

# Lower Southern Gulf



If you're shopping for penny-pinching paradises, Ko Samui, Ko Pha-Ngan and Ko Tao proffer fabulous bang for your baht. Bobbing like plump, green apples in the Gulf of Thailand, the Samui archipelago epitomises an exotic Eden fantasy for a fraction of the price. Calm, gin-clear seas, warm as a bath and sparkling a million shades of green, stretch on forever. Swaying palms and long stretches of porcelain sand give you the choice of basking until bronze, reading trashy romances or sipping juice from a coconut. When it comes to turning beach dreams into reality, these islands are master magicians.

Ko Samui is best for pampering, attracting a crowd of jetsetters, honeymooners, families and, unfortunately, men searching for love with Thai prostitutes. The villas here can come with private pools, restaurants are Michelin-star worthy and water sports are plentiful.

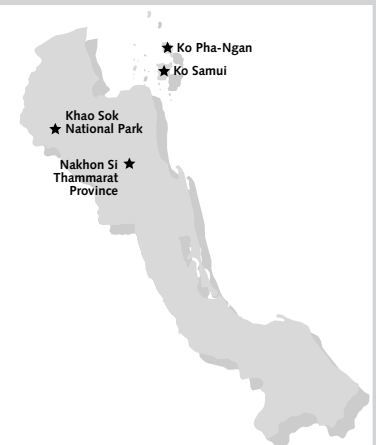
Citizens of the world wanting to twirl firesticks and dance till dawn will find their answer in Ko Pha-Ngan. Not only is the backpacker Mecca legendary for throwing the planet's best Full Moon parties, its ramshackle bungalows can go for less than three Singha's at the bar.

Divers enjoy mellow Ko Tao where open-water certification is cheap and the snorkelling is the best in the gulf.

For an entirely different angle, head south along the mainland's coast. Off the madly trodden 'banana pancake trail', the Deep South is the crucible of Buddhist and Muslim cultures. Unfortunately, at the time of research, continued violence made travel to this region dicey. See the travel warning on p636 for more.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Lazing the day away on Ko Samui's sun-kissed **Chaweng Beach** (p586), then indulging in an oceanside massage
- Experiencing the legendary Ko Pha-Ngan **Full Moon party** (p615)
- Sleeping in a boutique hotel on tranquil and gorgeous **Hat Bo Phut** (p586), Ko Samui's rising seashore star
- Tramping around lost waterfalls and million-year-old rainforests in impressive **Khao Sok National Park** (p582)
- Relishing the solitude on a picturesque beach along the coast of **Nakhon Si Thammarat Province** (p626)



## FAST FACTS

- **Best Time to Visit** November to April
- **Population** 5.2 million

## History

Indian traders first visited the Gulf of Thailand around 600 BC and introduced Hinduism, which rapidly became the principal faith in the area. By 230 BC, when Chinese traders showed up on southern shores, large parts of Thailand had been incorporated into the kingdom of Funan, the first state in Southeast Asia. At its peak the state included large parts of Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam and had active trade with agrarian communities along the Malay Peninsula, as far south as modern-day Pattani and Yala. Funan peaked as a nation under Jayavarman I, who ruled from AD 478 to 514, and then went into rapid decline.

Following this decline a series of city-states developed in the upper southern gulf. Tambralinga, which had its capital at Ligor on the site of present-day Nakhon Si Thammarat, was one of the most notable. It became part of the Srivijaya kingdom, a confederation of maritime states that ruled southern Thailand and Malaysia from the 7th to 13th centuries. The Srivijaya became hugely wealthy from tolls extracted from traffic through the Strait of Melaka. Tambralinga and nearby states adopted Buddhism in the 13th century, while those further south fell under the influence of Islam, creating a religious boundary that persists to this day in southern Thailand.

Islam came to southern Thailand from Malaysia during the reign of Sultan Iskandar, reaching Pattani by 1387 and spreading as far north as Songkhla. The Malay dialect of Yawi became the main language of the Deep South and Islam replaced Buddhism through the region.

