.

Transport from the bus terminal into the centre of New Sukhothai costs 40B in a chartered vehicle, or 10B per person in a shared *sāwngthāew*. *Sāmlāw* and motorbike taxis cost 30B. If going directly to the Old Sukhothai, *sāwngthāew* charge 80B.

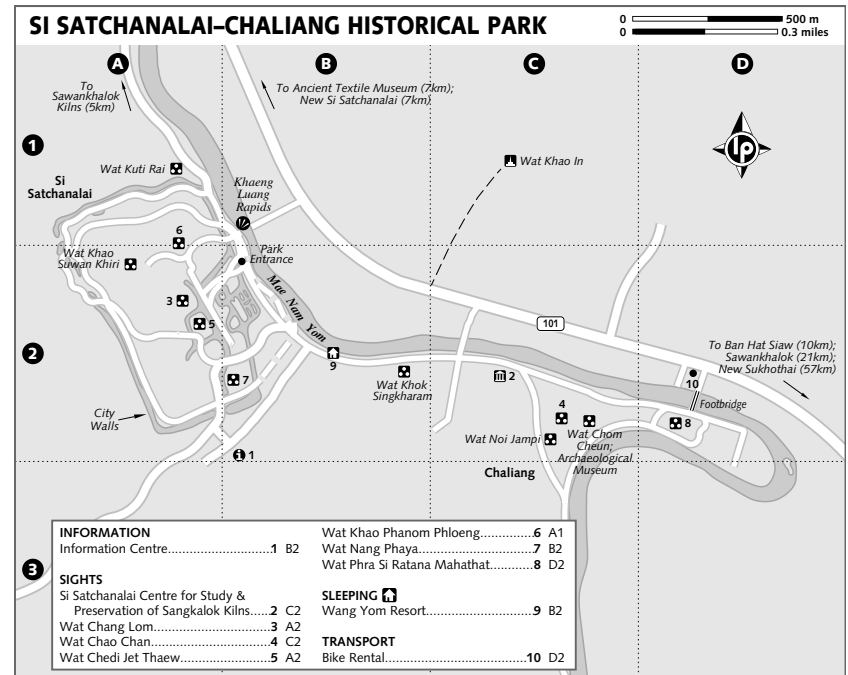
Motorbikes can be rented at Poo Restaurant (p407) and many guesthouses in New Sukhothai.

### AROUND SUKHOTHAI Si Satchanalai-Chaliang Historical Park

อุทยานประวัติศาสตร์ศรีสัชนาลัย/พะเยียง

If you have the time, don’t skip this portion of the Sukhothai World Heritage site. Bring your imagination and sense of adventure and you’re sure to love this more rustic collection of truly impressive ruins.

Set among the hills, the 13th- to 15th-century ruins in the old cities of Si Satchanalai and Chaliang, about 50km north of Sukhothai, are in the same basic style as those in the Sukhothai Historical Park, but the setting is more peaceful and almost seems untouched. Some people prefer the atmosphere here over that of Sukhothai. The **park** (admission 40B or free if you have the 150B inclusive ticket from Sukhothai, usable for 30 days; plus per bike/motorbike/car 10/30/50B; ☎ 8.30am-5pm) covers roughly 720 hectares and is surrounded by a 12m-wide moat. Chaliang, 1km southeast, is an older city site (dating to the 11th century), though its two temples date to the 14th century.



Those listed below represent only the more distinctive of the numerous Si Satchanalai ruins.

An **information centre** (☎ 8.30am-5pm) at the park distributes free park maps and has a small exhibit outlining the history and major attractions. There are bicycles to rent (20B) near the entrance gate to the park that are slightly better than those rented where the bus stops on the main road. A tram can also be taken around the park (20B).

The nearby town of Sawankhalok (p411) is the main supply centre for the area.

#### WAT CHANG LOM

วัดช้างล้อม

This fine temple, marking the centre of the old city of Si Satchanalai, has elephants surrounding a bell-shaped *chedi* that is somewhat better preserved than its counterpart in Sukhothai. An inscription says the temple was built by King Ramkhamhaeng between 1285 and 1291.

#### WAT KHAO PHANOM PHLOENG

วัดเขาพนมพลอง

On the hill overlooking Wat Chang Lom to the right are the remains of Wat Khao Ph-

anom Phloeng, including a *chedi*, a large seated Buddha and stone columns that once supported the roof of the *wihāan*. From this hill you can make out the general design of the once-great city. The slightly higher hill west of Phanom Phloeng is capped by a large Sukhothai-style *chedi* – all that remains of Wat Khao Suwan Khiri.

#### WAT CHEDI JET THAEW

วัดเจดีย์เจ็ดแถว

Next to Wat Chang Lom, these ruins contain seven rows of *chedi*, the largest of which is a copy of one at Wat Mahathat in Sukhothai. An interesting brick-and-plaster *wihāan* features barred windows designed to look like lathed wood (an ancient Indian technique used all over Southeast Asia). A *prasat* (small ornate building with a cruciform ground plan and needlelike spire) and *chedi* are stacked on the roof.

#### WAT NANG PHAYA

วัดนางพญา

South of Wat Chang Lom and Wat Chedi Jet Thaeaw, this *chedi* is Sinhalese in style and was built in the 15th or 16th century, a bit later than

the other monuments at Si Satchanalai. Stucco reliefs on the large laterite *wihāan* in front of the *chedi* – now sheltered by a tin roof – date from the Ayutthaya period when Si Satchanalai was known as Sawankhalok. Goldsmiths in the district still craft a design known as *naang pháyaa*, modelled after these reliefs.

### Wat Phra Si Ratana Mahathat

วัดพระศรีรัตนมหาธาตุ

These ruins at Chaliang consist of a large laterite *chedi* (dating back to 1448–88) between two *wihāan*. One of the *wihāan* holds a large seated Sukhothai Buddha image, a smaller standing image and a bas-relief of the famous walking Buddha, so exemplary of the flowing, boneless Sukhothai style. The other *wihāan* contains some less distinguished images.

There's a separate 10B admission for Wat Phra Si Ratana Mahathat.

### Wat Chao Chan

วัดเจ้าจันทร์

These wat ruins are about 500m west of Wat Phra Si Ratana Mahathat in Chaliang. The central attraction is a large Khmer-style tower similar to later towers built in Lopburi and probably constructed during the reign of Khmer King Jayavarman VII (1181–1217). The tower has been restored and is in fairly good shape. The roofless *wihāan* on the right contains the laterite outlines of a large standing Buddha that has all but melted away from exposure and weathering.

### Sawankhalok Kilns

เตาเผาสังคโลก

The Sukhothai-Si Satchanalai area was once famous for its beautiful pottery, much of which was exported to countries throughout Asia. In China – the biggest importer of Thai pottery during the Sukhothai and Ayutthaya periods – the pieces came to be called 'Sangkalok', a mispronunciation of Sawankhalok. Particularly fine specimens of this pottery can be seen in the national museums of Jakarta and Pontianak in Indonesia.

At one time, more than 200 huge pottery kilns lined the banks of Mae Nam Yom in the area around Si Satchanalai. Several have been carefully excavated and can be viewed at the **Si Satchanalai Centre for Study & Preservation of Sangkalok Kilns** (admission 30B). Two groups of kilns are open to the public: a kiln centre in

Chaliang with excavated pottery samples and one kiln; and a larger outdoor Sawankhalok Kilns site 5km northwest of the Si Satchanalai ruins. The exhibits are interesting despite the lack of English labels. These sites are easily visited by bicycle. Admission is included in the 150B all-inclusive ticket.

Sawankhalok pottery rejects, buried in the fields, are still being found. Shops in Sukhothai and Sawankhalok sell misfired, broken, warped and fused pieces.

### Sawanworanayok Museum

พิพิธภัณฑ์สวรรคโลก

In Sawankhalok town, near Wat Sawankhalam on the western bank of the river, this locally sponsored museum (☎ 0 5561 4333; 69 Th Phracharat; admission 30B; ☎ 8am–4.30pm Wed–Sun) holds thousands of 12th- to 15th-century artefacts, utensils, ceramic wares and Buddha images unearthed by local villagers and donated to the wat.

### Ban Hat Siaw

บ้านหาดเสี้ยว

This colourful village southeast of Si Satchanalai is home to the Thai Phuan (also known as Lao Phuan), a Tai tribal group that immigrated from the Xieng Khuang Province in Laos about 100 years ago when the Annamese and Chinese were in northeastern Laos.

The local Thai Phuan are famous for **hand-woven textiles**, particularly the *phàa sìn tiin jòk* (brocade-bordered skirts), which have patterns of horizontal stripes bordered by thickly patterned brocade. The men's *phàa khào-màa* (short sarong) from Hat Siaw, typically in dark plaids, are also highly regarded.

Practically every stilt house within the village has a loom underneath it; cloth can be purchased at the source or from shops in Sawankhalok. Vintage Hat Siaw textiles, ranging from 80 to 200 years old, can be seen at the **Ancient Textile Museum** (☎ 0 5536 0058; free admission; ☎ 7am–6pm) opposite the market in New Si Satchanalai, north of the ruins.

Another Thai Phuan custom is the use of **elephant-back** processions in local monastic ordinations; these usually take place in early April.

### Sleeping & Eating

#### SI SATCHANALAI-CHALIANG HISTORICAL PARK

**Wang Yom Resort** (Sunanthana; ☎ 0 5563 1380; bungalows 600–1000B; ☎) This collection of rustic, worn

bungalows in a mature garden lies just outside the Si Satchanalai-Chaliang Historical Park, 400m before the southeastern corner of the old city. Service lacks enthusiasm but the large restaurant (dishes 50B to 140B) is reportedly very good. Food and drink are also available at a coffee shop in the historical park until 6pm.

### SAWANKHALOK

This charming town about 20km south of the historical park has a couple of overnight options.

**Saengsin Hotel** (☎ 0 5564 1259-1424; 2 Th Thetsaban Damri 3; s/d from 220/360B; ☎) This hotel is about 1km south of the train station on the main street that runs through Sawankhalok. It has clean, comfortable rooms and a coffee shop.

A couple of other options also line the main drag.

This isn't a big town for eating; most food places sell noodles and *khào man kài* and not much else.

**Kung Nam** (dishes 40–70B; ☎ 10am–11pm) A Thai and Chinese garden restaurant on the outskirts of Sawankhalok towards Sukhothai, it's probably the best spot to chow down in Sawankhalok.

Sawankhalok's **night market** assembles along its main streets.

### Getting There & Away

#### BUS

Si Satchanalai-Chaliang Historical Park is off Rte 101 between Sawankhalok and new Si Satchanalai. From New Sukhothai, take a Si Satchanalai bus (38B, two hours) and ask to get off at 'meuang kào' (old city). Alternatively, catch the 9am bus to Chiang Rai, which costs the same but makes fewer stops. The last bus back to New Sukhothai leaves at 4.30pm.

There are two places along the left side of the highway where you can get off the bus and reach the ruins in the park; both involve crossing Mae Nam Yom. The first leads to a footbridge over Mae Nam Yom to Wat Phra Si Ratana Mahathat at Chaliang; the second crossing is about 2km further northwest just past two hills and leads directly into the Si Satchanalai ruins.

#### TRAIN

Sawankhalok's original train station is one of the main local sights. King Rama VI had a 60km railway spur built from Ban Dara (a small town on the main northern trunk) to Sawankhalok just so that he could visit the ruins.

Amazingly, there's a daily special express (train 3) from Bangkok to Sawankhalok (482B, seven hours), which leaves the capital at 10.50am, stops at Phitsanulok at 4pm and arrives in Sawankhalok at 5.50pm. Train 4 heads back to Bangkok at 7.40pm, arriving in the city at 3.30am. You can also hop this train to Phitsanulok (50B). It's a 'Sprinter', which means 2nd class air-con, no sleepers, and the fare includes dinner and breakfast. It is possible to book in advance via [www.railway.co.th](http://www.railway.co.th).

### Getting Around

You can rent **bicycles** (20B per day) from a shop at the gateway to Wat Phra Si Ratana Mahathat.

## KAMPHAENG PHET PROVINCE

### KAMPHAENG PHET

กำแพงเพชร

pop 27,500

Formerly known as Chakangrao or Nakhon Chum, Kamphaeng Phet (Diamond Wall) was once an important front line of defence for the Sukhothai kingdom but it is now mostly known for producing the tastiest *klúay khài* ('egg banana', a delicious kind of small banana) in Thailand. It's quite a nice place to spend a day or two wandering around the ruins and experiencing a small northern provincial capital that receives few tourists.

### Information

Most of the major banks also have branches with ATMs along the main streets near the river and on Th Charoensuk. There are a couple of other internet cafés in town on Th Teresa and Th Ratchadumnoen, otherwise try the main post office.

**Tourist information Centre** (☎ 8am–4.30pm) Next to Wat Phra Kaew; has some maps and pamphlets.

**Main post office** (Th Thesa) Just south of the old city. Has internet.

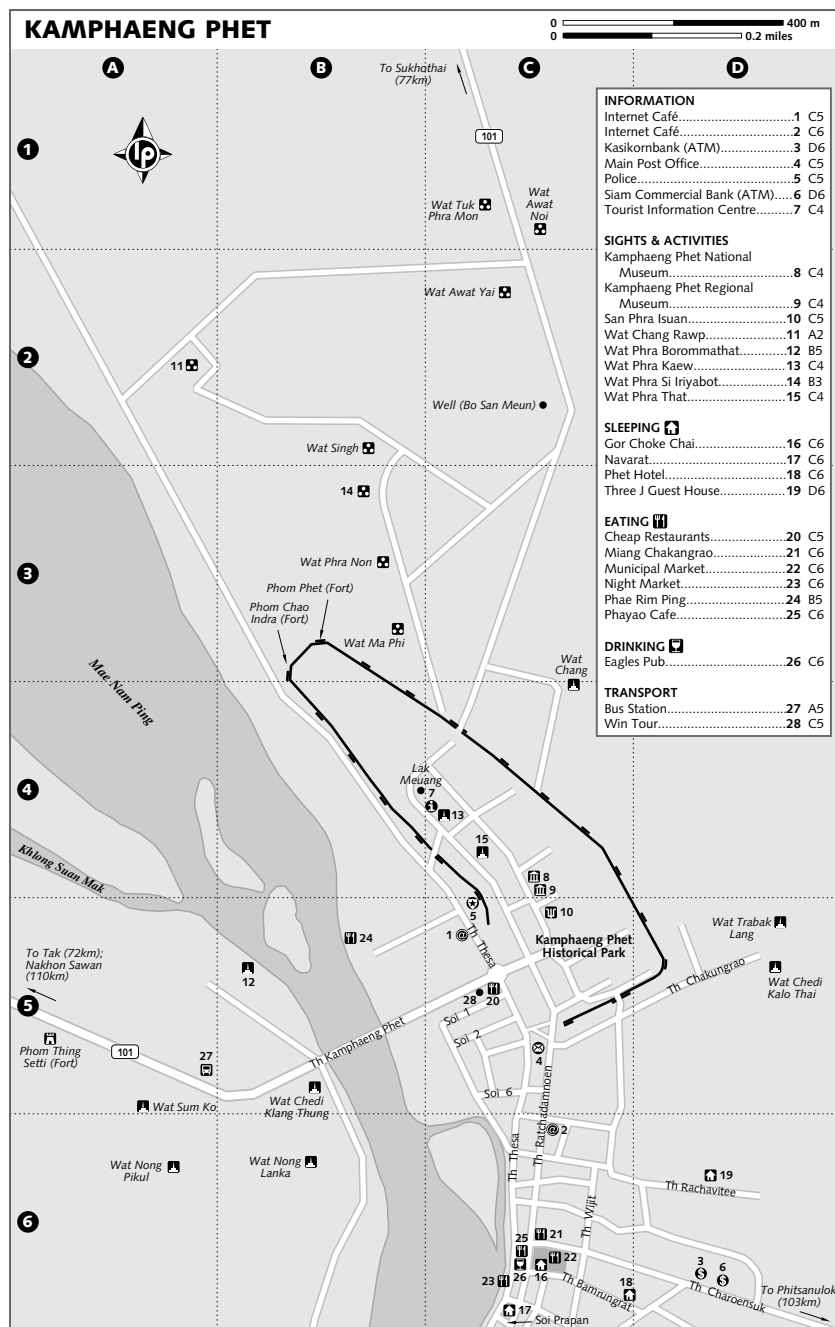
**Police** (☎ 0 5571 1199, emergency 1155)

### Sights

#### OLD CITY

เมืองเก่า

A Unesco World Heritage site, the **Kamphaeng Phet Historical Park** (☎ 0 5571 1921; admission 40B, bicycle/motorbike/sáamláw/car 10/20/30/50B; ☎ 8am–5pm)



encloses the old city site where you'll find **Wat Phra Kaew**, which used to be adjacent to the royal palace (now in ruins). It's not nearly as well restored as Sukhothai, but it's smaller, more intimate and less visited. Weather-corroded Buddha statues have assumed slender, porous forms that remind some visitors of the sculptures of Alberto Giacometti (a Swiss artist). About 100m southeast of Wat Phra Kaew is **Wat Phra That**, distinguished by a large round-based *chedi* surrounded by columns. This park is popular with joggers and walkers.

### KAMPHAENG PHET NATIONAL MUSEUM

พิพิธภัณฑ์สถานแห่งชาติกำแพงเพชร

The nearby **national museum** (☎ 0 5571 1570; admission 30B; ☎ 9am-noon & 1-4pm Wed-Sun) has the usual survey of Thai art periods downstairs. Upstairs there is a collection of artefacts from the Kamphaeng Phet area, including terracotta ornamentation from ruined temples and Buddha images in both the Sukhothai and Ayuthaya styles.

### KAMPHAENG PHET REGIONAL MUSEUM

พิพิธภัณฑ์เฉลิมพระเกียรติกำแพงเพชร

The **regional museum** (☎ 0 5572 2341; admission 10B; ☎ 9am-4pm) is a series of central, Thai-style wooden structures on stilts set among nicely landscaped grounds. There are three main buildings in the museum: one focuses on history and prehistory; one features displays about geography and materials used in local architecture; and the third houses an ethnological museum featuring encased displays of miniature doll-like figures representing various tribes. Push-button recordings in English and Thai explain the displays.

### WAT PHRA BOROMMATHAT

วัดพระบรมธาตุ

Across Mae Nam Ping are more neglected ruins in an area that was settled long before Kamphaeng Phet's heyday, although visible remains are postclassical Sukhothai. Wat Phra Borommathat has a few small *chedi* and one large *chedi* of the late Sukhothai period that is now crowned with a Burmese-style umbrella added early in the 20th century.

### SAN PHRA ISUAN

ศาลพระอิศวร

Near the Kamphaeng Phet Chaloe Phrakiat Museum, the San Phra Isuan (Shiva Shrine) has

a sandstone base upon which is a Khmer-style bronze sculpture of Shiva (Isvara). The image is a replica: the original is in the Kamphaeng Phet National Museum. In 1886, a tourist stole the idol's hands and head (they were returned).

### OTHER TEMPLES

The 40B admission fee to the Kamphaeng Phet Historical Park in the old city also includes access to the forested area just north of it called *Aranyik*. Here, the most notable temples are Wat Phra Si Iriyabot and Wat Chang Rawp.

Northeast of the old city walls, **Wat Phra Si Iriyabot** has the shattered remains of standing, sitting, walking and reclining Buddha images all sculpted in the classic Sukhothai style. Northwest of here, **Wat Chang Rawp** (Elephant-Encircled Temple) is just that – a temple with an elephant-butressed wall. Several other temple ruins – most of them little more than flat brick foundations, with the occasional weather-worn Buddha image – can be found in the same general vicinity.

### Sleeping

**Three J Guest House** (☎ 0 5571 3129; threejguest@hotmail.com; 79 Th Rachavitee; r 200-500B; ☎ ☎) This pleasant collection of bungalows in a pretty garden has a very hospitable and friendly host. Pathways lead to clean log bungalows with terraces. The cheapest ones share a clean bathroom and the more expensive have air-con. Bicycles and motorcycles are available for rent.

**Gor Choke Chai** (Kaw Chok Chai; ☎ 0 5571 1247; Th Charoensuk; r from 250B; ☎ ☎) The recently renovated Gor Choke Chai is a good budget choice with its large, clean rooms. Popular with Thai businessmen, it's in the centre of the new town not far from the municipal market.

**Phet Hotel** (☎ 0 5571 2810-5; 189 Th Bamrungrat; r 500-800B; ☎ ☎ ☎) Near the market, this comfortable hotel features spacious, well-maintained, modern rooms with views over Kamphaeng Phet. There is a small pool, a restaurant and bar. Look for the sign on the top of the building. The street-side sign is only in Thai script.

**Navarat** (Nawarat; ☎ 0 5571 1211; 2 Soi Prapan; r/st 600/950B; ☎ ☎) Set off the road, this five-storey hotel may lack style, but its carpeted rooms are clean and fairly comfortable. There is a coffee shop downstairs and some rooms have views.

## Eating

**Miang Chakngrao** (☎ 0 5571 1124; 273 Th Ratchadamnoen) Sells local sweets and snacks, particularly the shop's namesake, a fermented tea salad eaten with peanut-rice brittle.

**Phayao Cafe** (dishes 45-120฿; ☎ 10am-midnight) It may look closed with its heavily tinted windows, but inside you'll find a casual, family-friendly atmosphere and great ice cream.

**Phae Rim Ping** (☎ 0 5571 2767; dishes 40-140฿; ☎ 11am-midnight) This place is one of a few floating restaurants on the river.

A **night market** sets up every evening in front of the provincial offices near the old city walls and there are also some **cheap restaurants** near the roundabout. Inexpensive food stalls can be found in a larger **municipal market** (nr Th Wijit & Th Bamrungrat). Along Th Thesa across from Sirijit Park by the river are several family-friendly, air-con restaurants.

## Drinking

There are a number of discos with karaoke around Phet Hotel. Some of them feature live music on the weekends.

**Eagles Pub** (Th Bamrungrat; dishes 40-120฿; ☎ 8pm-1am) A pub with a Western theme, it serves a lot of whisky and a mixture of Thai and Western food. Sometimes the pub hosts live music.

## Getting There & Away

The bus terminal is 1km west of town. If coming from Sukhothai or Phitsanulok get off in the old city or at the roundabout on Th Teresa to save getting a *sǎwngthǎew* back into town. Most visitors arrive from Sukhothai (ordinary/2nd class air-con/1st class air-con 39/55/70฿, 1½ hours), Phitsanulok (ordinary/air-con 57/80฿, 2½ hours) or Tak (50฿, 1½ hours). Regular buses to/from Bangkok (ordinary/air-con/VIP 175/215/274฿, five hours) leave throughout the day. You can book tickets in advance at **Win Tour** (☎ 0 5571 1095; Th Kamphaeng Phet).

## Getting Around

The least expensive way to get from the bus station into town is to hop on a shared *sǎwngthǎew* (5฿ per person) to the roundabout across the river. From there take a *sǎmláw* anywhere in town for 20฿ to 30฿. It is worth renting a bicycle or motorbike to explore areas outside of the old city – Three J Guest House (p413) has both for rent.

# TAK PROVINCE

Tak is a wild and mountainous province. Its proximity to Myanmar has resulted in a complex history and unique cultural mix.

In the 1970s the mountains of western Tak were a hotbed of communist guerrilla activity. Since the 1980s the former leader of the local CPT movement has been involved in resort-hotel development and Tak is very much open to outsiders, but the area still has an untamed feeling about it. This province boasts Thailand's largest population of domesticated elephants, which are still commonly used by Karen villagers in western Tak for transport and agricultural tasks.

Western Tak has always presented a distinct contrast with other parts of Thailand because of strong Karen and Burmese cultural influences. The Thailand-Myanmar border districts of Mae Ramat, Tha Song Yang and Mae Sot are dotted with refugee camps, an outcome of the firefights between the Karen National Union (KNU) and the Myanmar government, which is driving Karen civilians across the border. At the time of writing it was estimated that there were 151,000 unregistered migrant workers from Burma in Tak Province alone.

The main source of income for people living on both sides of the border is legal and illegal international trade. The main smuggling gateways on the Thailand side are Tha Song Yang, Mae Sarit, Mae Tan, Wangkha, Mae Sot and Waley. One important contraband product is teak, cut by the Karen or the Karenni (Kayah) and then brought into Thailand from Myanmar on large tractor-trailers at night. As much as 200,000฿ in bribes per truckload is distributed among local Thai authorities, who conveniently look the other way. None of the trade is legal since the Thai government cut off all timber deals with the Burmese military in 1997.

The majority of Tak province is forested and mountainous and is an excellent destination for those wanting to trek. Organised trekking occurs, some further north out of Chiang Mai, most of it locally organised. There are Hmong, Musoe (Lahu), Lisu and White and Red Karen settlements throughout the west and north.

In Ban Tak, 25km upstream along Mae Nam Tak from Tak, you can visit **Wat Phra**

## AROUND TAK & MAE SOT



**Borommathat**, the original site of a Thai *chedi* that, according to legend, was constructed during the reign of King Ramkhamhaeng (1275-1317) to celebrate his elephant-back victory over King Sam Chon, ruler of an independent kingdom once based at or near Mae Sot. The wat's main feature is a large, slender, gilded *chedi* in the Shan style surrounded by numerous smaller but similar *chedi*. Many Thais flock to the temple each week in the belief that the *chedi* can somehow reveal to them the winning lottery numbers for the week.

Approximately 45km north of Tak via Rte 1 and then 17km west (between the Km 463 and Km 464 markers), via the road to Sam Ngao, is **Kheuan Phumiphon** (Bhumibol Dam), which

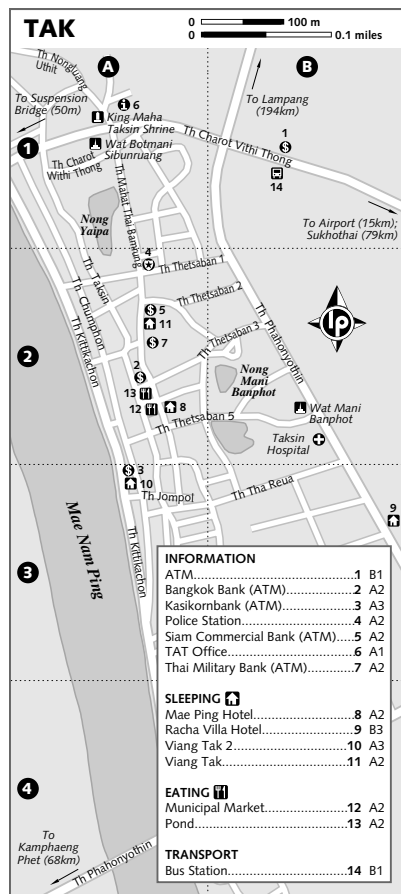
impounds Mae Nam Ping at a height of 154m, making it the tallest dam in Southeast Asia. The shores and islands of the reservoir are a favourite picnic spot for local Thais.

## TAK

๓๓

pop 49,200

Tak is not particularly interesting, but it's a good point from which to visit the Lan Sang and Taksin Maharat National Parks to the west or Kheuan Phumiphon to the north. It's also the best place to get up-to-date information about Mae Sot, Um Phang and border activity. Occasionally travellers find themselves stuck here for a night. Luckily there are a couple decent places to stay.



Although most of Tak exhibits nondescript, cement-block architecture, the southern section of the city harbours a few old teak homes. Residents are proud of the suspension bridge (for motorcycles, pedicabs, bicycles and pedestrians only) over Mae Nam Ping, which flows quite broadly here even in the dry season.

## Information

Several banks have branches along Th Mahat Thai Bamrung and Th Taksin, all of them with ATMs.

You can pick up brochures and some basic maps at the **TAT office** (☎ 0 5551 3584; www.tak.go.th; 193 Th Taksin; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm), but don't expect much more.

## Sleeping & Eating

Few people pause to spend the night in Tak, as most jump on the next bus to Mae Sot.

**Mae Ping Hotel** (☎ 0 5551 1807; 619 Th Taksin; s 110B, d 140-200B; ☎) Everyone's budget likes this place, but not everyone likes the super-worn and very basic rooms that have gone without repair for too long. Look at more than one room before handing over any baht. It's surprisingly quiet considering its location opposite the market.

**Racha Villa Hotel** (☎ 0 5551 2361; 307/1 Th Phahonyothin; r 220-300B; ☎) You'll get a good night's sleep here, but you won't write home about this plain 58-room hotel. The retro-looking rooms have more extras than you'd expect at these prices. The location is awkward and no English is spoken.

**Viang Tak 2** (☎ 0 5551 2507; www.viangtak hotel.com; 236 Th Jompol; r/ste 600-950/2100B; ☎) By far the best place in town, this smart eight-storey hotel has comfortable, well-maintained rooms with cable TV. Its coffee shop/restaurant has a river view, and there's a pool, conference room and an attached internet café.

**Viang Tak** (☎ 0 5551 1950; 25/3 Th Mahat Thai Bamrung; r 490B) is the older, bigger sibling of Viang Tak 2, and it features 100 rooms with cheaper rates.

You can buy food at the **municipal market** (Th Taksin; dishes 10-30B; ☎ 6am-6pm). **Pond** (Th Taksin; dishes 15-30B; ☎ 8am-3pm) is a simple place near the market specialising in Thai curries.

## Getting There & Away

Tak airport, 15km out of town towards Sukhothai on Hwy 12, wasn't operating at last look; the nearest functioning airport is Phitsanulok.

Tak's **bus station** (Th Charot Vithi Thong) is just outside town. A tük-tük will take you to the town centre for around 30B, but it's also possible to walk if you packed light. Frequent buses travel between Tak and Sukhothai (ordinary/2nd class air-con/1st class air-con 40/56/72B, 1½ hours).

There is also regular service to Lampang (ordinary/air-con 90/126B, three hours), Chiang Mai (ordinary/air-con 133/186B, four hours), Chiang Rai (ordinary/air-con 176/246B, seven hours).

Ordinary government buses depart for Bangkok (176B, 10 hours) three times daily, while a 2nd-class air-con bus (207B, eight hours) leaves once a day. There are four daily

1st-class air-con departures from Tak to Bangkok and one 10pm departure (275B, six hours) in the reverse direction.

Air-con buses to Mae Sot (74B) leave at 2pm, 4pm and 5pm. Minivans to Mae Sot leave almost hourly (53B, 1½ hours).

## AROUND TAK

### Taksin Maharat & Lan Sang National Parks

อุทยานแห่งชาติตากสินมหาราช

These small **national parks** (www.dnp.go.th; admission 400B) receive a steady trickle of visitors on weekends and holidays, but they are almost empty during the week. Taksin Maharat (established in 1981) covers 149 sq km; the entrance is 2km from the Km 26 marker on Rte 105/Asia Rte 1 (the so-called Pan-Asian Hwy, which would link Istanbul and Singapore if all the intervening countries allowed land crossings) to Mae Sot.

The park's most outstanding features are the 30m, nine-tiered **Nam Tok Mae Ya Pa** and a record-holding *tàbaak*, a dipterocarp that is 50m tall and 16m in circumference. Bird-watching is said to be particularly good here; known resident and migratory species include the tiger shrike, forest wagtail and Chinese pond heron.

Nineteen kilometres from Tak, Lan Sang National Park preserves a 104-sq-km area of rugged, 1000m-high granite peaks – part of the Tenasserim Range. A network of **trails** leads to several **waterfalls**, including the park's 40m-high namesake.

**Lan Sang National Park** (☎ 0 5551 9278; bungalows 400-4000B) rents rustic bungalows that can accommodate two to 36 people. Two-person tents (40B) are also available. **Taksin Maharat National Park** (☎ 0 5551 1429; r 1000-2400B) offers utilitarian rooms that sleep between four and 15 people. Taksin Maharat also has a **camping ground** (tent sites 20B). Food service can be arranged in both parks.

The best way to reach the parks is by private car, but the bus to Mae Sot will drop you on the road where you can easily walk to the park entrance. By car take Rte 1103 3km south off Rte 105. Some tour agencies in Mae Sot do trips to the parks.

### Kheuan Phumiphon

เขื่อนภูมิพล

This huge reservoir is a favourite canoeing, swimming, fishing and picnicking destina-

tion for Tak residents. The **Electrical Generating Authority of Thailand** (EGAT; Bangkok ☎ 0 2436 3179, Ban Phak Rap Rong Kheuan Phumiphon ☎ 0 5554 9509; multibed units 400-1500B) maintains several bungalows and longhouses. On weekends there is bus service from the Tak bus terminal (54B).

### Doi Muser Hilltribe Cultural Center

ศูนย์พัฒนาและส่งเสริมชาวเขาออกมุงเข

At the top of the mountain before you descend into Mae Sot is this small **research and cultural centre** (☎ 0 5551 2131, 0 5551 3614; Km 28 Th Tak-Mae Sot; bungalows 200-700B) where you can visit for the day, or spend the night. Here they grow and sell crops such as tea, coffee, fruits and flowers. Call ahead to find out about seeing a cultural performance. The temperature can go as low as 4°C in the winter. During November and December, *buu tong* (a kind of wild sunflower) blossom around the centre.

### MAE SOT

เม็สอ

Mae Sot is a Burmese-Chinese-Karen-Thai trading outpost that has become a small but simmering tourist destination. Although there aren't many formal sites to see in Mae Sot, and most tourists just come for a visa run, many end up staying longer than expected; this laid-back town has a vibrant market, good restaurants and a fascinating cultural mix.

Black-market trade between Myanmar and Thailand is the primary source of local revenue, with most transactions taking place in the districts of Mae Ramat, Tha Song Yang, Phop Phra and Um Phang. Mae Sot has also become the most important jade and gem centre along the border, with most of the trade controlled by Chinese and Indian immigrants from Myanmar.

Walking down the streets of Mae Sot, you'll see an interesting ethnic mixture – Burmese men in their *longyi* (sarongs), Hmong and Karen women in traditional hill-tribe dress, bearded Indo-Burmese men, Thai army rangers, and some foreign NGO workers. Shop signs along the streets are in Thai, Burmese and Chinese. Most of the temple architecture in Mae Sot is Burmese. The town's Burmese population is largely Muslim, while those living outside town are Buddhist and the Karen are mostly Christian.

Border skirmishes between Myanmar's central government and the weakening Karen and Kayah ethnic insurgencies can break out





at any time, sending thousands of refugees – and the occasional mortar rocket – across the Thai–Myanmar border, elements that add to the area's perceived instability.

The Thai-Myanmar Friendship Bridge links Mae Sot with Myawadi and the highway west to Mawlamyine (Moulmein) and Yangon.

### Information

Krung Thai Bank, Bank of Ayutthaya and Siam Commercial Bank all have ATMs and are conveniently located in the centre of town. International phone services can be found at Bai Fern restaurant (p421), the River Book Exchange and Se. Southeast Express Tours. There is no official tourist information or TAT office in Mae Sot, but good sources of information are Ban Thai Guest House (p420) and Khrua Canadian (p421).

**River Book Exchange** (Tourist Information; ☎ 0 5553 4700; Th Intharakhiri; 🕒 10am-6pm Mon-Fri) Has a fair collection of books to exchange and offers Thai lessons (five days 3000B, personal tutor) and some tourist information.

**Se. Southeast Express Tours** (Th Intharakhiri; per hr 25B) There are several internet cafés around town, but this is the biggest.

**Tourist police** (☎ 1155) Has an office at the market by the Friendship Bridge.

### Sights & Activities

See p424 for information about visiting Myawadi in Myanmar.

### WAT WATTANARAM

วัดวัฒนาราม  
At Ban Mae Tao, 3km west of Mae Sot on the road to the Thailand–Myanmar border, lies this Burmese temple, Wat Wattanaram (Phatanaram). Most associate this wat with its huge, modern Burmese-style reclining Buddha. In the main *wihāan* on the 2nd floor is a collection of Burmese musical instruments, including tuned drums and gongs.

### WAT PHRA THAT DOI DIN KIU (JI)

วัดพระธาตุคอกอยดิมทิว(จี)  
Wat Phra That Doi Din Kiu (Ji) is a forest temple 11km northwest of Mae Sot on a 300m-high hill overlooking Mae Nam Moei and Myanmar. It's a bit difficult for some to find, and during Myanmar's dry-season offensives against the KNU, this area is sometimes considered unsafe and the road to the temple is occasionally blocked by Thai rangers. Ask

in town about the current situation before heading up the road.

The highlight of this wat is a small *chedi* mounted on what looks like a boulder that has been balanced on the edge of a cliff. It is reminiscent of the Kyaiktiyo Pagoda in Myanmar.

If you're on a motorcycle, or have a car, take Hwy 105 to Wat Thani Watharun, turn right and drive 3km. The trail that winds up the hill to the *chedi* provides good views of the thick teak forests across the river in Myanmar. There are a couple of small limestone caves in the side of the hill on the way to the peak.

### HERBAL SAUNA

Wat Mani has separate herbal **sauna** (admission 20B; 🕒 3-7pm) facilities for men and women. The sauna volunteers also sell monk-made herbal medicines. The sauna is towards the back of the monastery grounds, past the monks' *kūti*.

### COOKERY COURSE

**Mo Mo & Bo Bo Cookery Course** (Borderline; ☎ 0 5554 6584; borderlineshop@yahoo.com; 674/14 Th Intharakhiri; 400B a day, 3 people min) Held at the Borderline Shop (p422) this course teaches Shan, Burmese and Karen dishes. Running from 8am to 12pm, it includes a trip to the market, food and drink preparation, a cook book, and sharing the results in the adjoining café.

### Tours

Several guesthouses arrange tours of the surrounding area. The staff working at the Khrua Canadian restaurant (p421) keep pretty good tabs on the different tours and can book tours with agencies out of Um Phang. Tours from Mae Sot run at about 1800B per person for day tours or 4500B for three-day/two-night trips – not including transport to Um Phang. Be sure to clarify exactly what is included in the price of your tour.

The following are the longest running and most reliable. See p427 for other tour options out of Um Phang.

**Eco-Trekking** (☎ 0 5554 4976; www.geocities.com /no4guesthouse; No 4 Guest House; 736 Th Intharakhiri) Mr Oom has extensive knowledge of flora and fauna (especially birds) and will design specialised tours based on your interests. One of his specialities is a challenging seven-day trek south to Sangklhaburi. Check the website for more details.

**Mae Sot Conservation Tour** (☎ 0 5553 2818; maesotco@cscoms.com; 415/17 Th Tang Kim Chiang) Runs educational tours to Karen and Hmong hill-tribe villages.

**Max One Tour** (☎ 0 5554 2942; www.maxonetour.com; Mae Sot Sq, Th Intharakhiri) Biggest company with the most elaborate adventure-centric tours.

**Se. Southeast Express** (☎ 0 5554 7048; 522/3 Th Intharakhiri) Does the usual three- to four-day tours to Um Phang and around, as well as one-day tours around Mae Sot.

## Festivals & Events

A big **Thai-Burmese gem fair** is held in April. Around this time Thai and Burmese boxers meet for an annual **Thai-boxing competition**, held somewhere outside town in the traditional style. Matches are fought in a circular ring and go for five rounds; the first four rounds last three minutes, the fifth has no time limit. With their hands bound in hemp, the boxers fight till first blood or knockout. You'll have to ask around to find the changing venue for the annual slugfest.

## Sleeping BUDGET

The lodging market is changing and growing in Mae Sot, especially in the budget category. Most places cater for NGO workers that are staying longer-term and often offer weekly or monthly discounts.

**No 4 Guest House** (☎ 0 5554 4976; www.geocities.com/no4guesthouse/; 736 Th Intharakhiri; dm/s/d 50/80/100B) This large teak house has very basic rooms with mattresses on the floor. Shared bathrooms are down steep stairs. It's fine if you are short on baht and don't mind the 11pm curfew.

**Kame Guest House** (☎ 0 5553 5868; kame@picosystems.net; 119/22 Th Chidwana; dm/s/d 60/120/150B; 📺) Tidy but stark, this guesthouse overlooking the bus terminal has clean dorms and 120B rooms with just tatami mats to sleep on. The more expensive rooms have beds and a fan. All share hot-water bathrooms. You can rent a bicycle here for 30B a day.

**Green Guest House** (☎ 0 5553 3207; 406/8 Th Intharakhiri; dm/s/d from 80/150/250B) Run by a teacher and her husband, this peaceful, friendly guesthouse offers a variety of good-sized rooms with TV and decent furniture. It's great value, centrally located and has a pretty garden.

**Bai Fern Guesthouse** (☎ 0 5553 1349; Th Intharakhiri; s/d 150/250) The newly renovated Bai Fern has superclean, large, if rather plain rooms, right

in the middle of town. All have well-equipped shared bathrooms. The service is very friendly and professional with the use of a kitchen, fridge, wireless internet and TV in the communal area.

**Siam Hotel** (☎ 0 5553 1376; 185 Th Prasat Withi; r 200-500B; 📺) Although it's basically a truckers' and gem traders' haunt, local rumour has it that Myanmar intelligence agents frequent the Siam. It also sees a fair number of families and has clean, if stark, rooms.

**DK Mae Sot Square Hotel** (Duang Kamol Hotel; ☎ 0 5554 2648/9; 298/2 Th Intharakhiri; r 250-450B; 📺 📺) The vast rooms in this plain, three-storey hotel range from those with fans, hospital-like beds and cold water, to more comfortable air-con rooms with hot water, a small balcony and some furniture to fill up the space. There is a bookshop next door that occasionally has England-language titles.

**First Hotel** (☎ 0 5553 1233; fax 0 5553 1340; 44 Th Intharakhiri; r 270-450B; 📺) Just off the main street, this hotel appears to be in shambles from the outside but inside the ceilings and walls of heavy carved teak make it imposingly grand. Large rooms are not at all grand but have cable TV and lots of furniture.