Songkhla, Pattani, Narathiwat, Yala and the Andaman coast province of Satun were not officially a part of Thailand until 1902, when Rama V annexed them in an attempt to prevent Thai territory from being ceded to the British, who were then in control of Malaysia. Culturally quite different from the rest of the country, these provinces were comprehensively neglected by the central govern-

ment over the next 50 years. Islamic traditions and the Yawi language were discouraged by the region's non-Malay administrators and systematic abuses of power contributed to growing separatist sentiments.

In 1957 Muslim resentment against the ruling Buddhist government reached boiling point and separatists initiated a guerrilla war with the aim of creating a separate Muslim state in southern Thailand. The main armed faction was the Pattani United Liberation Organisation (PULO), which launched a campaign of bombings and armed attacks throughout the 1970s and '80s. The movement began to decline in the 1990s, when Bangkok presented a peace deal consisting of greater cultural freedom and autonomy for the south and an amnesty for PULO members.

For a while the situation in the south subsided and it seemed the separatist movement had diffused, but after Thaksin Shinawatra became prime minister in 2001 PULO resumed its activities.

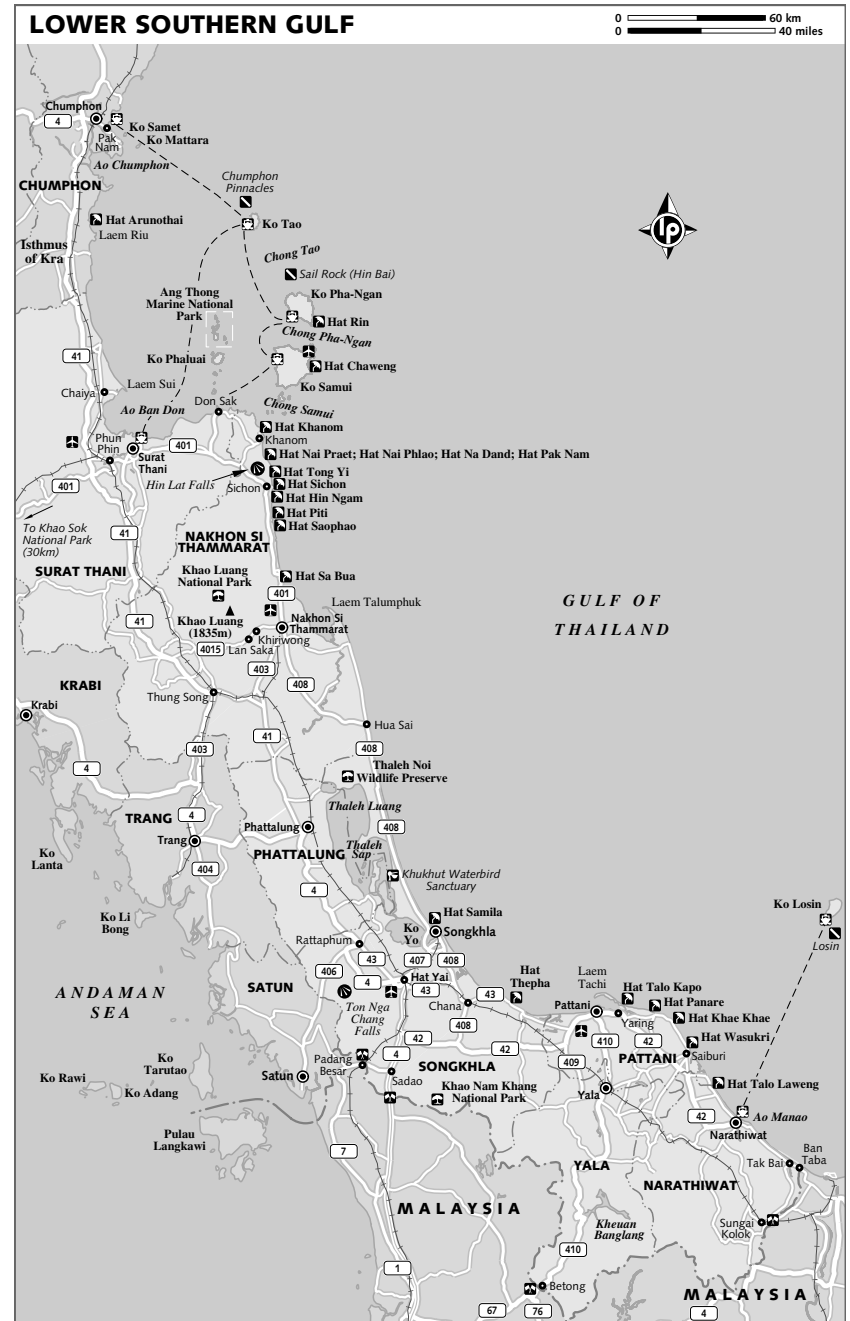
Violence in this region increased markedly in the month leading up to the 19 September coup, when Thaksin and his government were peacefully ousted (see p40). It was hoped with the end of Thaksin's regime and his hard-line approach with Muslim separatists, bloodshed would decrease. But at the end of 2006 the situation remained dire and the death toll had climbed above 1800. Most of the victims were innocent Thai bystanders, although a few foreigners were also killed. The increase in terrorist brutality in November 2006 led the government to close all schools in Yala, Pattani and Narathiwat Provinces indefinitely.