**Ban Thai Guest House** (☎ 0 5553 1590; banthai\_mth@hotmail.com; 740 Th Intharakhiri; r 300-550B; 📺) Popular among volunteers, this neighbourhood of five converted Thai houses down a hibiscus-lined alley has spacious, very stylish wooden rooms with Thai style furniture, axe lounging pillows and Thai textiles. The cheaper rooms have plentiful shared bathrooms; the more expensive have en suite bathrooms, large terraces and some come with a lounge/office. Shared sitting areas have cable TV, DVDs and free wireless internet. There are bicycles and motorbikes to rent and a laundry service.

## MIDRANGE & TOP END

**Rujira** (☎ 0 5554 4969; rujira\_tom@hotmail.com; 3/18 Th Buakjoon; r 350-1000B; 📺 📺) This fantastic value hotel south of the centre, has spacious, light rooms with lots of homely touches. Cable TV, large fridges, good toiletries, bathrobes and slippers are included. More expensive rooms have romantic four-poster beds and sofas. The many communal areas include hammocks around a fountain and a *saalaa* (open-sided covered meeting hall or resting place) with axe cushions. There is a restaurant, cute coffee shop, two conference rooms, wi-

fi access throughout the hotel, and bicycles are free to use. Call for pick up from the bus station (50B).

**Central Mae Sod Hill Hotel** (☎ 0 5553 2601; www.centralhotelsresorts.com; 100 Th Asia; r/ste incl breakfast 1100/2900B; 📺 📺) This resort on the highway to Tak is 10 minutes' drive from the town centre. Rooms are spacious and have all the four-star amenities. There's a pool, tennis courts, good restaurant, disco and a bar.

## Eating

Mae Sot is a culinary crossroad with plenty of veggie-friendly options.

## RESTAURANTS

**Casa Mia** (☎ 08 7204 4701; Th Don Kaew; dishes 30-160B; 📺 8am-10pm) Tucked down a side street, this simple Italian restaurant is heartily recommended by Italian NGO workers. Home-made pasta, pizzas and focaccia are served here. Try dishes like spinach and ricotta ravioli with sage and butter sauce. They also do a wicked chocolate cake. Lots of vegetarian options plus Thai and Burmese food is on offer. Guesthouse deliveries are also available.

**Aiya** (☎ 0 5553 0102; 533 Th Intharakhiri; dishes 30-160B; 📺 10am-10pm) Opposite Bai Fern Guest House, Aiya is a simple place that serves fantastic Burmese food, which is particularly strong on vegetarian options. Try dishes like tealeaf salad with mixed fried peas or the aubergine curry. The sea bass with ginger sauce is good too. Aiya also delivers.

**T Corner** (☎ 0 5553 4297; 557/2 Th Intharakhiri; dishes 35-60B; 📺 8am-10pm) This new, fresh looking café has a decked terrace with parasols and a small air-con section. Serving large breakfast, good coffee, sandwiches, salads and Thai food, this is a popular gathering spot.

**Khrua Canadian** (☎ 0 5553 4659; 3 Th Sri Phanit; dishes 40-100B; 📺 7am-10.30pm) The coffee is strong, the servings are large, the menu is varied, the prices are reasonable and local information is abundant here. It's also the best place to catch up on international news.

**Khao Mao Khao Fang** (☎ 0 5553 3607; 382 Mu 5, Mae Pa; dishes 50-90B; 📺 10am-10pm) North of town between the Km 1 and Km 2 markers on the road to Mae Ramat, this is the place for a romantic evening out. A Thai botanist designed this open-air restaurant to make it feel as if you're dining in the forest. The Thai cuisine is equally inventive, with such specialities as *yam hêt khon* (a spicy salad made with for-

est mushrooms only available in September and October) and *müu khôo mào* (a salad of home-cured sausage, peanuts, rice shoots, lettuce, ginger, lime and chilli).

**Bai Fern** (☎ 0 5553 3343; Th Intharakhiri; dishes 60-240B; 📺 7.30am-10pm) The cosy, wood-furnished Bai Fern has a pleasant atmosphere and is popular all day long. Many come here for the good coffee and bread. The steaks, salads and Burmese curries have been recommended too. Peruse the *Bangkok Post* or the *Nation* while you wait.

## QUICK EATS

For cheap Thai and Burmese takeaway, head to the **day market** behind the Siam Hotel or to the back of the **night market** (furthest away from Th Prasat Withi). Look out for a favourite local snack, *krabawng jaw* (Burmese for 'fried crispy'), a sort of vegetable tempura. Another local food speciality is *küaytiaw meuang*, a rich bowl of rice noodles covered with sliced pork, greens, peanuts, chilli and green beans – very similar to *küaytiaw sùkhòthai*. Look for rice-noodle vendors along Th Prasat Withi.

## Drinking & Entertainment

Mae Sot has a lively nightlife that heats up at the weekends.

**Kung's Bar** (Th Intharakhiri) Lively on Friday and Saturday nights, this laid-back popular place has a chunky wooden bar, pool table, and a choice of outside or inside seating. Good Thai food is also available.

**Crocodile Tear** (Th Intharakhiri; 📺 3pm-1am) Features an extensive selection of mixed drinks, folkly live music and many drunken travellers.

**Lucky Music Room** (Th Prasat Withi) For more local flavour, you can dance yourself silly at Lucky Music Room, which gets going around 10.30pm and sometimes charges a cover (20B).

## Shopping

Don't miss the large, lively **municipal market** in Mae Sot. Behind the Siam Hotel, the market sells some interesting stuff, including Burmese clothing, cheap cigarettes, roses, Indian food, sturdy Burmese blankets and velvet thong slippers from Mandalay.

Mae Sot is most famous for its gems trade, and is the most important jade and gem centre along the border. Check out the hustle and bustle among the glittering treasures in the shops and stalls along Th Prasat Withi (beside

the Siam hotel). If looking to buy be prepared to bargain hard.

**Borderline Shop** (☎ 0 5554 6584; borderlineshop@yahoo.com; 674/14 Th Intharakhiri; ☎ 8am–6pm Tue–Sun) Selling arts and craft items made by refugee women, the profits of this shop go back into a woman's collective and a child-assistance foundation. All of the products, such as bags, clothes and household items, have labels on them so you know where the money is going. Upstairs a gallery sells paintings. A cookery course (see p419) and outdoor café are also located here.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

The Mae Sot airport was not operating at the time of writing.

### BUS & SÄWNGTHÄEW

If you're heading anywhere other than Bangkok, go to Tak (minivan/air-con bus 53/74B,

1½ hours) where you can easily connect with buses headed to Lampang, Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai and Mae Sai. Minivans leave for Tak hourly from the station just north of the police station. Buses leave less frequently from the same station. Orange säwngthäew serving the northern destinations of Mae Sarit (70B, 2½ hours), Tha Song Yang (60B, 1½ hours) and Mae Sariang (170B, six hours) also leave this station hourly between 6am and noon.

First-class air-con buses run between Bangkok and Mae Sot six times daily (365B, nine hours); 2nd-class air-con buses (284B, nine hours) have similar departures. VIP buses (24 seats) to/from Bangkok leave four times daily (565B, eight hours). These leave from the bus station that is around 2km out of town by Th Asia. A new bus terminal near the airport was being completed at the time of writing. All buses will stop here when it is finished – reportedly by late 2007. Blue säwngthäew to

Um Phang (120B, four hours) leave hourly between 7am and 3pm from an office off the southern end of Th Sri Phanit.

## Getting Around

Most of Mae Sot can be seen on foot. Regular säwngthäew serve surrounding communities including Moei (10B).

**Jit Motorcycle** (Th Prasat Withi; motorcycles per day 160B) rents out motorcycles. Make sure you test ride a bike before renting. Ban Thai guesthouse also rents out motorbikes (see p406). Cars and vans can be rented for around 1200B a day; ask at any hotel or Bai Fern restaurant (p421).

Motorcycle taxis and sämlaw charge 20B for trips around town.

## AROUND MAE SOT Waley

บ้านวะเลย์

Thirty-six kilometres from Mae Sot, Rte 1206 splits southwest off Rte 1090 at Ban

Saw Oh and terminates 25km south at the border town of Waley, an important smuggling point.

The Burmese side was once one of two main gateways to Kawthoolei, the Karen nation, but in 1989 the Yangon government ousted the KNU. Until the Thai government cut off all timber trade with Myanmar's military government, teak was the main border trade. Nowadays there's a brisk trade in teak furniture instead.

One can visit hill-tribe villages near **Ban Chedi Kok**, or the **Highland Farm and Gibbon Refuge** (www.members.tripod.com/highlandfarm; Km 42.8, Rte 1090) near Phop Phra. The latter is a private facility that cares for gibbons and other animals that have been rescued from captivity. It is possible to volunteer and live at the sanctuary, but there is a three-day minimum at a charge of US\$25 per person per day, or US\$600 per month. The fee includes a very nice room and three meals per day.

## BURMESE REFUGEES & MIGRANTS

Burmese refugees first crossed into Thailand in 1984, when the Burmese army penetrated the ethnic Karen state and established bases near the Thai–Burma border, from where they launched forced relocation campaigns of the indigenous populations. Large numbers of civilian ethnic minority populations, students and pro-democracy advocates were forced into Thailand following the suppression of pro-democracy demonstrations in 1988 and the overturned 1990 elections. Today, refugees continue to cross the border to escape from ongoing fighting and persecution in eastern Burma.

At present, over 151,000 Burmese refugees live in relative safety in nine refugee camps scattered along the border. In these camps the Thai government allows international organisations to provide humanitarian assistance, including health care and schooling.

Many who flee Burma are not permitted to be registered refugees if not running from active fighting. Those who cross the border because of politically induced economic hardship or human rights violations often become migrant workers, with a precarious political and legal status. Approximately two million Burmese migrant workers and their families live in Thailand – often at way below subsistence levels – performing farm, factory, fishery, construction and domestic work. They are extremely vulnerable to exploitation by employers and deportation by officials, and frequently lack access to basic educational and health services.

It is possible for migrant workers from the region to be legally registered, obtain non-Thai identification cards and be issued work permits once employment is secured. Migrants are allowed to work for one year and the work permits have to be renewed on a yearly basis. However, the majority of the migrants are not registered, as it is an expensive and unclear process and the employer needs to cover some of the costs.

According to Thai government policy, migrant children in Thailand have a right to basic education of up to 12 years, regardless of their nationality, legal status and documentation. Yet many challenges remain to making this law a practical reality for migrant children. These include their lack of legal status making them vulnerable to deportation, language differences and difficulty in accessing transport to the schools. Migrants and registered workers can access a national health insurance scheme, but this is largely unattainable for the majority of migrants, partly because most aren't registered and their legal status makes them avoid Thai institutions. Consequently,

many grass roots and international nongovernmental organisations are actively working to bridge this gap in health care, often in cooperation with provincial health authorities.

To find out more about the refugees and migrants, as well as the situation in Burma, useful sites are www.burmanet.org and www.irrawaddy.org.

*Thanks to the International Rescue Community (www.theirc.org)*

## HOW TO HELP?

Although many Thai and foreign volunteers have come to the refugees' aid, the camps are very much in need of outside assistance. Tourists, both Thai and foreign, are no longer permitted to visit the camps unless working formally with an aid organisation. However, there are various ways to help:

**Mae Tao Clinic** (Dr Cynthia's Clinic; ☎ 0 5556 3644; www.maetaoclinic.org, www.burmachildren.org) While many of Burma's refugees that flood over the border end up in refugee camps with access to medical care; those who don't are in a precarious position. The Mae Tao Clinic was established in 1989 by Dr Cynthia Maung, herself a Karen refugee, to meet the health needs of these Burmese migrants. The clinic gives free medical treatment to around 50,000 Burmese migrants a year. One of the best and direct ways of offering help is by donating money to the clinic. Take a säwngthäew to the clinic, which is halfway between Mae Sot and the Friendship Bridge. Here there is a desk with a 'Public Relations Center' sign, where you can give money in return for a receipt. It is also possible to volunteer at the clinic if you apply in advance. Most of the volunteers are health professionals doing internships but there are some English teaching opportunities. In both cases the minimum volunteering period is 3 months. Email win7@loxinso.co.th for more information.

**Burma Volunteer Programme** (www.geocities.com/maesotbvp) This volunteer programme was set up to provide English teaching to different Burmese social, political and ethnic groups along the Thai–Burmese border, to enable communication of their situation with the international community, and to facilitate access to additional educational opportunities. Teaching placements are for a minimum of three months. As well as English training, volunteers may get involved in editing publications or practical skills training. Placements are mainly in Mae Sot and around, but positions in Mae Hong Son, Mae Sariang and Chiang Mai are possible.

**Ban Thai Guest House** (p420) Ask at this guesthouse about other volunteering options. Teaching is often in demand, and with 40 schools in and around Mae Sot, an informal teaching post may be arranged. So as not to be disruptive, the minimum commitment is usually one month.

**GETTING THERE & AWAY**

Sǎwngthǎew to Phop Phra (40B) and Waley (45B) depart from Mae Sot every half-hour, between 6am and 6pm, from the same place as the sǎwngthǎew to Um Phang. If you go by motorcycle or car, follow Rte 1090 south-east towards Um Phang and after 36km take Rte 1206 southwest. From this junction it's 25km to Waley; the last 10km of the road are unpaved. Your passport may be checked at a police outpost before Waley.

**Border Market & Myawadi**

ตลาดริมเมย/เมียววดี

Experience a slice of Myanmar, or just go for the sake of an instant 30-day visa, by crossing the Mae Nam Moei to Myawadi. Immigration procedures are taken care of at the **Thai immigration booth** (☎: 8.30am-4.30pm) at the Friendship Bridge, although if you have any problems there's another immigration office in the nearby Mae Moei Shopping Bazaar. It takes around 15 minutes to finish all the paperwork to leave Thailand officially, and then you're free to walk across the arched 420m Friendship Bridge.

At the other end of the bridge is a rustic **Myanmar immigration booth**, where you'll fill out permits for a one-day stay, pay a fee of US\$10 or 500B and leave your passports as a deposit. Then you're free to wander around Myawadi as long as you're back at the bridge by 4.30pm to pick up your passport and check out with immigration. On your return to Thailand, the Thai immigration office at the bridge will give you a new 30-day tourist visa (p753).

Before taking the 6km sǎwngthǎew trip to the Friendship Bridge, ask about the border situation in Mae Sot. At the time of writing the crossing was closed for a week due to the September 2006 coup. In addition, sporadic relations between Myanmar and Thailand can sometimes cause the border to close for a few days. If the border is closed and your 30-day visa has run out, it is possible to get a one-day extension for free at the immigration office. For each day's extension after that it costs 500B.

There is a **market** about 100m from the river on the Thai side that legally sells Burmese goods – dried fish and shrimp, dried bamboo shoots, mung beans, peanuts, woven-straw products, teak furniture, thick cotton blankets, lacquerware, tapestries, wooden furniture, jade and gems. However, it's not one of the more exciting markets in Thailand,

and the Mae Sot market is much more lively. You can also buy black-market *kyat* (Burmese currency) here at favourable rates.

**MYAWADI**

เมียววดี

Myawadi is a fairly typical Burmese town, with a number of monasteries, schools, shops and so on. The most important temple is **Shwe Muay Wan**, a traditional bell-shaped *chedi* gilded with many kilos of gold and topped by more than 1600 precious and semiprecious gems. Surrounding the main *chedi* are 28 smaller *chedi*, and these in turn are encircled by 12 larger ones. Colourful shrines to Mahamuni Buddha, Shin Upagot and other Buddhist deities follow the typical Mon and central-Burmese style, with lots of mirrored mosaics.

Another noted Buddhist temple is **Myikyaungon**, called Wat Don Jarakhe in Thai and named for its crocodile-shaped sanctuary. A hollow *chedi* at Myikyaungon contains four marble Mandalay-style Buddhas around a central pillar, while niches in the surrounding wall are filled with Buddhas in other styles, including several bronze Sukhothai-style Buddhas. Myawadi's 1000-year-old earthen city walls, probably erected by the area's original Mon inhabitants, can be seen along the southern side of town.

It might sound like Myawadi isn't all that different than Thailand – temples, *chedi* and Buddhas – but as soon as you step off the bridge, you'll note the differences. As self-proclaimed guides and energetic sǎamlǎw drivers gather around lone travellers in hopes of a few extra baht, you'll feel just how different life is on this side of the river. Few motorised vehicles travel the barely paved main avenue, and just about every woman has something large balanced on her head. Because of long-time commercial, social and religious links between Mae Sot and Myawadi, many local residents can speak some Thai.

**GETTING THERE & AWAY**

Sǎwngthǎew frequently go to the border (10B), 6km west of Mae Sot: ask for Rim Moei (Edge of the Moei). The last sǎwngthǎew going back to Mae Sot leaves Rim Moei at 5pm.

**UM PHANG & AROUND**

อุ้มผาง

Route 1090 goes south from Mae Sot to Um Phang, 150km away. This stretch of road used to be called the 'Death Highway' be-

cause of the guerrilla activity in the area that hindered highway development. Those days ended in the 1980s, but lives are still lost because of brake failure or treacherous turns on this steep, winding road through incredible mountain scenery.

Along the way there are short hikes off the highway to two waterfalls, **Nam Tok Thararak**

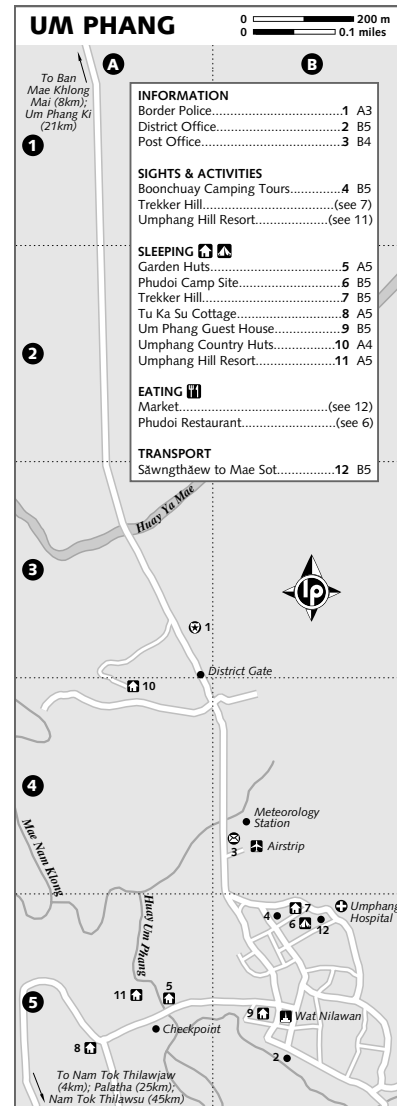
(26km from Mae Sot) and **Nam Tok Pha Charoen** (41km). Nam Tok Thararak streams over limestone cliffs and calcified rocks with a rough texture that makes climbing the falls easy. It's been made into a park of sorts, with benches right in the stream at the base of the falls for cooling off and a couple of outhouse toilets nearby; on weekends food vendors set up here.

The eucalyptus-lined dirt road leaves the highway between the Km 24 and Km 25 markers. A side road at the Km 48 marker leads to a group of government-sponsored hill-tribe villages (Karen, Lisu, Hmong, Mien, Lahu). Just beyond Ban Rom Klao 4 – roughly midway between Mae Sot and Um Phang – is a very large Karen and Burmese refugee village (called Um Piam) with around 20,000 refugees that were moved here from camps around Rim Moei. There are also several Hmong villages.

Sitting at the junction of Mae Nam Klong and Huay Um Phang, Um Phang is an overgrown village populated mostly by Karen. Many Karen villages in this area are very traditional, and elephants are used as much as oxen for farm work. *Yaeng* (elephant saddles) and other tack used for elephant wrangling are a common sight on the verandas of Karen houses outside of town. You'll also see plenty of **elephants** in other Karen villages throughout the district. The name for the district comes from the Karen word *umpha*, a type of bamboo container in which travelling Karen carried their documents to show to Thai border authorities.

An interesting hike can be done that follows the footpaths northeast of the village through rice fields and along Huay Um Phang to a few smaller Karen villages. At the border where Amphoe Um Phang meets Myanmar, near the Thai-Karen villages of Ban Nong Luang and Ban Huay, is a Karen refugee village inhabited by more than 500 Karen who originally hailed from Htikabler village on the other side of border.

South of Um Phang, towards Sangkhlaburi in Kancharaburi province, **Um Phang Wildlife Sanctuary** (admission 400B) is a Unesco World Heritage site. One of its most popular attractions is Nam Tok Thilawsu (p426), the largest waterfall in Thailand. Um Phang Wildlife Sanctuary links with the Thung Yai Naresuan National Park and Huay Kha Kaeng Wildlife Sanctuary (another Unesco World Heritage



site), as well as Khlong Lan and Mae Wong National Parks to form Thailand's largest wildlife corridor and one of the largest intact natural forests in Southeast Asia.

### Information

There is no bank in Um Phang and businesses are not equipped to deal with credit cards, so bring all the cash you'll need with you. There's a **post office**, which has a couple of long-distance phones. The Umphang Hill Resort (p428) has a slow internet connection for 40B per hour that nonguests can use. Places in town near Wat Nilawan offer the same connection for 20B per hour.

### Sights & Activities

#### NAM TOK THILAWSU

น้ำตกทีลอซู

In Amphoe Um Phang you can arrange trips down Mae Nam Mae Klong to Nam Tok Thilawsu and Karen villages – inquire at any guesthouse. Typical three-day excursions include a raft journey along the river from Um Phang to the falls, then a two-day trek from the falls through the Karen villages of **Khotha** and **Palatha**, where a 4WD picks up trekkers and returns them to Um Phang (25km from Palatha by road).

Some people prefer to spend two days on the river; the first night at a cave or hot springs along the river before Thilawsu and a second night at the falls. On the third day you can cross the river by elephant to one of the aforementioned villages to be met by a truck and returned to Um Phang. Or you can continue 20km further south along the road to Palatha to the Hmong village of **Kanqae Khi**. On the way back to Um Phang from Palatha you can stop off at **Nam Tok Thilawjaw**, which tumbles over a fern-covered cliff.

The scenery along the river is stunning, especially after the rainy season (November and December) when the 200m to 400m limestone cliffs are streaming with water and Nam Tok Thilawsu is at its best. This waterfall is Thailand's largest, measuring an estimated 200m high and up to 400m wide during the rainy season. There's a shallow cave behind the falls and several levels of pools suitable for swimming. Part of Um Phang Wildlife Sanctuary, Thais consider Nam Tok Thilawsu to be the most beautiful waterfall in the country.

You can **camp** at the Um Phang Wildlife Sanctuary headquarters near the falls any

time of year. Between December and May there are also rooms available for 150B per person, but you must bring your own food. The 1.8km trail between the sanctuary headquarters and the falls has been transformed into a self-guided nature tour, with the addition of well-conceived educational plaques. Surrounding the falls on both sides of the river are Thailand's thickest stands of natural forest, and the hiking in the vicinity of Nam Tok Thilawsu can be superb. The forest here is said to contain more than 1300 varieties of palm; giant bamboo and strangler figs are commonplace, and the orchid tree (*Bauhinia variegata*) can even be seen along the road to Palatha.

Between December and June you can also drive to the falls over a rough 47km road from Um Phang, suitable for 4WD or a skilled dirt-bike rider only. Or follow the main paved road south of Um Phang to Km 19; the walk to the falls is a stiff four hours from here via **Mo Phado** village. A *sawnghaew* goes to the Km 19 marker from Um Phang once daily; ask for *kii-loh sip kao* and expect to pay 20B to 25B per person.

#### RAFTING

Um Phang Khi is a 'new' area for rafting, northeast of Um Phang. Officially there are 47 (some rafting companies claim 67) sets of rapids rated at class III (moderate) and class IV (difficult) during the height of the rainy season. The rafting season for Um Phang Khi is short – August to October only – as other times of year the water level isn't high enough. Rafting trips arranged in Um Phang typically cost 3500B for a two-night, three-day programme, or 4000B if booked in Mae Sot. See Tours (opposite) for more information.

#### LETONGKHU TO SANGKHLABURI

เลตองคภู/ถ้ำมกอดสังขละบุรี

From Ban Mae Khlong Mai, just a few kilometres north of Um Phang via the highway to Mae Sot, a graded dirt road (Rte 1167) heads southwest along the border to **Beung Kleung** (sometimes spelt Peung Kleung) – a Karen, Burmese, Indo-Burmese, Talaku and Thai trading village where buffalo carts are more common than motorcycles. The picturesque setting among spiky peaks and cliffs is worth the trip even if you go no further. Impressive **Nam Tok Ekaratcha** is an hour's walk away. *Sawnghaew* from Um Phang usually make a

trip to Beung Kleung once a day, and it's possible to stay at the village clinic or in a private home for a donation of 100B per person. On the way you can stop off at the small, traditional Karen village of **Ban Thiphochi**.

Four hours' walk from here along a rough track (passable by 4WD in the dry season), near the Myanmar border on the banks of Mae Nam Suriya next to Sam Rom mountain, is the culturally singular, 109-house village of **Letongkhu** (Leh Tawng Khu).

According to what little anthropological information is available, the villagers, although for the most part Karen in language, belong to the Lagu or Talaku sect, said to represent a form of Buddhism mixed with shamanism and animism. Letongkhu is one of only six such villages in Thailand; there are reportedly around 30 more in Myanmar. Each village has a spiritual and temporal leader called a *pu chaik* (whom the Thais call *reusii* – 'rishi' or 'sage') who wears his hair long – usually tied in a topknot – and dresses in white, yellow or brown robes, depending on the subject.

The current *pu chaik* at Letongkhu is the 10th in a line of 'white-thread' priests dating back to their residence in Myanmar. The sage's many male disciples also wear their hair in topknots (often tied in cloth) and may wear similar robes. All *reusii* abstain from alcohol and are celibate. The priests live apart from the village in a temple and practise traditional medicine based on herbal healing and ritual magic. Antique elephant tusks are kept as talismans.

Evangelistic Christian missionaries have infiltrated the area and have tried to convert the Talaku, thus making the Talaku sensitive to outside visitation. Before heading out here call **Ban Lae Tongku** (☎ 05556 1008) to make sure this unique community will welcome your visit. Travellers are said to have been turned away upon arrival. If you do visit Letongkhu, take care not to enter any village structures without permission or invitation. Likewise, do not take photographs without permission. If you treat the villagers with respect then you shouldn't have a problem.

You should also inquire about the border status in Um Phang or at the TAT office (p416) in Tak. Opposite Letongkhu on the Myanmar side of the border, the KNU has set up its latest tactical headquarters. Yangon government offensives against the KNU can break out in this area during the dry months

of the year, but when this is happening or is likely to happen, Thai military checkpoints will turn all trekkers back.

Sangkhlaburi (p222) is 90km or a four- to five-day trek from Beung Kleung. On the way (11km from Beung Kleung), about 250m off the road, is the extensive cave system of **Tham Takube**. From Ban Mae Chan, 35km along the same route, there's a dirt road branching out across the border to a KNU-controlled village. The route to Sangkhlaburi has several branches; the main route crosses over the border into Myanmar for some distance before crossing back into Thailand. There has been discussion of cutting a newer, more direct road between Um Phang and Sangkhlaburi.

Because of the overall sensitive nature of this border area and the very real potential for becoming lost, ill or injured, a guide is highly recommended for any sojourn south of Um Phang. You may be able to arrange a guide for this route in Beung Kleung. Otherwise, Eco-Trekking in Mae Sot (p419) and Umphang Hill Resort (p428) can arrange seven-day treks from Umphang to Sangkhlaburi with advance notice. The best time of year to do the trek is October to January.

### Tours

Several of the guesthouses in Um Phang can arrange trekking and rafting trips in the area. The typical three-night, four-day trip costs from 4500B per person (four or more people). The price includes rafting, an elephant ride, food and a guide service.

Longer treks are also possible, as well as day trips to Nam Tok Thilawsu. If given a few weeks' notice Umphang Hill Resort does a seven-day trek down to Sangkhlaburi (minimum four people, per person 9000B); Eco-Trekking (p419) at No 4 Guest House in Mae Sot also does a similar and recommended trip for US\$400. It is worth checking to see what kind of rafts are used; most places have switched to rubber as bamboo rafts can break up in the rough rapids. Choose rubber unless you are really looking for adventure (such as walking to your camp site rather than rafting there).

Within Um Phang, Umphang Hill Resort (p428) has the best equipment and trip designs. Most guesthouses arrange treks, as well as the recommended companies below who have English-speaking guides. The majority have rafting and hiking trips to Nam Tok

Thilawsu and beyond, including one itinerary that takes rafters through 11 different sets of rapids on Mae Nam Mae Klong. Longer or shorter trips may also be arranged, and elephant riding instead of walking is always an option.

**Boonchuay Camping Tours** (☎ 0 5556 1020; boonchuay\_umphang@hotmail.com; 360 Mu 1 Th Pravitpawian) Its focus is camping and communing with nature.

**Trekker Hill** (☎ 0 5556 1090; 620 Th Pravitpawian) This highly recommended outfit offers a variety of treks running from one day to four.

**Umphang Hill Resort** (☎ 0 5556 1063; Mae Sot ☎ 0 5553 1409; www.umphanghill.com) Associated with Max One Tour in Mae Sot (p420) this is the longest-running company in Um Phang. Its emphasis is on leading big groups of foreigners who book ahead of time. Can arrange seven-day treks south to Sangkhlaburi.

## Sleeping

Accommodation in Um Phang is plentiful, but since the majority of visitors to the area are Thai, room rates tend to be a little higher than normal and all of the beds are rock hard. Most places cater to large groups so their rooms are designed for four or more people. Singles or couples may be able to negotiate lower rates, especially in the wet season.

## BUDGET

**Umphang Hill Resort** (☎ 0 5556 1063, Mae Sot 0 5553 1409; www.umphanghill.com; per person 100-200B, bungalows 500-2000B; 📶) Set in a pretty garden with views of the mountains, the oversized bungalows are designed to sleep six to 20 people and are in grave need of TLC. There are also tiny basic huts with just a mattress. Plus sides are that it does run the most tours and has the largest number of English-speaking guides in town.

**Phudoi Camp Site** (☎ 0 5556 1049, Bangkok 0 1886 8783; www.phudoi.com; 637 Th Pravitpawian; tent 200B, r 400B) Primarily catering to its prebooked tour clients, Phudoi has bungalows set on a well-landscaped hillside near the village centre. The log cabin-style bungalows are spacious and have verandas. There's also a camping area and a restaurant with the same name (right).

**Um Phang Guest House** (☎ 0 5556 1073; r 250-450B) Near Wat Nilawan, this place is owned by the local *kamnan* (precinct officer). It has motel-like rooms with squat toilets that sleep up to three, and nicer wood-and-brick cottages with Western toilets and hot water, which sleep up to four. There's a large outdoor restaurant in an open area near the cottages.

**Trekker Hill** (☎ 0 5556 1090; r 300B) This rustic collection of huts on a steep hillside has views of the valley and Um Phang. The restaurant serves three meals a day and also has satellite TV.

**Garden Huts** (Boonyaporn Guest House; ☎ 0 5556 1093, in Bangkok ☎ 0 1642 7594; www.boonyaporn.com; 8/1 Mu 6; r 300-500B) Operated by a sweet older couple, this collection of bungalows of varying degrees of comfort and size fronts the river. It features pleasant sitting areas and a well-cared-for garden. The strong, Thai-grown coffee is a perk bonus.

## MIDRANGE & TOP END

Midrange options in Um Phang don't have all the bells and whistles of comparably priced places in other areas. They are notably more comfortable and well kept than their cheaper neighbours though, and take good advantage of the natural scenery in Um Phang.

**Tu Ka Su Cottage** (Kin Ka Tu; ☎ 0 5556 1295; r 600-1500B) West of Huay Um Phang, this is the cleanest and best-run accommodation in Um Phang. The attractive collection of brick-and-stone, multiroom cottages is surrounded by flower and exotic fruit gardens. The largest bungalows sleep 10, but it's possible to rent half of one of the smaller two-room cottages for between 600B and 800B. All of the bathrooms have hot-water showers with an outdoor feel. Tu Ka Su also runs good local trekking-rafting trips, but it only has one English-speaking guide.

**Umphang Country Huts** (☎ 0 5556 1079; www.umphangcountryhut.com; r 500-1500B) Off the highway 1.5km before Um Phang, these huts enjoy a nice hilly setting. Rooms in a wood-and-thatch, two-storey building facing Huay Mae Klong share a common veranda. There are larger, more atmospheric rooms in another two-storey building with private verandas. The cheapest rooms have cold-water bathrooms.

## Eating

Um Phang has three or four simple noodle and rice shops, plus a morning **market** and a small sundries shop. There is a short string of noodle shops along the main road.

At the camp site of the same name (left) you'll find **Phudoi Restaurant** (☎ 0 5556 1049; dishes 20-40B; 📶 8am-10pm). It has very good food, especially the *phánaeng* (mild curry) dishes. There are also rice dishes, noodles, *tôm yam* (hot-

and-sour Thai soup) and cold beer. There's a bilingual menu and it's often the only place open past 9pm.

## Getting There & Away

There are *sáwngtháew* to Um Phang from Mae Sot (120B, five hours, 165km) departing several times a day between 7am and 3pm. *Sáwngtháew* usually stop for lunch at windy **Ban Rom Klao 4** on the way.

If you decide to try to ride a motorcycle from Mae Sot, be sure it's one with a strong engine as the road has lots of fairly steep grades. Total drive time is around four hours. The only petrol pump along the way is in Ban Rom Klao 4, 80km from Mae Sot, so you may want to carry 3L or 4L of extra fuel.

## MAE SOT TO MAE SARIANG

แม่สอด/แม่สะเรียง

Route 105 runs north along the Myanmar border from Mae Sot all the way to Mae Sariang (226km) in Mae Hong Son Province. The winding, paved road passes through the small communities of **Mae Ramat**, **Mae Sarit**, **Ban Tha Song Yang** and **Ban Sop Ngao** (Mae Ngao). The thick forest in these parts still has a few stands of teak and the Karen villages continue to use the occasional work elephant. Be prepared to show your passport to Thai border patrols often.

If you have your own transport, be sure to stop and check out these friendly, low-key, rarely visited communities. Don't miss **Wat Don Kaew** in Mae Ramat. It's behind the district office and houses a large Mandalay-style marble Buddha. Other attractions on the way to Mae Sariang include **Nam Tok Mae Kasa**, between the Km 13 and Km 14 markers, and extensive limestone caverns at **Tham Mae Usu**, at Km 94 near Ban Tha Song Yang. From the highway it's a 2km walk to Tham Mae Usu; note that it's closed in the rainy season, when the river running through the cave seals off the mouth.

Instead of doing the Myanmar border run in one go, some people opt to spend the night in Mae Sarit (118km from Mae Sot). **Mae Salid Guest House** (Mae Sarit; s/d 50/100B) is related to Umphang Hill Resort and offers six very simple rooms with private toilet and shared cold-water showers. It's east of the main intersection in Mae Sarit.

There is a very basic **guesthouse** (s/d 80/100B) in Ban Tha Song Yang near the *sáwngtháew* stop on Rte 105. Just follow the signs.

**Krua Ban Tai** (Th Si Wattana, Ban Tha Song Yang; dishes 20-50B; 📶 8am-9pm) is a two-storey wooden restaurant in the centre of Ban Tha Song Yang, around the corner from the main market. The creative menu includes good *yam wún sên* (spicy noodle salad) made with freshwater shrimp, and *khão phát phánaeng* (curried fried rice).

Hourly *sáwngtháew* to Mae Sarit (70B, four hours) leave from Mae Sot between 6am and noon (the same *sáwngtháew* continue on to Mae Sariang). Frequent *sáwngtháew* connect Mae Sarit to Ban Tha Song Yang (30B, 30 minutes) where morning and midday *sáwngtháew* head to Mae Sariang (60B, three hours). If you miss the morning *sáwngtháew* from Mae Sarit to Mae Sariang, you can usually arrange to charter a truck for 200B to 250B.

If you decide not to stay overnight in Mae Sarit, just stay on the *sáwngtháew* and eventually you'll land in Mae Sariang (170B, six hours) with an exhausted bum. These orange *sáwngtháew* leave from Mae Sot's bus station just north of the police station.

# MAE HONG SON PROVINCE

Thailand's most northwestern province is a crossroads for ethnic minorities (mostly Karen, with some Hmong, Lisu and Lahu), Shan (known locally as Thai Yai) and Burmese immigrants. Reportedly 75% of the province consists of mountains and forest.

As the province is so far from the influence of sea winds and is thickly forested and mountainous, the temperature seldom rises above 40°C, while in January the temperature can drop to 2°C. The air is often misty with ground fog in the winter and smoke from slash-and-burn agriculture in the hot season.

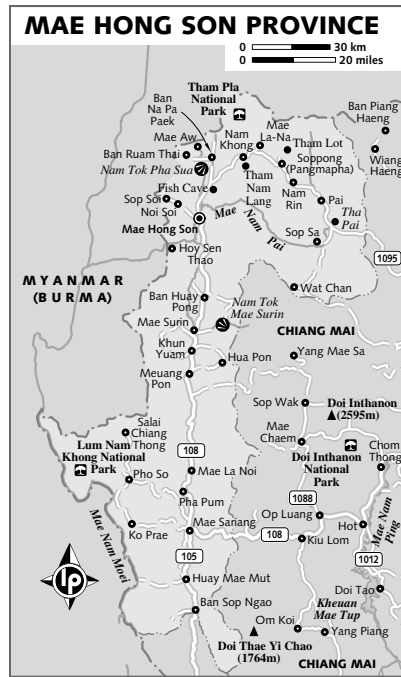
Mae Hong Son province has undergone a tourist miniboom over the past decade, with many resorts opening in the area around the capital. However, few visitors seem to leave the beaten Mae Hong Son-Soppong-Pai track.

## MAE SARIANG

แม่สะเรียง

pop 7800

Many of the hill-tribe settlements in Mae Hong Son province are concentrated in the



## Activities

Little-known Mae Sariang offers amazing **trekking** and **tours**, both scenic and cultural. Because the area around Mae Sariang is far from the popular jumping-off grounds of Mae Hong Son, Chiang Mai or Chiang Rai, you're less likely to see other trekking groups and the communities you visit are going to be less 'prepared' for you. Most tours include or focus on trekking to hill-tribe villages, boat trips to Mae Sam Laep, bamboo rafting, and elephant riding. In November many of the nearby hills bloom with *bua thawng* (literally 'golden lotus'), which look like large yellow daisies. Most guesthouses run tours but these have been particularly recommended:

**Salawin Tour** (Th Laeng Phanit; one-day trek 1300B, 3-day trek 2200B) With the best reputation in town, the sole trekking guide who runs Salawin Tour is from one of the surrounding hill tribes and knows the mountains like a guide should. He has an 'office' next to Riverside Guest House, and speaks very good English.

**Kanchana Tour** (☎ 08 1952 2167; kanchanakosai@yahoo.co.uk) This ex-teacher offers half- and full-day cycling tours around Mae Sariang, as well as river trips on the Salawin and 4WD trips to Karen villages. You can find her at Salawin Guest House (below).

## Sleeping

### BUDGET

**Mitaree Guest House** (☎ 0 5368 1110; www.mitareehotel.com; Th Mae Sariang; r 120-600B; 🏠) This is Mae Sariang's oldest hostelry. It has rooms in the old wooden wing or rooms with hot-water shower in the new wing. The older wing is popular with Thai truckers.

**North West Guest House** (☎ 0 5368 1956; Th Laeng Phanit; s/d 150/200B) The rooms in this large wooden house are simple (think mattress on the floor) but get natural light and are a good size. The six rooms come with slippers and towels, and share two spotless hot-water showers.

**Salawin Guest House** (☎ 0 5368 1490; Th Laeng Phanit; r 300-450B; 🏠) Although there are no river views here, this simple place is run by a helpful and welcoming couple. Rooms are clean and basic with large bathrooms. The proprietor makes a lovely iced lemon drink, and free coffee and tea is available.

**Riverside Guest House** (☎ 0 5368 1188; Th Laeng Phanit; r 300-600B; 🏠) This friendly, ramshackle guesthouse keeps growing and improving.

Some rooms feel cramped but most share large terraces with fantastic views of a turn in the river and the valley beyond. There is a mediocre restaurant, and the local Salawin Tour trekking guide tends to hang out here if he's not in his place next door.

**Kamolsorn Hotel** (☎ 0 5368 1524; Th Mae Sariang; r 450-700B; 🏠) A multistorey hotel with clean rooms but zero character. Although spacious, dark wood furniture fills the rooms making them feel cluttered. Limited English is spoken.

### MIDRANGE & TOP END

**River House Hotel** (☎ 0 5362 1201; riverhouse@hotmail.com; 77 Th Laeng Phanit; d 550-750B, tr 950B; 🏠) The combo of nostalgia-inducing teak and stylish décor makes this riverside hotel the best spot in town. Air-conditioned 2nd-floor rooms have huge verandas overlooking the river, and floor-to-ceiling windows. Downstairs, fan rooms are also riverside and have hammocks outside. All are well equipped and simply decorated in cream and wood. A very romantic place to stay. There's an excellent restaurant (p432) and recommended tours are run from here.

**Garden House Resort** (New Mitaree; ☎ 0 5368 1109; www.mitareehotel.com; 24 Th Wiang Mai; s 600-700B, d 700-800B, two-bed cottage 1200B; 🏠) Near the post office, this is run by the same friendly family as Mitaree Guest House. The newer wooden 'resort' cottages at the back have sitting areas in front with great views of the mountains. All have hot water, air-con and cable TV.