On 22 November Wan Kadir Che Wan, leader of an umbrella organisation for southern separatist groups, told Arab TV network Al Jazeera that an Al-Qaeda-linked terrorist network was helping local insurgents stage the attacks. It is believed that much of the violence is linked to younger separatists, but as yet no specific group has been identified.

For more on politics and safety in this region, see the travel warning on p636.

## Climate

The best time to visit the Samui group of islands is during the hot and dry season, from February to late June. From July to October (southwest monsoon) it can rain on and off, and from October to January (northeast



### ISLANDS FOR CHEAP

You're on Th Khao San in Bangkok, shopping around for combination tickets to Ko Pha-Ngan (or Ko Tao or Ko Samui) and the prices seem unbelievable: Bangkok to Ko Pha-Ngan straight for 350B? Sounds like a good deal, right?

Sometimes it is...and sometimes it's not. Some unscrupulous bus companies make their profits by, well, stealing from travellers. Ruses have included bus personnel going below and rifling through bags (while the bus is en route) and picking pockets while everyone is asleep (and the lights are off). Some travellers show up and don't get the bus they were expecting. Others have extra transport charges added to their fare. A very few have even reported being gassed to unconsciousness and robbed right in their seats.

We're not saying that this happens with cheap bus/boat tickets, but remember that no-one's in business to lose money. It's always best to have a chat with other travellers who've recently returned from where you're going before choosing a dirt-cheap company. Otherwise cough up the extra few hundred baht.

monsoon) there are sometimes strong winds. However, many travellers have reported fine weather (and fewer crowds) in September and October. November tends to receive some of the rain that affects the east coast of Malaysia.

### National Parks

There are several notable parks in this region. Khao Sok (p582) is a thick rainforest glory land with plenty of accommodation and lazy rivers flowing through limestone cliffs. Ang Thong (p589), the setting for the perfect beach in the movie *The Beach* (although much of the movie was actually filmed on Ko Phi-Phi Leh; p713), is a stunning archipelago of 40 small picture-perfect islands. Khao Luang National Park (p630) is known for its beautiful mountain and forest walks, waterfalls and fruit orchards. It is also home to a variety of species, from clouded leopards to tigers.

### Getting There & Away

Travelling to the lower southern gulf is fairly straightforward. It's extremely easy to hop on a bus or train and then catch a ferry to the islands from Bangkok, the Andaman coast and numerous other Thai destinations, as well as neighbouring Malaysia. Aeroplanes also ply the skies between Bangkok and Ko Samui. Bus and train travel from Bangkok is generally cheap, relatively efficient and mostly takes place overnight. Almost any travel agency can sell you a combination bus or train and boat ticket to the islands, which should get you to your destination with little effort on your part. Beware of the

cheapest tickets as they often prove to be scams. Pay a few more baht and you'll arrive with few hassles. For more information on travelling into and out of the region, see the individual destinations or check out the Transport chapter (p761).