**River House Resort** (☎ 0 5368 3066; www.riverhousehotels.com; Th Laeng Phanit; r incl breakfast 1700-2800B; 🏠) This large three-storey hotel is run by the same people as the River House Hotel but lacks its charm. New rooms are spacious with contemporary décor, minibar and cable TV. Ask for a river view room as the town-side ones are the same price. Those on the 1st floor open onto the river. There is a lawn garden with deckchairs, a bar with a pool table and a good restaurant.

## Eating

**Shaw Yang** (Th Mae Sariang; snacks 15-49B; ☎ 10am-5pm) This large, modern, airy café serves ice cream by the cone or in a sundae, as well as real coffee. Perch on a bar stool or sit by the window and tuck into scoops of ice cream or a frothy cappuccino.

districts and towns of Khun Yuam, Mae La Noi and Mae Sariang, which are good departure points for treks to Hmong, Karen and Shan villages. Of these three small towns, Mae Sariang is the largest and offers the most facilities for use as a base camp.

Although there is not much to see in Mae Sariang, it's a pleasant, laid-back riverside town with a small travel scene. Two Burmese-Shan temples, **Wat Jong Sung** (Uthayarom) and **Wat Si Bunruang**, just off Mae Sariang's main street (not far from the Mae Sariang bus station), are definitely worth a visit if you have time. Built in 1896, Wat Jong Sung is the more interesting of the two temples and has slender, Shan-style *chedi* and wooden monastic buildings.

## Information

Mae Sariang has a couple of banks with ATMs and an **immigration office** (☎ 0 5368 1339; Route 108) that will extend your visa by a couple of days if you're in a pinch and on your way to the border. It's opposite the petrol station on the road to Mae Hong Son. Internet is available next to River House Hotel and just south of Renu Restaurant.



## VISITING VILLAGES

When visiting hill-tribe villages try to find out what the local customs and taboos are, either by asking someone or by taking the time to observe local behaviour. Here are several other guidelines for minimising the impact you can have on local communities:

- Always ask for permission before taking photos of tribespeople and/or their dwellings. You can ask through your guide or by using sign language. Because of traditional belief systems, many individuals and even whole tribes may object strongly to being photographed.
- Show respect for religious symbols and rituals. Don't touch totems at village entrances or any other object of obvious symbolic value without asking permission. Unless you're asked to participate, keep your distance from ceremonies.
- Exercise restraint in giving things to tribespeople or bartering with them. If you want to give something to the people you encounter on a trek, the best thing is to make a donation to the village school or other community fund. Your guide can help arrange this. While it's an easy way to get a smile – giving sweets to children contributes to tooth decay – remember they probably don't have toothbrushes and toothpaste like you do.
- Set a good example to hill-tribe youths by not smoking opium or using other drugs.
- Don't litter while trekking or staying in villages.
- You might also want to check the 'Guidelines for Visitors to Northern Thailand's Mountain Peoples' at [www.lanna.com/html/tourists.html](http://www.lanna.com/html/tourists.html).

**Kai Yang Rai Khwan** (dishes 10-150B; ☎ 10am-5pm) A great spot for Isan-style grilled chicken (half/whole chicken 72/150B) and sticky rice (10B), this simple place is at the foot of the bridge crossing.

**Renu Restaurant** (☎ 0 5368 1171; Th Wiang Mai; dishes 25-70B; ☎ 10am-11pm) Decorated with pics of King Bhumibol playing saxophone, this local spot has a more basic menu than the Inthira. The veggie options are limited to fried rice, but adventurous eaters might enjoy the 'nut-hatch curry'.

**Inthira Restaurant** (☎ 0 4368 1529; Th Wiang Mai; dishes 40-100B; ☎ 8am-10pm) This is the town's most popular restaurant for a good reason. Its casual setting with some creative décor is a mere side note to the extensive and tasty menu. Several of the standard Thai and Chinese dishes are available in veggie versions. The mushroom and lemongrass soup is delicious.

**Sawadee Restaurant & Bar** (Th Laeng Phanit; dishes 40-150B; ☎ 8am-11pm) At this funky, colourful place sit at the low tables on rattan mats or chill out on the axe cushions. Healthy breakfasts, sandwiches, Thai and fish dishes are served at the river view tables. There are lots of options for vegetarians; it's also a good place just to sip a beer.

☎ **River House Restaurant** (☎ 0 5362 1201; riverhouse@hotmail.com; 77 Th Laeng Phanit; dishes 45-160B)

For a romantic meal overlooking the wandering river, this is the place to be. It's rustic with antique tables and no white linens, but pleasantly lit and there's plenty of room between the tables. The food is tasty, especially anything including fresh river fish, and the service is great.

## Getting There & Around

Ordinary buses to Mae Sariang (100B, four hours) leave Chiang Mai's Arcade terminal at 8am, 1.30pm, 3pm and 8pm. From Mae Sariang to Chiang Mai buses leave at 7am, 9am, 10.30am and 12.30pm. First-class air-con buses (180B, four hours) depart at 6.30am, 11am and 9pm from Chiang Mai and 12pm, 1pm, 3pm and 4.30pm from Mae Sariang.

Buses also regularly connect Mae Sariang to Mae Hong Song (ordinary/air-con 100/180B, four hours), with a stop midway in Khun Yuam (ordinary/air-con 65/110B, two hours).

Sǎwngthǎew leave for Mae Sot (180B, six hours) hourly between 6.30am and 12.30pm, but only leave when full. See the Mae Sot to Mae Sariang section (p429) for more details about the sǎwngthǎew trip.

For a bus to Bangkok head to **Sombat Tour** (☎ 0 5368 1532, 0 5361 8255; Th Mae Sariang). First-class air-con buses leave from here at 4pm, 6pm and 7pm daily (571B, 12 hours).

Destinations anywhere in town are 20B by motorcycle taxi.

## AROUND MAE SARIANG

One trekking option out of Mae Sariang is a boat trip on Mae Nam Salawin, with stops in Karen villages and Mae Sam Laep (see p430). In April 2006 it was announced that a new border checkpoint would open at Mae Sam Laep to promote trade and tourism between Thailand and Myanmar. However, at the time of writing the checkpoint had not yet materialised.

From Mae Sam Laep the boat may head upriver to **Lum Nam Kong National Park** (child/adult 200/400B; [www.dnp.go.th](http://www.dnp.go.th)), a 722-sq-km protected area established in 1994. It takes about half an hour to reach the park headquarters from Mae Sam Laep. There are basic bungalows available (300-800B), and in the dry season you can pitch a tent (30B) on a white-sand beach called Hat Thaen Kaew, along the river in front of the park offices. There are good views of the river and Myanmar from the park headquarters. The park is heavily forested in teak, Asian redwood and cherrywood.

About 36km southeast of Mae Sariang at Ban Mae Waen is **Pan House** (☎ 08 7187 4169; r per person 50B), a wooden house on stilts, where a guide named T Weerapan (Mr Pan) leads local treks. No English is spoken and women and men sleep in separate rooms. Ban Mae Waen itself is a mixed Thai/Karen village in the middle of a Karen district. To get there, take a Chiang Mai-bound bus east on Rte 108 and get out at the Km 65 marker. Ban Mae Waen is a 5km walk south along a mountain ridge and (during the rainy season) across a couple of streams. This is a dirt road so if you're driving a 4WD is necessary, especially if the road is wet.

## Khun Yuam

About halfway between Mae Sariang and Mae Hong Son, where all northbound buses make their halfway stop, is the quiet mountain town of Khun Yuam. This little-visited town is a nice break from more 'experienced' destinations nearby. There are a couple of places to stay and a few notable sights.

At the northern end of town, a collection of rusted military trucks marks the **World War II Museum** (admission 10B; ☎ 8am-4pm). Here weapons, military equipment, personal possessions

and black-and-white photographs document the period when the Japanese occupied Khun Yuam in the closing weeks of the war with Burma. After they had recovered, some of the Japanese soldiers stayed in Khun Yuam and married. The last Japanese soldier who settled in the area died in 2000.

About 5km to the west of Khun Yuam, the atmospheric **Wat To Phae** sits alongside a country stream and boasts a Mon-style *chedi*, antique wooden monks' residences and an immaculate Burmese-style *wihān*. Inside the latter, take a look at the large, 150-year-old Burmese *kalaga* (embroidered and sequined tapestry) that's kept behind curtains to one side of the main altar. The tapestry depicts a scene from the *Vessantara Jataka* and local devotees believe one accrues merit simply by viewing it.

On the slopes of Doi Mae U Khaw is the Hmong village of Ban Mae U Khaw (25km from Khun Yuam via upgraded Rte 1263), and 50km northeast of Khun Yuam is the 100m **Nam Tok Mae Surin** (part of the Mae Surin National Park; child/adult 200/400B), reportedly Thailand's highest cataract. The area blooms with scenic *bua thawng* during November; this is also the best time to view the waterfall.

There is an ATM in town just south of Mit Khoon Youm Hotel, and a few sleeping options.

**Ban Farang** (☎ 0 5362 2086; banfarang@hotmail.com; 499 Th Ratburana; bungalows 600-1200B) is located off the main road towards the north end of town (look for the signs near the bus stop). The bungalows here are overpriced but set in beautiful, lush grounds. The cheaper fan bungalows are plain and dark but have a terrace. The more expensive ones come with air-con, fridge, cable TV and a terrace looking to the forest. Herbal massage is available and the restaurant on site is reasonable.

On the main road through the town centre, **Mit Khoon Youm Hotel** (☎ 0 5369 1057; 61 Th Chiang Mai-Mae Hong Son; r 300-500B, bungalow 800B; ☎) has simple, clean rooms. Some have en suite bathrooms and there are a few more expensive bungalows by the garden.

In Khun Yuam you'll find a collection of modest **rice and noodle shops** along the east side, or Rte 108, towards the southern end of town. Most of these close by 5pm or 6pm. Ban Farang has a restaurant and Mit Khoon Youm Hotel can arrange meals.



Buses stop regularly at Khun Yuam (ordinary/air-con 65/110B, two hours) on their runs between Mae Sariang and Mae Hong Song.

## MAE HONG SON

เมืองงซอน  
pop 8300

Surrounded by mountains and punctuated by small but picturesque Nong Jong Kham (Jong Kham Lake), this provincial capital is still relatively peaceful despite the intrusion of daily flights from Chiang Mai. Mae Hong Son has become part of northern Thailand's standard tourist circuit, with plenty of guesthouses, hotels and resorts in the area, many of them catering to Thais. However, much of

the capital's prosperity is due to its supply of rice and consumer goods to the drug lords across the border. The town's population is predominantly Shan. Several Karen and Shan villages in the vicinity can be visited as day trips, and further afield are Lisu, Lahu and Musoe villages.

Mae Hong Son is best visited between November and March when the town is at its most beautiful. During the rainy season (June to October) travel in the province can be difficult because there are few paved roads. During the hot season, the Mae Pai valley fills with smoke from slash-and-burn agriculture. The only problem with going in the cool season is that the nights are downright cold – you'll need at least one thick sweater and a good

pair of socks for mornings and evenings, and a sleeping bag or several blankets.

## Information

### EMERGENCY

**Tourist Police** (☎ 0 5361 1812, 1155; Th Singhanat Bamrung; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm) Report mishaps or file complaints about guesthouses and trek operators here.

### INTERNET ACCESS

Where there are travellers, there's internet. But like many places around Thailand, many of Mae Hong Son's places don't last. The **CAT office** (Th Udom Chow) has T-card computers which work out to 15B per hour. Other places charge anywhere from 40B to 60B per hour. Several places around town, including Sunflower Café (p439), and a nameless internet café next to Lakeside Bar & Restaurant (p440), provide internet access by the minute.

### MEDICAL SERVICES

**Srisangwal Hospital** (☎ 0 5361 1378; Th Singhanat Bamrung) A full-service facility that includes an emergency room.

### MONEY

Most of the banks on Th Khunlum Praphat have ATMs. Foreign-exchange services are available at Bangkok Bank, Kasikornbank and Bank of Ayudhya.

### POST

**Main post office** (Th Khunlum Praphat; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, closed holidays) Towards the southern end of Th Khunlum Praphat.

### TELEPHONE

International telephone service is available at the CAT office, which is attached to the post office – hours are the same. There's a Lenso International Phonecard telephone outside the entrance to the post office.

### TOURIST INFORMATION

**TAT office** (☎ 0 5362 3016; Th Khunlum Praphat; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri) In an old two-storey wooden building opposite the post office. With helpful staff, tourist brochures and maps can be picked up here.

### Sights

#### WAT PHRA THAT DOI KONG MU

วัดพระธาตุคุดออกมู

Climb the hill west of town, Doi Kong Mu (1500m), to visit this Shan-built wat, also

known as Wat Phai Doi. The view of the sea of fog that collects in the valley each morning is impressive; at other times of the day you get a view of the town. Two Shan *chedi*, erected in 1860 and 1874, enshrine the ashes of monks from Myanmar's Shan state. Around the back of the wat you can see a tall, slender, standing Buddha and catch views west of the ridge.

A good time to visit the wat is at the end of the annual rains retreat, usually late October depending on the lunar calendar, when it fills with townspeople gaining merit by bringing food to feed a large number of monks.

#### WAT JONG KHAM & WAT JONG KLANG

วัดจกขก/วัดจกขกลาง

Next to Nong Jong Kham in the southern part of town are a couple of mildly interesting Burmese-style wats.

Wat Jong Kham was built nearly 200 years ago by Thai Yai (Shan) people, who make up about half of the population of Mae Hong Son Province. Wat Jong Klang houses 100-year-old glass *jataka* paintings and has small rooms full of wooden reliefs and figures depicting the *Vessantara Jataka* (the popular *jataka* in which the Bodhisatva develops the 'perfection of giving') – all very Burmese in style. The *wihāan* containing these is open 8am to 6pm daily. Wat Jong Klang has several areas that women are forbidden to enter – not unusual for Burmese-Shan Buddhist temples.

#### WAT HUA WIANG

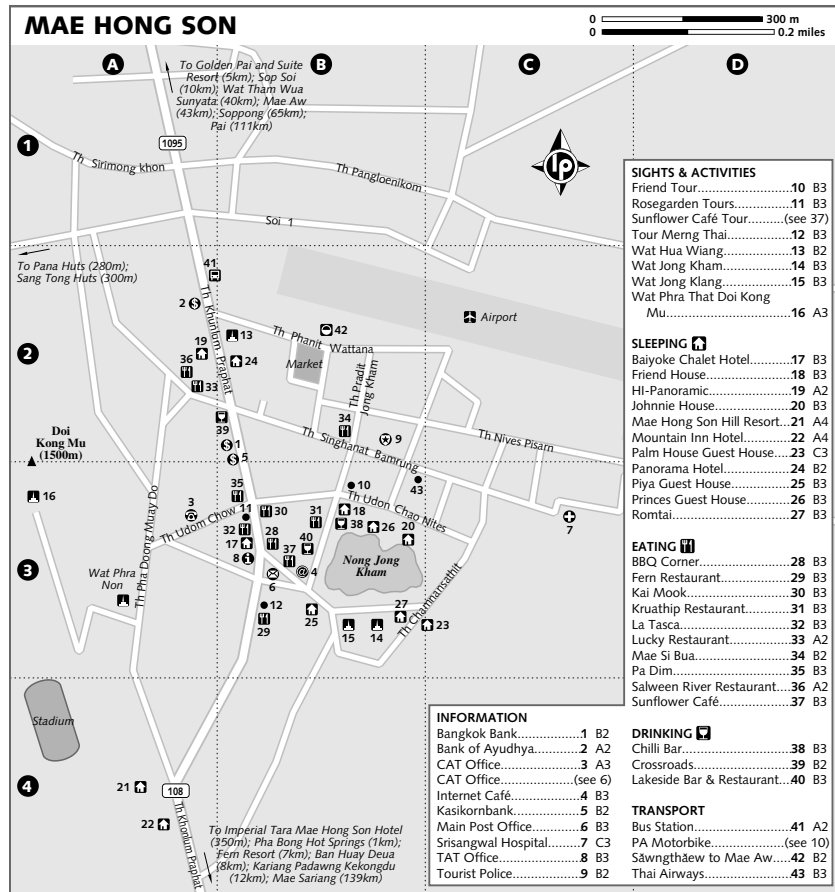
วัดหัวเวียง

Although its wooden *bòt* is in an advanced state of decay, a famous bronze Buddha in the Mandalay style, called Chao Phalakraeng, can be seen in this *wat* (Th Phanit Wattana), east of Th Khunlum Praphat.

## Activities

### TREKKING

The area around Mae Hong Son towards Soppong is also used by tours from Chiang Mai, which means that in the high season it's possible to see other groups of travellers while trekking through the seemingly pristine jungle. Trekking trips can be arranged at several guesthouses and travel agencies. Rates for most treks are about 700B to 800B per person per day (if there are four or more people), with three to five days being the normal duration. Popular routes include the Mae Pai Valley, Amphoe Khun Yuam and north of Soppong.



A straightforward six-day trek from east of Mae Hong Son to near Soppong costs around 700B per person per day. As with trekking elsewhere in the north, be sure to clarify when a trek starts and stops or you may not get your money's worth.

The following tour companies have received good reviews:

**Sunflower Café Tour** (☎ 0 5362 0549; www.sunflowercafetour.com; Th Udom Chaonithet) The guides here have

been highly recommended and are often coming up with new ideas. As well as the usual trek itineraries, they do cycling tours around town and from Maehong Son to Pai, as well as bird-watching.

**Tour Merg Thai** (☎ 0 5361 1979; Th Khunlum Praphat) Located next to Fern Restaurant and originating from Fern Resort (p438), this company focuses on community-based tourism. It employs guides from the local community and also offers homestays. Treks are very much nature focused.

### 'LONG-NECKED' PADAUNG VILLAGES

Some come to Mae Hong Son with the intent to visit one of the nearby Padaung refugee villages where 'long-neck' women live. The women wear a continuous coil around their necks, and sometimes their limbs, that can weigh up to 22kg (but 5kg is most common) and stand as tall as 30cm. The neck coils depress the collarbone and rib cage, which makes their necks look unnaturally stretched. A common myth claims if the coils are removed, the women's necks will fall over from atrophy and the women will suffocate. The women attach and remove the coils at will with no such problems. In fact, there is no evidence that this deformation impairs their health at all.

Nobody knows for sure how the coil custom got started. One theory is that it was meant to make the women unattractive to men from other tribes. Another story says it was so tigers wouldn't carry the women off by their throats. The Padaung claim their ancestors were the offspring of a liaison between the wind and a beautiful female dragon, and that the coil-wearing custom pays tribute to their dragon progenitor. This custom was dying out, but money from tourism has reinvigorated it.

The business of the long-neck as a tourist attraction is largely controlled by the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP), a Kayah (Karenni) insurgent group whose reported objective is to establish an independent Kayah state in eastern Myanmar. The Padaung are an ethnolinguistic subgroup of the Kayah.

The biggest Padaung village is Nai Soi (also known as Nupa Ah), 35km northwest of Mae Hong Son. It receives an average of 1200 tourists annually and collects an entry fee (250B per person), the bulk of which is believed to go to the KNPP. The 'long-neck' women receive a small portion of the money collected, but make most of their money selling handicrafts (some say as much as 3000B per month). Typically, a visit consists of extended photography sessions of the coil-adorned women posing or standing with visitors. The women tell reporters they aren't bothered by the photography, which they consider to be part of their livelihood. As Nai Soi's Ma Nang was quoted in the *Bangkok Post*, 'We had nothing in Myanmar. I had to work relentlessly in the rice fields. We miss our homes, but we don't want to go back'. These people are usually in Thailand by choice, having fled a potentially worse fate in Myanmar amid ethnic war.

Opinions are sharply divided as to the ethics of 'consuming' the Padaung as a tourist attraction. On the surface, viewing the Padaung seems like crass exploitation, but those who have taken the time to learn more about their lives continue to point out that this gives them an opportunity to make a living under current social conditions in Myanmar and Thailand. Thai authorities view Nai Soi as a self-sustaining refugee camp. For visitors the current set-up beats paying a trek operator for the privilege of photographing tribal people when the latter receive nothing.

If you want to see any of the Padaung settlements, any travel agency in Mae Hong Son can arrange a tour for about 700B. You can choose among Hoy Sen Thao (11km southwest of Mae Hong Son, 20 minutes by boat from the nearby Ban Huay Deua landing), Nai Soi (35km northwest) and Huay Ma Khen Som (about 7km before Mae Aw). A couple of hundred metres beyond Nai Soi is a large Kayah refugee settlement, also controlled by the KNPP.

At the entrance to the village your name, passport number and country of residence will be noted on a payment receipt issued by the 'Karenni Culture Department'.

**Friend Tour** (☎ 0 5361 1647; 21 Th Pradit Jong Kham) Opposite Friend House, this recommended outfit offers trekking, elephant riding and rafting, as well as day tours.

**Rosegarden Tours** (☎ 0 5361 1577; www.rosegarden-tours.com; 86/4 Th Khunlum Praphat) English- and French-speaking guides focus on cultural tours.

### RAFTING

Raft trips on the nearby Mae Pai are gaining popularity, and the same guesthouses and trekking agencies that organise treks from Mae Hong Son can arrange the river trips. The most common type of trip sets off from Tha Mae Pai (Pai River Pier) in **Ban Huay Deua**, 8km southwest of Mae Hong Son, for a day-long upriver journey of 5km. From the same pier, down-river trips to the 'long-neck' village of **Kariang Padawng Kekongdu** (Hoy Sen Thao) on the Thailand-Myanmar border are also possible.

Another popular rafting route runs between **Sop Soi** (10km northwest of town) and the village of **Soppong** to the west (not to be confused with the larger Shan trading village of the same name to the east). These day trips typically cost 700B to 900B for six people if arranged in Ban Huay Deua, or 900B to 1200B per person if done through a Mae Hong Son agency. Tha Ban Huay Deua (Ban Huay Deua pier) is to the left of the entrance to the large white Mae Hong Son Riverside Hotel in Ban Huay Deua.

The Mae Pai raft trips can be good fun if the raft holds up – it's not uncommon for rafts to fall apart or sink. The Myanmar trip, which attracts travellers who want to see the Padaung or 'long-necked' people (see boxed text opposite), is a bit of a rip-off and, to some, exploitative; it's a four-hour trip through un spectacular scenery to see a few Padaung people who have fled to Mae Hong Son to escape an ethnic war in Myanmar. The admission (250B per person) into the town is not included in the price of the rafting trip. When there is fighting between Shan armies and Yangon troops in the area, this trip may not be possible.

### Festivals & Events

**Poi Sang Long Festival** (March) Wat Jong Klang and Wat Jong Kham are the focal point of this festival, where young Shan boys are ordained as novice monks in the ceremony known as *buat lăuk kăew*. Like elsewhere in Thailand, the ordinands are carried on the shoulders of friends or relatives and paraded around the wat under

festive parasols. But as part of the Shan custom, the boys are dressed in ornate costumes (rather than simple white robes) and wear flower headdresses and facial make-up. Sometimes they ride on ponies.

**Jong Para Festival** (October) Another important local event, it is held towards the end of the Buddhist Rains Retreat – three days before the full moon of the 11th lunar month, so it varies from year to year. The festival begins with local Shan bringing offerings to monks in the temples in a procession marked by the carrying of models of castles on poles. An important part of the festival is the folk theatre and dance, which is performed on the wat grounds, some of it unique to north-west Thailand.

**Loi Krathong** (November) During this national holiday – usually celebrated by floating *krathong* (small lotus floats) on the nearest pond, lake or river – Mae Hong Son residents launch balloons called *krathong săwăn* (heaven *krathong*) from Doi Kong Mu.

### Sleeping BUDGET

New budget options keep springing up in Mae Hong Son. Often the newest places are the best deal, because they're clean and competitively priced. The cheapest rooms share a bathroom, and few places here offer air-con.

**Johnnie House** (☎ 0 5361 1667; Th Pradit Jong Kham; r 100-250B) The new rooms with private hot-water showers are an excellent deal. They are spacious with tile floors and plenty of natural light, and there are views of the lake. The rooms with shared bathroom are basic and in a dark wooden building.

**Princes Guest House** (☎ 0 5361 1136; princesguesthouse@gmail.com; Th Pradit Jong Kham; r 150-400B; ☎ ) It has a collection of spotless, great value rooms with a back door leading to seats on the lake. Two hot-water showers are shared between three large rooms, which have beds with decent mattresses and wooden floors. Upstairs rooms have large bathrooms and river views, plus a shared balcony overlooking the lake to Wat Jong Klang. Motorbikes can be rented here.

**Friend House** (☎ 0 5362 0119; 20 Th Pradit Jong Kham; r 150-400B) Superclean rooms run from the ultra basic that share hot-water bathrooms to larger en suite rooms. Set in a teak and concrete house, the upstairs rooms have a view of the lake. Breakfast is available and there is a laundry service.

**Romtai** (☎ 0 5361 2437; Th Chumnanit; r 250-600; ☎ ) By the lakeside temples, this place has a choice of spacious, clean rooms or bungalows looking over a lush garden with fishponds.

**Mae Hong Son Hill Resort** (☎ 0 5361 2475; 106/2 Th Khunlum Praphat; bungalows 250-600B; 🏠) Although it doesn't look like much at first, this quiet spot offers 24 well-kept bungalows, each with woven bamboo walls, a bit of furniture, hot showers and a private veranda. It's a friendly, family-run place.

**Palm House Guest House** (☎ 0 5361 4022; 22/1 Th Chamnansathit; r 300-500B; 🏠) Family-run but a bit sterile, Palm House offers spacious modern rooms with hot showers and cable TV. The second-storey common area is a good place to meet travellers. The building is all cement and seems to amplify sound.

**HI-Panoramic** (☎ 0 5361 1757; www.tyha.org/hi-panorama.html; 54/1 Th Khunlum Praphat; r 400B) This new, 20-room hostel has spotless, cluttered rooms in an elevated Thai-style house. Instead of a garden it has a parking lot. A laundry service is available.

**Pana Huts** (☎ 0 5361 4331, 08 6772 8502; www.panahuts.com; 293/9 Mu 11 Pang Moo; bungalows 400-500B) Although on the edge of town, this new, peaceful place is worth the extra hike. Five cute bamboo huts spaced out on a jungly hill all have attractive hot-water bathrooms and terraces. Rooms look charming with their pots of flowers, Thai textile bed covers and mosquito nets. The communal area feels appropriately rustic, with its thatched teak leaf roof, wooden benches and enclosed campfire for chilly nights. The friendly owner speaks great English, teaches Thai and creates fantastic hearty meals.

Other less convenient places can be found around Mae Hong Son – the touts will find you at the bus station.

## MIDRANGE

**Piya Guest House** (☎ 0 5361 1260; 1/1 Th Khunlum Praphat; bungalows 600B; 🏠) This well-managed place has cement bungalows set around a quiet garden with small lotus ponds. The rooms have wooden floors, air-con and hot showers, and are well furnished and of a decent size. Some are looking a little weathered. There is a pleasant lake view from the restaurant.

**Panorama Hotel** (☎ 0 5361 1757; www.panorama.8m.com; 51 Th Khunlum Praphat; r 600-800B; 🏠) The lobby decorated with Thai details is welcoming, but the dark, wood-panelled rooms have ill-fitted carpet and strange enclosed balconies. The location is quite convenient though.

**Sang Tong Huts** (☎ 0 5362 0680; www.sangtonghuts.com; bungalows 700-1600B; 🏠) Tucked on

a hillside on the edge of town, this eclectic collection of unique huts is a fabulous place to stay. Each and every room is different and decorated using natural materials in variants of contemporary Thai style. Your room may have floor-to-ceiling windows and abstract art, or rattan sofa and chairs with Thai silks. All have terraces and provide a real sense of being in nature. The set, communal five-course dinner is excellent. Call ahead or reserve online – this place is popular.

**Baiyoke Chalet Hotel** (☎ 0 5361 1536; 90 Th Khunlum Praphat; r incl breakfast 1000-1400B; 🏠) Rooms here have a few charming details and are big and modern. It is popular with European tour groups and the restaurant/lounge downstairs can get quite loud, so request a room away from the street or on an upper level. Low-season rates are 30% less and breakfast is included.

## TOP END

Southwest of town, a few kilometres towards Ban Huay Deua and Ban Tha Pong Daeng on the river, are several 'resorts', which in the Thai sense of the term means any hotel near a rural or semirural area. Many are quite luxurious, service-oriented hotels with pleasantly groomed grounds. Discounts of up to 40% are common in the low season and online discounts can be found any time of year. Prices listed below are for high-season walk-ins.

**Fern Resort** (☎ 0 5368 6110; www.fernresort.info; 64 Mu Bo, Tambon Pha Bong; standard/deluxe/ste 1500/1800/2500B; 🏠 🏠 🏠) This ecofriendly resort features Shan-style wooden bungalows with stylishly decorated interiors. Some are set among rice paddies and streams, others are tucked around a lush garden or overlook the pool. Nearby nature trails lead to the adjacent Mae Surin National Park and treks can be arranged. To encourage community-based tourism, most of the employees come from local villages. Free pick-up is available from the airport and bus terminal. Regular shuttles run to/from town stopping at the Fern Restaurant (opposite). To drive here take Rte 108 7km south of town, turn at the sign and follow the winding road 2km.

**Golden Pai and Suite Resort** (☎ 0 5361 2265; www.goldenpai.com; 285 Moo1 Ban Pang moo; s/d 1400-2300/1500-2500B; 🏠 🏠) Five kilometres out of town off the road to Pai, this resort is set on the Pai River and features Shan-style chalets. Set in manicured gardens, rooms are large, tastefully

decorated with textiles and have outside seating areas. The restaurant makes the most of the Pai River location. There is a spa specialising in mud treatments nearby.

**Imperial Tara Mae Hong Son Hotel** (☎ 0 5368 4444-9; www.imperialhotels.com/taramaehongson; 149 Mu 8; r 2804B, ste 3708-4944B; 🏠 🏠 🏠) Rooms in this upmarket, 104-room hotel all have wood floors and are tastefully decorated. French windows that open onto a terrace make a change from the standard business hotel layout. Facilities include a sauna, swimming pool and fitness centre.

**Mountain Inn Hotel** (☎ 0 5361 1802; www.mhsmountaininn.com; 112 Th Khunlum Praphat; standard/deluxe/ste incl breakfast 1700/2000/4000B; 🏠) This hotel has clean, cosy rooms with Thai decorative touches. There is a pretty courtyard garden with small ponds, benches and parasols. Standard rooms are a better deal than deluxe as you get a terrace overlooking the garden. All have cable TV.

## Eating

Although Mae Hong Son isn't known for culinary delights, there are plenty of places to fill your belly with curry or freshly baked bread.

**Mae Si Bua** (Thai Yai Food; Th Singhanat Bamrung; dishes 20-45B; 🍴 10am-6pm) Offers delicious Shan and northern-Thai food.

**Pa Dim** (Th Khunlum Praphat; dishes 25-80B; 🍴 8am-8pm) Everyone loves this place for its extensive variety of well-priced Thai and Chinese options.

**Kruathip Restaurant** (Th Pradit Jong Kham; dishes 30-150B) Next to Lakeside Bar & Restaurant, this place is a more sedate affair with an equally good view. Tasty Thai dishes and river fish are served. Breakfasts are also available.

**Salween River Restaurant** (☎ 0 5361 2050; Th Singhanat Bamrung; dishes 35-150B; 🍴 7am-1am) The local hang-out for NGO workers, this place serves excellent organic hill-tribe coffee, delicate chocolate croissants, local-style Shan specialities and imaginative Western dishes. Try the *kai op* (baked Shan chicken casserole), fermented green tea salad, or the ginger and honey glazed pork steak. The owners are very friendly and are a good source of information. The menu is also very strong on vegetarian options.

**Lucky Restaurant** (Th Singhanat Bamrung; dishes 40-100B; 🍴 9am-10pm) Popular with travellers, this place cooks up a lot of savoury meat dishes but has limited offerings for vegetarians. Drinks

seem to be the focus and service is an afterthought. But it's a pleasant place to linger over a meal with friends.

**Sunflower Café** (☎ 0 5362 0549; www.sunflowercafeour.com; Th Udom Chaonithet; dishes 40-150B; 🍴 7.30am-9pm) Start your day with an oversized cup of coffee and some fresh-baked bread, or swing by in the afternoon for a light meal of pumpkin soup or stuffed tomatoes. Then again, you could just wait until dinner and munch on a full-sized homemade pizza. This is a cosy place with friendly people. Sunflower also runs recommended tours.

**Fern Restaurant** (Th Khunlum Praphat; dishes 50-180B; 🍴 10.30am-midnight) The Fern is an upmarket, but casual, option. Service is professional and the food is good. Enjoy a bottle of whisky with friends, French wine with your sweetheart, or just come for the ice cream. There is live lounge music some nights.

**Kai Mook** (Khai Muk; ☎ 0 5361 2092; 23 Th Udom Chao Nites; dishes 55-160B; 🍴 10am-2pm & 5pm-midnight) This smart, open-air restaurant just off the main street is one of the better Thai-Chinese restaurants in town. It's popular with both Thais and Westerners for house specialities such as *pèt yàng nám phèoing* (roast duck with honey gravy), *plaa chawn sái úa* (serpent-headed fish with northern-Thai sausage) and *yam bai kút* (yam with fern leaves). Its set menus are also a good deal.

**BBQ Corner** (☎ 08 1385 7277; Th Khunlum Praphat; barbecue 69B; 🍴 5pm-12am) This social, open-air place offers table 'BBQ's'. A small hot plate and soup pot is set up on your table where you fling the meat of your choice on the griddle and your noodles and veg in the soup. Good ingredients and a fun way to eat.

**La Tasca** (☎ 0 5361 1344; Th Khunlum Praphat; dishes 90-145B; 🍴 10am-10pm) This rustic looking place with checked tablecloths and chunky wood serves decent homemade pasta, pizza and calzone.

## Drinking

**Crossroads** (nr Th Singhanat Bamrung and Th Khunlum Praphat) This two-storey bar, set in a wooden house, is appropriately located at the crossroads of Th Singhanat Bamrun and Khunlum Praphat. Upstairs watch the world go by or shoot some pool; downstairs perch on stools and choose from the huge list of cocktails at the bar. A good selection of mainly Western, as well as Thai dishes (dishes 50B to 200B) are also served at this friendly, laid-back place.

**Chilli Bar** (Th Pradit Jong Kham; ☎ 7am-1am) This semi-open-air bar is new but already lively. Sit up at the chunky, long, wooden bar and choose from whiskies, beers or shakes. The available food (dishes 30-80B), from bar snacks to sandwiches, is chalked up on boards.

**Lakeside Bar & Restaurant** (Th Pradit Jong Kham; ☎ 10.30am-midnight) The Lakeside is for those who appreciate live music and a social atmosphere. This is a good choice for groups and for people looking for a little socialising. It's popular with Thai families for dinner, and there's all-you-can-eat dining (buffet 69B). After about 10pm, however, it's a place for drinking.

### Shopping

From October to February the walkway around the lake becomes a lively **night market** (☎ 5pm-11pm). Food and a variety of hill-tribe handicraft stalls set up every evening.

### Getting There & Away

#### AIR

For many people the time saved flying from Chiang Mai to Mae Hong Son versus bus travel is worth the extra baht.

**Nok Air** (☎ 1318; www.nokair.com; airport office)

A cheaper subsidiary of Thai Airways, it flies to Chiang Mai twice a day for 900B.

**PB Air** (☎ 0 5361 4369; www.pbair.com) Flies direct from Bangkok to Mae Hong Son (2370B). Its office is at the entrance to the airport.

**Thai Airways** (☎ 0 5361 2220/1194; www.thaiairways.com; 71 Th Singhanat Bamrung; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri) Has flights to Mae Hong Son from Chiang Mai four times daily (1270B, 35 minutes). It also has an office at the airport (open 8.30am to 5.30pm).

#### BUS

From Chiang Mai there are two bus routes to Mae Hong Son: the 270km northern route through Pai (ordinary/air-con 142/200B, seven to eight hours) and the 368km southern route through Mae Sariang (ordinary/air-con 187/337B, eight to nine hours). The fare to Mae Sariang is (ordinary/air-con 100/180B). Two minivans also run to Chiang Mai via Pai (250B, seven hours) at 8am and 9am.

Although it may be longer, the southern route through Mae Sariang is much more comfortable because the bus stops every two hours for a 10- to 15-minute break, and larger buses – with large seats – are used. Buses to Mae Hong Son via Mae Sariang leave Chiang

Mai's Arcade bus station five times daily between 6.30am and 9pm. In the reverse direction, ordinary buses leave Mae Hong Son for Chiang Mai at 8am, 2pm, 8pm and 9pm; air-con buses depart at 6am, 10.30am and 9pm.

The Pai bus leaves the Chiang Mai Arcade station four times a day at 7am, 9am and 10.30am and 12.30pm. In the opposite direction, buses leave Mae Hong Son at 7am, 8.30am, 10.30am, 12.30pm and 4pm. The 4pm bus only goes as far as Pai. An air-con minivan (Pai 150B, Chiang Mai 250B) departs from Mae Hong Son at 10.30am and 12.30pm.

Buses to Pai (ordinary/air-con/air-con minibus 70/98/150B, three hours) also stop in Soppong (ordinary/air-con/air-con minibus 45/60/150B, 1½ hours), and buses to Mae Sariang stop in Khun Yuam (ordinary/air-con 50/85B, 1½ hours).

The northern route through Pai, originally built by the Japanese in WWII, is very winding and offers spectacular views from time to time. Because the buses used on this road are smaller, they're usually more crowded and the younger passengers tend to get motion sickness.

### Getting Around

It's pretty easy to walk around most of Mae Hong Son. Official motorcycle taxi drivers wear a red tunic with a white number and within town they charge 20B; to Doi Kong Mu it's 50B one way or 80B return. Motorcycle drivers will also take passengers further afield but fares out of town are expensive. There are now a few túk-túk in town; most are at the bus stop. They charge 40B per trip and 50B to the airport.

Motorcycles are readily available for rent (150B to 200B per day) around town.

**PA Motorbike** (☎ 0 5361 1647; 21 Th Pradit Jong Kham) Opposite Friends House, it rents motorbikes (from 150B per day), cars and jeeps (from 1000B per day). Insurance can be bought on top.

**Avis Rent-A-Car** (☎ 0 5362 0457-8; www.avisthailand.com) Its office is located at the Mae Hong Son airport. Rates start at about 1300B per day.

### AROUND MAE HONG SON

#### Pha Bong Hot Springs

พ่อน้ำร้อนผาบ่อง

Eleven kilometres south of the capital at the Km 256 marker on Rte 108, this public park with **hot springs** (☎ 8am-sunset; private bath/bathing

room 50/400B) covers 12 sq km. You can take a private bath or rent a room. The springs can be reached on any southbound bus.

### Mae Aw & Around

แม่ฮ้อ

Another day trip from the provincial capital is to Mae Aw, 43km north of Mae Hong Son on a mountain peak at the Myanmar border. The modern Thai name for Mae Aw is Ban Rak Thai (Thai-Loving Village). Mae Aw is a Chinese KMT settlement, one of the last true KMT outposts in Thailand. Filled with old renegade fighters, this is now a quiet place with people going about their business, but the scenery on the way up here, and in the town itself, is stunning.

On the road to Mae Aw, take a left at Ban Na Pa Paek and continue 6km to the Shan village of **Ban Ruam Thai**. Look for the yellow sign indicating the **Guest House and Homestay** (☎ 0 5369 2144, 08 6916 8967; r200-300B), where simple bamboo huts positioned on a slope are surrounded by coffee plants, fruit trees and stunning scenery. Even if not staying, stop here for a brew. Passionate about coffee, the English-speaking Mr Hilary explains the process of making it, from the picking of beans to the roasting and grinding. There is a roasting room at the homestay where visitors can roast and grind their own beans. Once an opium-growing area, help from the Royal Project, which provided arabica beans and expertise, has transformed this village. Although some miss the 'beautiful flowers' from the opium crops, most see the replacement crop project as a success.

A few kilometres further north is Pang Ung lake where A-frame **wooden huts** (☎ 0 5361 1244; r 200-400B) are perched on its bank. The beautiful scenery here is more reminiscent of Switzerland than Thailand. Bamboo rafts are available here to rent (2 people 100B). Call to book ahead.

Drive back the way you came to Ban Na Pa Paek. From there it is 6km further north to Mae Aw or Ban Tak Thai, past tea and coffee plantations and jaw-dropping scenery. The town sits on the edge of a large reservoir and the faces and signs are very Chinese. At the end of the paved road there are two places to stay. **The Law Sue Rak Thai Resort** (☎ 08 9950 0955; r 600-1000B) is quite plush and has large bamboo huts looking over the reservoir to Myanmar, some of which have their own

terraces. There is a restaurant attached serving Yunnan dishes.

Behind the resort restaurant is a shop selling massive bags of tea and pineapple-, lychee- and plum-flavoured palm wine (which you can sample). The friendly family running the store has four, clean simple rooms (300B) with hot-water showers.

There's a dirt road to the border crossing, but it's not advisable to do trekking in this area. Occasionally there's fighting along the border between the KMT and the Mong Tai Army, formerly led by the infamous opium warlord Khun Sa, but now operating as four splinter units under separate leaderships. When this happens, public transport is usually suspended and you shouldn't go without a guide.