### Getting Around

An intricate public-transport network takes you almost everywhere. Numerous boats shuttle back and forth between Ko Samui, Ko Pha-Ngan, Ko Tao and Surat Thani, while buses and trains link Surat Thani with destinations further south. Sawngthaw and motorcycle taxis will take you around the islands for little cost. If you want to drive yourself, motorcycles can be rented for about 200B a day. Car rental, at about 1500B per day, is also an option.

## SURAT THANI PROVINCE

Southern Thailand's largest province is home to Ko Samui, Ko Pha-Ngan and Ko Tao, as well as the stunning Ang Thong Marine National Park.

### SURAT THANI

สุราษฎร์ธานี

pop 132,324

Not many travellers include a stop in Surat Thani on holiday itineraries, instead it's just a point you zip through on the way to somewhere better, namely Ko Samui, Ko Pha-Ngan and Ko Tao. If your bus or minivan is late arriving in Surat (a common problem), and you don't have time to make the shuttle trip to

the main pier – some 84km away – before the last ferry for Ko Samui heads out, you'll end up sleeping in Surat for the night. (Usually, an effective way of avoiding this dilemma is by grabbing the earliest bus from your original destination, lessening the possibility of not boarding the boat.)

There's a string of banks – one on every block for five blocks – along Th Na Meuang southwest of Th Chonkasem; all have ATMs and most offer foreign exchange. Check your email at **Miss Tuka Cappucino** (☎ 0 7721 2723; 442/307 Th Talat Mai; per hr 30B; ☎ 9am-midnight; ☎), which also serves real coffee, sandwiches and smiles.

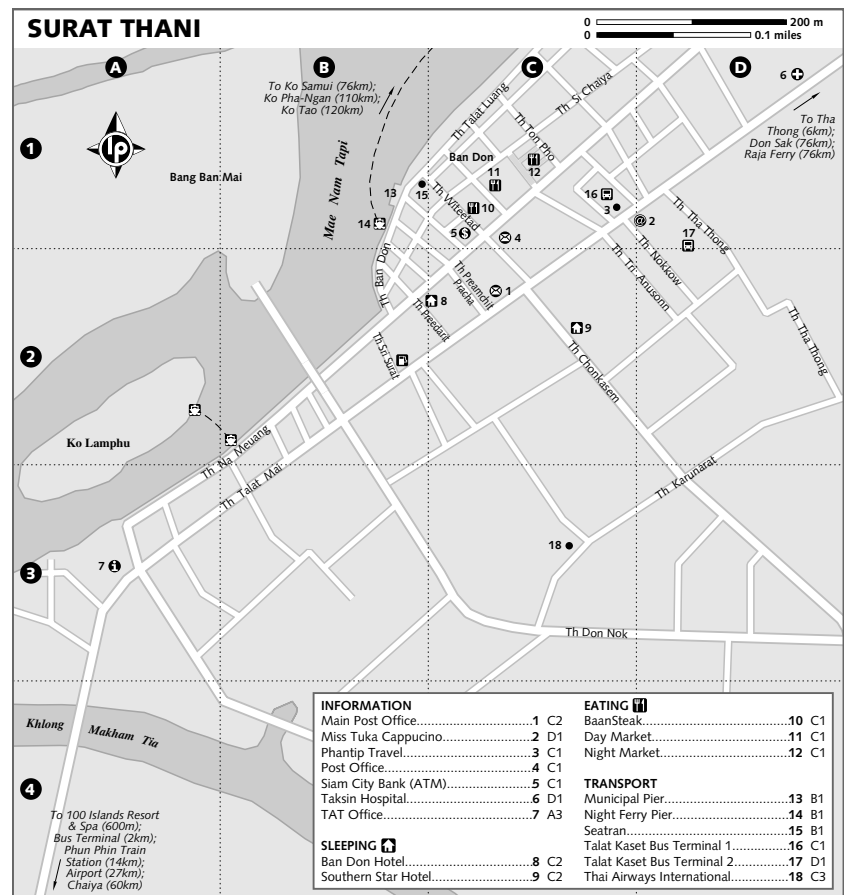
Be wary of Surat Thani travel agencies, many of which have a shady track record for

innovative scams involving substandard buses, nonexistent bookings and surprise 'extra' fees. **Phantip Travel** (☎ 0 7727 2230; 442/24-5 Th Talat Mai) is one of the more reliable full-service travel agencies in town.