Yellow **sǎwngthǎew** to Mae Aw (60B) and villages on the way (including Ban Na Pa Paek and Ban Ruam Thai), leave from the Mae Hong Son municipal market on Th Phanit Wattana at 9am, 12pm and 3pm. It's necessary to catch one early in the morning coming back from Mae Aw. Because **sǎwngthǎew** are few and far between it's worth getting a group of people together and chartering a **sǎwngthǎew**. It will cost you 600B to 1300B (depending on whether the drivers have any paid cargo). Otherwise any tour agency will send you with a driver and room for four for 1300B.

The trip takes two hours and passes Shan, Karen and Hmong villages, the Pang Tong Summer Palace and the Pha Sua waterfall.

### THAM PLA NATIONAL PARK

อุทยานแห่งชาติถ้ำปลา

A trip to Mae Aw could be combined with a visit to **Tham Pla Forest Park** (admission free) centred on the animistic Tham Pla or **Fish Cave**, a water-filled cavern where hundreds of soro brook carp thrive. These fish grow up to 1m in length and are found only in the provinces of Mae Hong Son, Ranong, Chiang Mai, Rayong, Chanthaburi and Kancharaburi. The fish eat vegetables and insects, although the locals believe them to be vegetarian and feed them only fruit and vegetables (which can be purchased at the park entrance).

A path leads from the park entrance to a suspension bridge that crosses a stream and continues to the cave. You can see the fish through a 2-sq-metre rock hole at the base of an outer wall of the cave. A **statue** of a Hindu rishi called Nara, said to protect the holy fish from danger, stands nearby. It's a

bit anticlimactic, but the park grounds are a bucolic, shady place to hang out; picnic tables are available.

The TAT office (p435) in Mae Hong Son has some information about the park. The park is 17km northeast of Mae Hong Son on the northern side of Hwy 1095. October to February is good for star-watching and from November to May is bird-watching season. Buses to Pai pass by, but renting a motorcycle is the best way to get here.

## Mae La-Na

แม่ละนา

Between Mae Hong Son and Pai, Rte 1095 winds through an area of forests, mountains, streams, Shan and hill-tribe villages and limestone caves. Some of Mae Hong Son's most beautiful scenery is within a day's walk of the Shan village of Mae La-Na (6km north of Rte 1095 via a half-sealed road), where you can stay overnight. From here you can trek to several nearby Red and Black Lahu villages and to a few caves within a 4km to 8km radius.

It's possible to walk a 20km half-loop all the way from Mae La-Na to Tham Lot and Soppong, staying overnight in Red Lahu villages along the way. Ask for information at MaeLana Garden Home (right). Experienced riders can do this route on a sturdy dirt bike – but not alone or during the rainy season.

Local guides will lead visitors to nearby caves. **Tham Mae La-Na**, 4km from the village, is the largest and most famous – it's threaded by a 12km length of river – and a journey to the cave and through it costs 600B. Tham Paka-

rang (Coral Cave) and Tham Phet (Diamond Cave) all feature good wall formations and cost 200B each for guides. Rates are posted at a small *sàalaa* near a noodle stand. At the *sàalaa*, and at the social spot of the main village shop, is where you may contact the guides during the day. Some of the caves may not be accessible during the rainy season.

Even if you don't fancy trekking or caving, Mae La-Na can be a peaceful and mildly interesting cul-de-sac for a short stay. Beyond the Shan-style Wat Mae La-Na, a school, some houses and the previously 'downtown' area around the noodle shops and petrol pumps, there's little to see, but the surrounding mountain scenery is quite pleasing.

The Mae La-Na junction is 51.3km from Mae Hong Son, 13.3km from Soppong and 70.5km from Pai. Twelve kilometres west of the three-way junction is a short turn-off for **Wat Tham Wua Sunyata**, a peaceful forest monastery. The village is 6km north of the junction. Infrequent *sáwngtháew* from the highway to the village cost 30B per person – mornings are your best bet.

## SLEEPING & EATING

Due to major floods in 2005 most of the accommodation options were wiped out.

**MaeLana Garden Home** (☎ 0 5361 9028, 0 8706 6021; r 100-200B). The only guesthouse in town, this is a great place to stay. Set among beautifully tended gardens is a two-storey wooden house decorated with colourful Thai paintings and dripping in orchids. Rooms with a shared bathroom are clean, well maintained

and have mozzie nets and quilts. Out the back are A-frame bamboo bungalows overlooking a huge lotus pond. There is a communal area with a large dining table, where meals can be prepared (50B each). The Thai lady who runs it speaks English and is a good source of information. In the rainy season call ahead to check that someone is there.

**Wilderness Lodge** (dm/bungalow 50/250B) About 15km before Mae La-Na in Ban Nam Khong is a dirt road leading 1.4km to this lodge. A very basic place overlooking a river valley, it's only really open in the dry season.

Alternatively, Mae La-Na has a **homestay programme** (per person per night 100B), where the money goes back into a community fund. Ask the village head's permission at the *sàalaa* and he will place you in a home.

## SOPPONG & AROUND

ซอปปอง

Soppong is a small but relatively prosperous market village a couple of hours northwest of Pai and about 70km from Mae Hong Son. Since the paving of Rte 1095, Soppong and Tham Lot have become popular destinations for minivan tours from Mae Hong Son and Chiang Mai. Soppong in particular is becoming a buzzing travellers' haunt.

Although for many years this town was known only as Soppong, lately the Thai government has been calling it 'Pangmapha', since the Pangmapha District Office is now located here. The two names seem to be used interchangeably.

The area around Soppong is *the* place to come in Northern Thailand for **caving**. There are also several Shan, Lisu, Karen and Lahu **villages** that can easily be visited on foot. The best source of information on caving and trekking in the area is the owner of Cave Lodge (p445) in Tham Lot. The people at Border Bar (p444) in Soppong are also good for reliable information.

The rough back road between Soppong and Mae La-Na is popular with mountain bikers and off-highway motorcyclists.

If you're here on Tuesday, check out the **market**. Next to the Border Bar (p444), a Bangkok Bank was being built at the time of writing.

## Sleeping & Eating

All accommodation is on the main road through Soppong or is clearly marked by

signs. Every guest house has a restaurant attached.

**Lisu Mountain** (☎ 08 7175 8581; www.lisumountain.com; dm 90B, r 200-250B) Up in the mountains, four kilometres from Soppong and next to a Lisu village, Mountain Lodge is a peaceful retreat. The thatched huts on stilts have terraces and are simple but comfortable. Run by a friendly English guy and his Thai partner, they offer caving trips and motorbike tours of the area. Call in advance or turn up at Border Bar (p444) to get a pick up from town. Lisu Mountain is closed from mid-July to October.

**Soppong River Inn** (☎ 0 5361 7107; www.soppong.com; hut 150B, r 500-1200B; ☑) With basic huts or stylish rooms in a river-facing two-storey house, this charming place has something for every budget. Set among lush gardens with winding paths, the huts are basic but comfortable. The house has a wonderful shared terrace overlooking a small gorge. Its four rooms have open-air showers, heaps of character and are all different. The 850B one is the best as it has a private balcony dramatically situated right over the river. The restaurant here is very good and massage is available.

**Lemon Hill Guest House** (☎ 0 5361 7039, 0 5361 7213; lemonhill@thaimail.com; r 200-300B, bungalows 400-1000B; ☑) Near the bus stop, Lemon Hill has a friendly and funny owner who offers brand new bungalows facing the Nam Lan or rooms near the road. The large concrete and bamboo bungalows are spick-and-span, have hot-water showers, wooden floors and some Thai-style details. The rooms are less attractive but decent. The restaurant overlooking the river serves tasty food using its homegrown organic veggies.

**Jungle Guest House** (☎ 0 5361 7099; s/d 250/350B) About 500m off the main road, Jungle House has basic bungalows set on a lawned slope. Some need maintenance. The large restaurant here overlooking the river serves great food, including homemade bread.

**Little Eden Guest House** (☎ 0 5361 7054; www.littleeden-guesthouse.com; r 420-1500B; ☑ ☑ ☑) The nine A-frame bungalows around a pleasant, grass-decked pool are well kept with hot-water showers. Yet, it's the beautiful two-storey 'houses' that makes this place special. Perfect for families or a group of friends, they are stylishly decorated, have living rooms, interesting nooks and crannies, and terraces with hammocks. One has its own fireplace and

## OPIUM & TREKKING

Some guides are very strict now about forbidding the smoking of opium on treks. This seems to be a good idea, since one problem trekking companies have had in the past is dealing with opium-addicted guides! Volunteers who work in tribal areas also say opium smoking sets a bad example for young people in the villages.

Opium is traditionally a condoned vice of the elderly, yet an increasing number of young people in the villages are now taking opium, heroin and amphetamines. This is possibly due in part to the influence of young trekkers, who may smoke once and a few weeks later be hundreds of kilometres away, while the villagers continue to face the temptation every day.

Addiction has negative effects for the village as well as the individual's health, including a reduced male labour force and corresponding increase in women's workloads (most addicts are men) and reduced overall agricultural production. Also, an increase in the number of villagers injecting heroin (needles are often shared) has led to skyrocketing rates of HIV infection in hill-tribe villages. Given the already high incidence of HIV infection among northern Thai prostitutes, some welfare groups say that entire tribal communities will be wiped out unless the rate of infection can be stopped.

is right on the river. There are also two chic rooms in the owner's house. The owner can speak Thai, English, Danish and German and organises all sorts of activities in the area.

**Lisu Homestay** (☎ 08 9998 4886; www.lisuhilltribe.crafts.blogspot.com; room incl food and 4hrs of classes a day 1000B) This place offers staying in a Lisu village and various holistic programmes, from learning Lisu healing remedies and massage to practising meditation. Check out the website for more details; it needs to be booked in advance.

**Border Bar** (☎ 10am-11pm) Next to Lemon Hill, this new, tiny bar is the place to find out about what's going on around Soppong. Perch at the bar or sit by the rustic wood tables and drink beers or wine in a friendly atmosphere. Run by an English and Thai couple, they also run Lisu Mountain (p443).

**Tribal Café & Connection** (internet per hr 50B; ☎ 8am-9pm) Opposite Little Eden, this new café has internet and serves good fresh coffee and snacks.

## Tham Lot

ถ้ำลอด

About 8km north of Soppong is Tham Lot (pronounced *thâm lâwt* and also known as *thâm nâam lâwt*), a large limestone cave with impressive stalagmites and 'coffin caves' (see boxed text below), and a wide stream running through it. Along with Tham Nam Lang fur-

ther west, it's one of the largest known caves in Thailand. The total length of the cave is 1600m and for 600m the stream runs through it.

At the **Nature Education Centre** (☎ 8am-5:30pm) and entrance, you must hire a gas lantern and guide for 150B (one guide leads one to four people) to take you through the caverns; visitors are not permitted to tour the caves alone. Apart from the main chamber, there are also three side chambers – Column Cavern, Doll Cave and Coffin Cave – that can be reached by ladders. It takes around two hours to explore the whole thing. Depending on the time of year it is necessary to take a bamboo raft for some or all of the journey through the caves. Access to parts of the cave may be limited between August and October because of water levels.

From the entrance to the exit and taking in the Column Cavern, Doll Cave and Coffin Cave, the rafts (up to four adults) cost 400B return, or 300B one way. If going one way you can walk back from outside of the cave (20 minutes). In the dry season it may be possible to wade to the Doll Cave and then take a raft through to the exit (300B return/200B one way). Try and be at the exit at sunset when hundreds of thousands of cave adapted swifts pour into Tham Lot and cling to their bedtime stalagmites.

Tham Lot is a good example of community-based tourism as all of the guides at the cave are from local Shan villages.

### COFFIN CAVES

The 900-sq-km area of Pangmapha district is famous for its high concentration of cave systems, where over 200 have been found. Apart from Tham Lot, one of its most famous is Tham Nam Lang, which is 20km northwest of Soppong near Ban Nam Khong. It's almost 9km long and said to be one of the largest caves in the world in terms of volume.

More than 83 of the district's 200 limestone caverns are known to contain ancient teak coffins carved from solid tree logs. Up to 9m long, the coffins are typically suspended on wooden scaffolds inside the caves. The coffins have been carbon dated between 1200 and 2200 years old. The ends are usually carved and Thai anthropologists have identified at least 50 different design schemes. Pottery remains associated with the sites have also been found, some of which is displayed in the Nature Education Centre (above) at Tham Lot.

The local Thais know these burial caves as *thâm phii* (spirit caves), or *thâm phii maen* (coffin caves). It is not known who made them or why they were placed where they are, but because most caves have less than ten coffins it indicates that not everyone was accorded such an elaborate burial. Similar coffins have been found in karst areas west of Bangkok and also in Borneo, China and the Philippines, but the highest concentration of coffin caves from this period is in Pangmapha.

The eight coffin caves that scientists are investigating at the moment are off-limits to the public, but John Spies at Cave Lodge (opposite) may know which coffin caves are possible to explore. The most easily accessible one is the coffin cave chamber at Tham Lot.

## SLEEPING & EATING

☎ **Cave Lodge** (☎ 0 5361 7203; www.cavelodge.com; dm 60B, bungalows 300-450B) This popular place is run by the unofficial expert on the region's caves, John Spies. Passionate about caving and fluent in Shan, his book 'Caves, Coffins and Chaos' details the 25 years of adventures he has had in the area. The charming bungalows here are all unique and dot a junglelike hill leading down to the river. The setting is beautiful and options for adventure abound. Choose from caving and kayaking trips, guided or unguided treks (good maps are available) or just hang out in the beautiful communal area. The traditional Shan herbal sauna is an experience and the restaurant is very good. Tham Lot is a short walk away.

A row of **outdoor restaurants** (dishes 15-40B; ☎ 9am-6pm) outside the Tham Lot park entrance offers simple Thai fare.

## Ban Nam Rin

บ้านน้ำริน

At this Lisu village 9km south of Soppong towards Pai (or 34km coming from Pai to Soppong), you can stay at **Lisu Lodge** (☎ 08 9953 4243; r 300-600B). This quiet place is set in beautiful mountain scenery with a garden filled with fruit trees. Choices range from simple, shared bathroom A-frames to wood and stone bungalows with lovely recycled teak furniture, tasteful Thai styling and terraces. A family bungalow is available too. The owner can give information on nearby hill-tribe villages to visit, plus he makes a wicked mulberry liqueur.

## Getting There & Around

Pai to Mae Hong Son buses stop in Soppong and there are six a day in either direction. From Mae Hong Son to Soppong, buses (ordinary/air-con/air-con minibus 45/60/150B) take 1½ hours. The trip between Pai and Soppong (ordinary/minivan 35/75B) takes one to 1½ hours.

Motorcycle taxis stationed at the bus stop in Soppong will take passengers to Tham Lot or the Cave Lodge for 70B per person; private pick-up trucks will take you and up to five other people for 200B.

## PAI

ปาย

pop 3000

Pai (pronounced like the English word 'bye', not 'pie') is something of a travellers' mecca.

It isn't a wat-filled town emanating Thai-ness. Instead it's a little corner of the world that happens to be in Thailand that seems to attract artists, musicians and foodies. It's got a live-music scene you won't find anywhere else, and some affordable modern art and a delicious range of international culinary treats. Oh, and it's in the middle of a gorgeous green valley with hot springs, rice fields and a lovely lazy river. However, its popularity does surpass its capacity and the town can feel completely overrun by foreigners in the high season. It remains to be seen what the added effect of the new Chiang Mai to Pai flight will do to the laid-back scene of the town.

Most of the town's population are Shan and Thai, but there's also a small but visible Muslim Chinese population. Attracted by easy living, Pai also features a sizeable collection of long-term visitors – mostly *faràng* and Japanese – who use the town as a place to chill out between excursions elsewhere in Asia.

## Information

There are plenty of places around town, especially on Th Chaisongkham, that offer internet services (40B per hour). **Pai Post** (www.paipost.com) is the free local English language newspaper. It covers cultural events, travel destinations, political pieces, and some restaurant and bar openings, and can be picked up around town.

**Krung Thai Bank** (Th Rangsiyanon) Has an ATM and foreign-exchange service.

**Siam Books** (☎ 0 5369 9075; Th Chaisongkham) Has a good selection of new and used books.

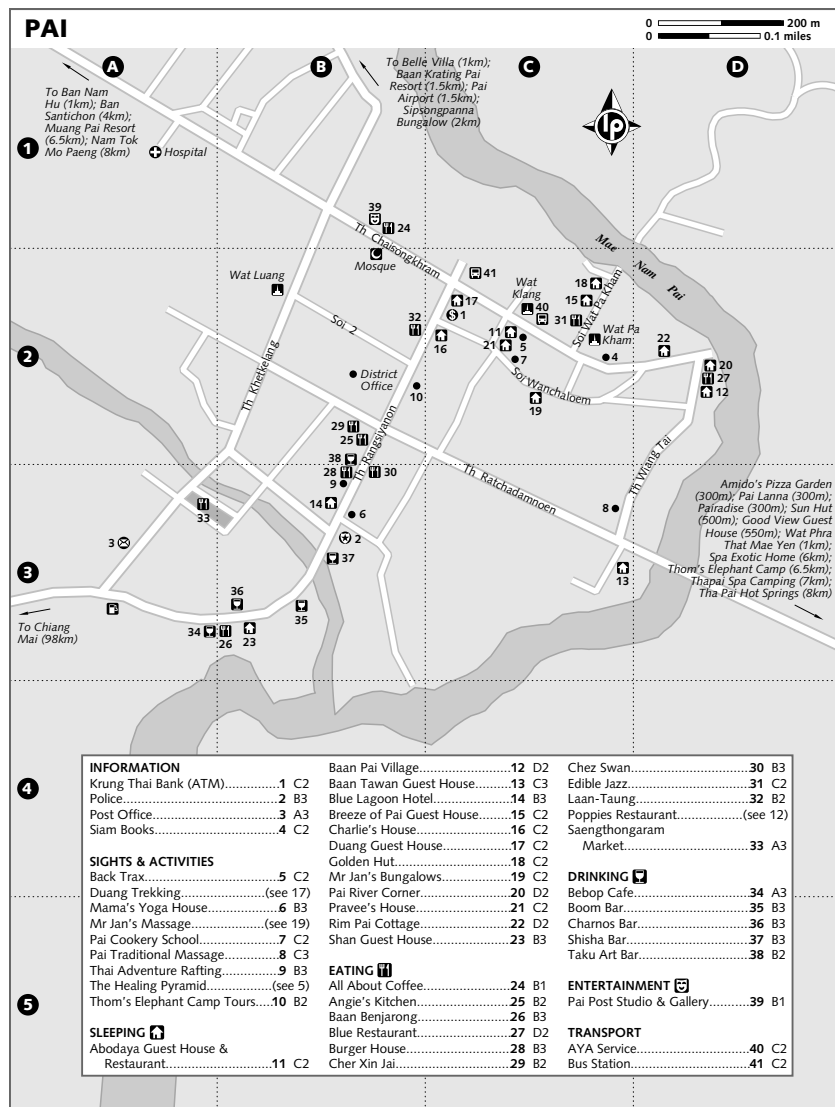
## Sights

### BAN SANTICHON

บ้านสันติชน

Northwest of town, a Shan village, a Lahu village, a Lisu village, a KMT village called **Ban Santichon** (San Ti Chuen in Yunnanese,) and **Nam Tok Mo Paeng** can all be visited on foot. The Shan, Lisu and KMT villages lie within 4km of Pai, while the Lahu village is near Nam Tok Mo Paeng, which is another 4km further from town (8km total).

You can cut the hike in half by taking a Mae Hong Son-bound bus north about 5km and getting off at a signpost for the falls; from the highway it's only 4km. A couple of pools at the base of the falls are suitable for swimming and are best just after the rainy season, October to early December.



### WAT PHRA THAT MAE YEN

วัดพระธาตุแม่เย็น

This temple sits atop a hill and has good views overlooking the valley. Walk 1km east from the main intersection in town, across a stream and through a village, to get to the stairs (353 steps) that lead to the top. Or take the 400m sealed road that follows a different route to the top.

### THA PAI HOT SPRINGS

บ่อน้ำร้อนท่าปาย

Across Mae Nam Pai and 8km southeast of town via a paved road is **Tha Pai Hot Springs** (admission free; soaking 50B), a well-kept park 1km from the road. A scenic stream flows through the park; the stream mixes with the hot springs in places to make pleasant bath-

ing areas. There are also small public bathing houses into which hot spring water is piped. There is a camp site here in the dry season (per pitch 30B; no tents for rent).

### Activities

#### TREKKING & RAFTING

All the guesthouses in town can provide information on local trekking and a few do guided treks for as little as 700B per day if there are no rafts or elephants involved. Among the more established local agencies are **Back Trax** (☎ 0 5369 9739; [backtraxinpai@yahoo.com](mailto:backtraxinpai@yahoo.com); Th Chaisongkhram) and **Duang Trekking** (at Duang Guest House; p448).

Whatever rafting company you choose in Pai, gauge their attitude about security before you hand over any baht. Make sure they are serious about using safety equipment, that your life jacket fits well and you have a safety helmet. Thai Adventure is considered the most professional outfit in Pai.

**Thai Adventure Rafting** (TAR; ☎ 0 5369 9111; [www.activethailand.com/rafting](http://www.activethailand.com/rafting); Th Rangsiyanon) Run by a French guy who has 18 years' experience on the Mae Pai and other rivers in the region, this is the safest and best place to do white-water rafting in Pai.

It leads excellent two-day white-water Mae Pai rafting trips in sturdy rubber rafts, from Pai to Mae Hong Son for 2400B per person including food, rafting equipment, camping gear, dry bags and insurance. On the way, rafters visit a waterfall, a fossil reef and hot springs; one night is spent at the company's permanent riverside camp. One-day trips are also available for 1500B on slightly easier rapids. The main rafting season runs from mid-June to mid-February; after that the trips aren't usually offered. Thai Adventure Rafting also has offices in Chiang Mai.

#### ELEPHANT RIDING

**Thom's Pai Elephant Camp Tours** (☎ 0 5369 9286; [www.geocities.com/pai\\_tours/](http://www.geocities.com/pai_tours/); Th Rangsiyanon; 1/2hr rides per person 300/450B) offers jungle rides year-round from Thom's camp southeast of Pai near the hot springs. You can choose between riding bareback or in a seat, and some rides include swimming with the elephants – a barrel of laughs on a bouncing elephant in the river. Rides include a soak in the hot-spring-fed tubs afterwards. Thom's can also arrange a variety of trips, including bamboo or rubber rafting, hill-tribe village stays or any combina-

tion of the aforementioned for about 1000B per person per day.

#### MASSAGE & SPA TREATMENTS

**Pai Traditional Massage** (☎ 0 5369 9121; [pttm2001@hotmail.com](mailto:pttm2001@hotmail.com); 1 Th Wiang Tai; 1/1½/2hr massage 150/230/300B, sauna per visit 70B, 3-day massage course around 2500B; ☎ 4.30am-8.30pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-8.30pm Sat & Sun) Being rebuilt after a fire at the time of writing, it should be open again by the time this is published. Pai Traditional Massage has very good northern-Thai massage, as well as a sauna where you can steam yourself in *sāmūn phrai* (medicinal herbs). The couple that do the massages are graduates of Chiang Mai's Old Medicine Hospital. Massage and sauna services are available on weekends.

**Mr Jan's Massage** (Soi Wanchaloem 18; per hr 150B) For those into the rougher stuff, this place in town employs a harder Shan-Burmese massage technique.

**The Healing Pyramid** (☎ 0 9998 2031; Th Chaisongkhram) Using herbal based products, spa packages and one-hour sessions include body scrubs, aromatherapy massage and Reiki, as well as the more dubious sounding psychic surgery and crystal healing. It's located about 6km out of town towards the waterfall. Book at Back Trax (see left) in town.

**Thapai Spa Camping** (☎ 0 1951 2784; [www.thapaispa.com](http://www.thapaispa.com); Ban Mae Hi) Next door to Spa Exotic Home, this hotel has good spa facilities making the most of the nearby hot-spring waters. Come here for the reasonably priced mud wraps, massages and spring-water treatments. The rooms at Thapai, however, are overpriced and plain.

There are plenty of traditional Thai massage places around town charging around 150B an hour.

#### COOKERY COURSE

**Pai Cookery School** (☎ 08 1706 3799; Soi Wanchaloem; courses 750-800B per day) offers a choice of three courses (red, green or yellow) with different dishes to learn. The course typically involves a trip to the market for ingredients, learning how to make five meals, getting a free recipe book and, of course, eating your creations at the end. One- to three-day courses are available.

#### YOGA

**Mama's Yoga House** (☎ 08 9954 4981; Th Rangsiyanon; one-day course 500B, 100B per hour) Just north of

the police station, Mama offers Hatha Yoga classes and courses in small groups.

### VOLUNTEERING

If you want to spend longer in the region and put something back **Travel to Teach** ([www.travel-to-teach.org/thai/pai.html](http://www.travel-to-teach.org/thai/pai.html)) organises affordable programmes where you can teach English in and around Pai. You need to apply at least two months before departure and placements can last from one week to six months.

### Sleeping

There's lots of accommodation choice in Pai. If you're coming to enjoy the quiet, idyllic countryside, or plan on staying for a while, head out of town to one of the 'off-map' spots. Budget places are the staple, but more places are moving into the midrange, and the top end has arrived.

There have been massive floods in Pai in the last few years; a particularly bad one was in 2005, in which some riverside bungalows were swept away. If in Pai for the rainy season and you want to stay right on the river, make sure it's a sturdy bungalow.

### IN TOWN

#### Budget

**Golden Hut** (☎ 0 5369 9949; dm/d 50/100B, r 300-500B) This place is popular for its laid-back atmosphere, garden setting and proximity to town and river. The thatched huts on stilts, dorm beds (not available in rainy season) and double rooms in a large bamboo-thatch building are simple but clean. Some rooms need maintenance because of flood damage. There is a restaurant on site.

**Shan Guest House** (☎ 0 5369 9162; r 100-300B) If you want to be close to Pai's nightlife, this well-run and well-worn spot on the southern edge of town off Th Rangsiyanon is a decent option. A new, rather grand, dining and lounging pavilion sits in the middle of a big pond. Long-term discounts are available.

**Charlie's House** (☎ 0 5369 9039; Th Rangsiyanon; r 100-600B; ☹) The friendly proprietor offers a range of options. Very clean, cheap and in the centre of town but most rooms are quite stark.

**Mr Jan's Bungalows** (☎ 0 5369 9554; Soi Wanchaloem 18; r from 200B) Although set around a lovely medicinal herb garden, the rooms are very plain and rather dark. Massages and herbal saunas are available in high season.

**Pravee's House** (☎ 0 5369 9368; Soi Wanchaloem; r with fan 200-300B, r with air con 600B; ☹) Tucked in the corner, this attractive house offers large, clean rooms with some decent furnishings and small verandas. There is a small garden out front.

**Duang Guest House** (☎ 0 5369 9101; Th Chaisongkhram; r 200-500B) This rambling complex of two-storey houses, row houses and bungalows is a reasonable choice if you want to be right in town. Being opposite the bus station it can get noisy, so take a room at the back. Shared bathrooms need maintenance.

**Abodaya Guest House & Restaurant** (☎ 0 5369 9041; Th Chaisongkhram; r 300B) The rooms at this guesthouse are behind the restaurant of the same name. The modern, clean rooms have some cosy touches and are a good deal, with cable TV, hot-water showers and a central location. It lacks a garden though.

**Breeze of Pai Guest House** (☎ 08 4170 5184, 08 1998 4597; helendavis2@yahoo.co.uk; Soi Wat Pa Kham; r 300-400B) Behind Golden Hut, this brand new place is down a quiet *soi* but right by the action. It has six large A-frame bungalows fitted out in contemporary Thai style, hot-water bathrooms and hammocks. The row of spacious rooms beside them have attractive decking, bamboo plants outside and a simple yet chic décor inside.

**Baan Tawan Guest House** (☎ 0 5369 8116/7; www.baantawaninpai.com; 114 Mu 4, Wiang Tai; r 300-800B) The older, more charming, more expensive, riverside two-storey bungalows made with salvaged teak are the reason to stay here. The newer, cement rooms hardly compare, but will do in a pinch. It's quite a social place with plenty of balcony hammocks and a pool table. Motorcycles and inner tubes (for floating down the river) are available for rent.

**Baan Pai Village** (☎ 0 5369 8152; www.baanpaivillage.com; Th Wiang Tai; r 500-650B) Behind Poppies Restaurant, this charming new place has a collection of wooden bungalows set among winding pathways. Beautifully designed, each bungalow has floor-to-ceiling sliding windows, large, quite plush bathrooms, rattan mats and axe cushions for relaxing, plus spacious terraces to enjoy the garden.

### Midrange

**Blue Lagoon Hotel** (☎ 0 5369 9998; Th Rangsiyanon; r 500-750B; ☹) Clean, characterless motel-like rooms with cable TV and hot-water showers

surround a sizeable pool. There is a restaurant and bar attached with a pool table and big screen to watch movies.

**Rim Pai Cottage** (☎ 0 5369 9133; www.rimpaicottage.com; Th Chaisongkhram; r & bungalows from 1000B; ☹) This place feels like a small village from another time period and has a stylish collection of dark wood bungalows and rooms set in a lovely garden. The interiors have a romantic feel with their mosquito nets and Thai decorating details, and the open bathrooms are particularly nice. In the cheaper rooms you may hear your neighbours. There are also some villas on the river. Rim Pai is an excellent deal in low season when the prices drop dramatically.

### Top End

**Pai River Corner** (☎ 0 5369 9049; www.pairivercorner.com; Th Chaisongkhram; r 3000-6000B; ☹) By the river in town, these elegant rooms are exquisitely designed with beautiful Thai furniture, gorgeous colours and lots of deluxe details. Definitely the place for the design conscious, all have river facing balconies and some have lounges and interior spa pool. Discounts are available in low season.

### OUT OF TOWN

Southeast of town are a number of places to stay along the road that leads to the hot springs, not very far from Wat Phra That Mae Yen.

### Budget

**Good View Guest House** (Ban Mae Yen; r 100-250B) Near Sun Hut but further up the hill, this sociable place has simple, shared bathroom A-frame bungalows and rooms with views of the mountains and rice fields. There are lots of thatched communal areas with hammocks, and places for campfires.

**Sun Hut** (☎ 0 5369 9730, 08 1301 3443; pai\_the\_sunhut@yahoo.com; 28/1 Ban Mae Yen; r 350-1100B) Set down a forested pathway, this eclectic collection of zodiac-inspired bungalows is one of the more unique and calming places in the area. Bungalows are nicely spaced apart and more expensive bungalows have porches and lots of charm. There is an attractive communal area with hammocks. The turn-off for Sun Hut comes after a bridge over a stream, about 200m before the entrance to Wat Phra That Mae Yen. Fifty percent discounts are possible in low season.

### Midrange

**Pairadise** (☎ 0 9838 7521; www.pairadise.com; 98 Mu 1, Ban Mae Yen; bungalows 650-1000B) Atop the ridge, Pairadise features super-stylish, spacious and cosy bungalows amid a pretty garden. The décor is understated and very chic, with gold leaf lotus murals, beautiful rustic bathrooms, and terraces with hammocks. The more expensive bungalows have a separate living room, desk and day bed. All surround a spring-fed pond that is suitable for swimming.

**Spa Exotic Home** (☎ 0 1917 9351, 0 5369 8088; 86 Mu 2, Ban Mae Hi; bungalows 850-1000B) All of the charming bungalows here sit around a beautifully landscaped garden. Each has a private tub in partially open-air bathrooms for enjoying the on-site spring water. There are also open-air tubs outside. Service is conscientious and the overall atmosphere is relaxing. Discounts of 35% are available from March to September. The restaurant serves good Thai and Western food.

**Pai Lanna** (☎ 08 9691 3367; www.pailanna.com; 169 Mu 1, Ban Mae Yen; bungalows incl breakfast 900B) Next to Pairadise, this brand new place has woven bamboo, thatched bungalows with a good view of the mountains. Rooms are simple and neat, and all have hot-water showers, Thai axe cushions for relaxing, mozzie nets and a few stylish touches.

**Sipsongpanna Bungalow** (☎ 0 5369 8259, 08 1881 7631; sipsongpanna33@hotmail.com; 60 Mu 5, Ban Juang, Wiang Neua; bungalows from 900B) These wooden riverside bungalows are rustic and a bit quirky with a mix of lacy curtains, abstract art and beds on a different level. The front of some bungalows open fully to terraces overlooking the river. Bathrooms have hot water but are basic. There is a vegetarian café and Thai vegetarian-cooking lessons are available.

**Muang Pai Resort** (☎ 0 5327 0906; www.muangpai-resort.infothai.com; 94 Mu 4, Baan Mor Paeng; bungalows from 1200B; ☹ ☹) Muang Pai is known for its pleasant, medium-sized swimming pool with loungers. The bungalows and garden are so neat they almost feel plastic. This is a good option for a family with transport.

### Top End

**Baan Krating Pai Resort** (☎ 0 5369 8255, www.baankrating.com/pai; 119 Th Wiang Nua; r 2700-5500B; ☹ ☹) These bungalows on stilts are all beautifully decorated with white linen, rattan and teak, and have large windows overlooking



manicured gardens or rice paddies. The restaurant serves its home-grown jasmine rice with tasty Thai dishes.

**Belle Villa** (☎ 0 5369 8226-7; www.bellevillaresort.com; 118 Th Wiang Nua; bungalows 3600B; ☎ ☎ ☎) These tasteful bungalows are very comfortable and have some style but not the 'wow' factor you'd hope for at this price. Attached terraces look over the neatly lawned gardens, and rooms come with cable TV and DVD players. The infinity pool overlooking the river is a nice bonus. There is a restaurant on site and free transfers to town.

## Eating

Pai's range of eating options reflects the diversity of international residents and visitors, but there is also a healthy selection of well-priced Thai places. The places that we have selected are located in town.

**Cher Xin Jai** (Pure Vegetarian Food; Th Ratchadamnoen; dishes 20B; ☎ 8am-5pm) Opposite the District Office, this simple place with low tables on rattan mats serves delicious and cheap vegan and vegetarian Thai food. Choose from the dishes in the metal trays out front, which are filled with much tofu and veg plus brown husky rice. There's good fruit and soya milk shakes too.

**Edible Jazz** (Soi Wat Pa Kham; dishes 30-90B; ☎ 2-11pm) The cushions-on-the-floor atmosphere make this a good choice for a leisurely late-night pasta, sandwiches or Mexican food. Jazz CDs play in the background and occasionally the Thai owner plays improvisational acoustic guitar. Full cocktail and espresso menu.

**Angie's Kitchen** (☎ 0 5369 9105; Th Rangsiyanon; dishes 30-100B; ☎ 7.30am-10pm) The 60B set meals are the best deal. The menu includes the typical Thai and Western dishes. It's a nice place to read the paper and catch up on world events over breakfast. Lots of unusual fruit shake mixes too.

**Blue Restaurant** (Th Chaisongkhram; dishes 30-180B; ☎ 8am-11pm) Next to Pai River Corner resort, this pleasant open restaurant has fantastic lassis, recommended burgers, lots of salads, and vegetarian Thai options.

**[Baan Benjarong** (☎ 0 5369 8010; Th Rangsiyanon; dishes 40-120B; ☎ 11am-10pm) Although this place doesn't look much from outside it serves the best Thai food in Pai. Dishes like stewed, salted crabs in coconut milk, and spicy banana flower salad are delectable. Out the back are tables with views of the rice paddies. There's ice cream too.

**[All About Coffee** (☎ 0 5369 9429; Th Chaisongkhram; dishes 45-75B; ☎ 8.30am-6.30pm) This stylish little bohemian place serves eye-opening coffee drinks and the best French toast in town. Instead of pop music, expect American ragtime, jazz or blues. Yummy open sandwiches are made with homemade bread.

**Poppies Restaurant** (Th Wiang Tai; dishes 50-70B) This stylish open restaurant serves tasty Thai and Western food on wooden tables surrounded by dark red Chinese parasols and lots of colourful lanterns. The pumpkin soup is really delicious and the salads have been recommended.

**Chez Swan** (☎ 0 5369 8253, 0 5369 9111; Th Rangsiyanon; dishes 70-190B; ☎ 8am-11pm) Set in an atmospheric wooden house, this cosy, romantic place serves French bistro-style food, like goat cheese salad and chicken in red wine sauce, as well as other European dishes. Try the very English crusty pies or the various Italian pasta dishes. The bar is a friendly place for a drink and there's also a pleasant seating area out back.

**Burger House** (☎ 0 5369 9093; Th Rangsiyanon; dishes 75-200B; ☎ 9am-9pm) If you are hankering after a big juicy burger this is the place to come. Try the super-high Barbarian Burger with its two quarter pounders, two cheeses and special sauce. Or if you need a fortifying breakfast, go for the Truck Driver Special, which will probably take most of the morning to get through.

**Amido's Pizza Garden** (dishes 80-160B) The truly great pizza at this open-air restaurant is not to be missed. It also features a variety of pasta dishes and daily specials (including delicious beef Bourguignon). It's about 300m east of the permanent bridge over Mae Nam Pai, near the school on Th Ratchadamnoen.

**Laan-Taung** (66 Th Rangsiyanon; dishes 129-149B, set menu for two 250B) This elegant restaurant looks very romantically Thai. On two floors, in an attractive wooden building, beautifully presented and tasty Thai dishes are served with the accompaniment of classical music. The downside is it's overpriced and a tad pretentious.

During the day, there's takeaway food at **Saengthongaram Market** (Th Khetkelang).

## Drinking & Entertainment

Pai boasts a small but happening live-music scene.

**Bebop Cafe** (Th Rangsiyanon; ☎ 6pm-1am) This old favourite is popular with travellers and has live

music nightly (from about 9.30pm), playing blues, R&B and rock.

**[Charnos Bar** (Th Rangsiyanon; ☎ 8pm-1am) The coolest-looking bar in Pai, this intimate place has a slinky '70s feel with its red easy chairs, bright pink swaying lamps and kitschy toys in display cabinets. Trendy Thais frequent it, and good house and funk are played.

**Shisha Bar** (Th Rangsiyanon; ☎ 5pm-1am) By the bridge, this cosy place is filled with people lounging on colourful sofas and smoking hookahs with flavours ranging from mango to cappuccino.

**Pai Post Studio & Gallery** (Th Chaisongkhram; ☎ 7.30-9.30pm Sat) Most of the time, the back of this white wooden building is home to Pai's English-language rag, and the front is a white space for photography. But every Saturday night it has another incarnation, when saxophones and bass come out to play some chilled live jazz.

**Taku Art Bar** (Th Rangsiyanon; ☎ 10am-11.30pm) Partially owned by a well-known Thai artist, Taku is the main centre for visiting Thai hipsters. It's pop arty décor is really funky and the bartender has a knack for spinning the right CD at the right moment. There's folky/rock live music on Tuesday, Friday and Saturday.

**Boom Bar** (Th Rangsiyanon; ☎ 6pm-1am) This big, brand new, partly open-air bar has lots of seating, a pool table and table football. There should be live bands by the time this comes out.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

At the time of writing the Pai airstrip renovations had finished and a new terminal had been added. From February 2007 a new Chiang Mai to Pai flight, through a company called Siam General Aviation (Siam GA), is scheduled to commence. It is estimated to cost one way/return 1450/2900B and will take 20 minutes. Contact Siam GA to book (☎ 0 2664 6099, 0 2641 4190; www.sga.aero). The airport is located around 2km north of the city along Rte 1095.

### BUS

Buses (ordinary/air-con 80/142B) leave Chiang Mai's Arcade bus station five times a day.

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It's only 134km but the trip takes three to four hours due to the steep winding road. From Mae Hong Son there are also five buses a day; this winding 111km stretch takes around three hours (ordinary/air-con/air-con minibus 70/98/150B).

Ordinary buses depart from Pai's bus station for Chiang Mai (80B) at 8.30am, 10.30am, 2pm and 4pm. The air-con minibuses (150B) leave from the same station almost every hour from 9.30am to 6pm. Ordinary buses for Mae Hong Son (70B) leave the bus station at 7am, 8.30am, 11am, 1pm and 4pm. Air-con minibuses to Mae Hong Son (150B) depart almost every hour from 8.30am to 3.30pm. Regular buses from Pai to Soppong cost 35B ordinary and 70B for air-con minivan. The trip takes 1½ hours.

**AYA Service** (☎ 0 5369 9940; Th Chaisongkhram) Book your ticket in advance at AYA; it runs air-con minivan buses to Chiang Mai (150B, 3hrs), Tham Thom (400B, 5hrs), Mae Sai (500B, 6hrs) and Chiang Khong (600B, 10hrs).

## Getting Around

Most of Pai is accessible on foot. For local excursions you can rent bicycles or motorcycles at several locations around town. A place next door to Duang Guest House (p448) rents out bicycles for 80B per day. Motorcycles can be rented at **AYA Service** (☎ 0 5369 9940; Th Chaisongkhram; bikes per 24 hr 100cc/larger 80/100-500B).

Motorcycle taxis wait at the taxi stand at the bus stop. Fares are 30B to Ban Nam Hu and Ban Wiang Neua; 40B to Nam Hu Lisaw and Nam Hu Jin; and 50B to Tha Pai.

## AROUND PAI

Pai can be used as a base for excursions to hill-tribe villages, such as Ban Santichon (p445). Further afield, the area northeast of Pai has so far been little explored. A network of unpaved roads - some are little more than footpaths - skirts a mountain ridge and the Mae Taeng valley all the way to the Myanmar border near **Wiang Haeng** and **Ban Piang Haeng**, passing several villages along the way. Near Ban Piang Haeng is a Shan temple built by Khun Sa, the opium warlord.