### Sleeping

At some of Surat Thani's cheaper hotels, business consists largely of 'by the hour' trade. This doesn't make them any less suitable as regular hotels – it's just that there's likely to be more noise as guests arrive and depart with some frequency.

**Ban Don Hotel** (☎ 0 7727 2167; 268/2 Th Na Meuang; r 200-350B; ☎) Surat's best bet for budget beds is a relatively quiet place with squeaky-clean rooms. Those with air-con are a great deal. The



entrance is through a Chinese restaurant – quite a good one for inexpensive rice and noodle dishes, so you don't have to wander far after dark.

**100 Islands Resort & Spa** (☎ 0 7720 1150; www.roikoh.com; 19/6 Muu 3, Bypass Rd; r 800B; ♿) Set in a gorgeous teakwood palace of sorts, the public areas are fabulous – think lofty ceilings, leafy plants and even a trickling waterfall. The garden out back is lush with shady outdoor seating and even a lagoon pool. Rooms are large and very sleepable, even if they smell a bit musty and lack decorative charm. The on-site restaurant stays open late. The menu is for the most part Thai, which is quite good, although it lists a few Western dishes. Take a *sāwngthāew* there; if the driver doesn't know it, say 'Tesco-Lotus', which is opposite.

**Southern Star Hotel** (☎ 0 7721 6414-24; fax 0 7721 6427/8; 253 Th Chonkasem; r 800-2700B; ♿) All 150 rooms, which are relatively elegant in a sort of Best Western or Holiday Inn fashion, feature sitting areas and the same kind of familiar home-on-the-road comfort (like carpeting, minibar, TV and hot showers). Breakfast is included. The hotel is also home to the biggest disco in southern Thailand, the Star Theque.

## Eating

Restaurants in Surat Thani are few and far between. The night market on Th Ton Pho is the place to go for fried, steamed, grilled or sautéed delicacies – look for the crunchy insect titbits. There are also a couple of good noodle shops: one on the southwestern cor-

ner of Th Chonkasem and Th Na Meuang; and one on the southern side of Th Talat Mai.

During the day you can eat very well at the day market in and around the bus terminal. Although stalls serve most local staples, they specialise in tasty *khào kài òp* (marinated baked chicken on rice).

**BaanSteak** (☎ 0 7728 5744; Th Witeetad; dishes 50-130B; ☺) breakfast, lunch & dinner) Ever craved a pork-flavoured steak? No, well how about chicken? This small restaurant serves reasonably priced steaks in marinades you never knew (and perhaps never wanted to know) existed. The food is tasty, but portions are on the small side. If you don't favour meat-flavoured meat, order pasta or sandwiches off the menu.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

There is a twice daily service to Bangkok on **Thai Airways International** (THAI; ☎ 0 7727 2610; 3/27-28 Th Karunarat) for 2745B; it takes 70 minutes.

### BOAT

From Surat there are nightly ferries to Ko Tao (500B, eight hours), Ko Pha-Ngan (200B, seven hours) and Ko Samui (150B, six hours). All leave from the night ferry pier at 11pm. These are cargo ships, not luxury boats, so bring food and water and watch your bags.

In the high season there are usually bus/boat services to Ko Samui and Ko Pha-Ngan directly from the train station. These services don't cost any more than those booked in Surat Thani and can save you a lot of waiting

## ARRIVING IN SURAT THANI BY TRAIN

Most travellers arriving in Surat by train don't realise they'll actually be debarking in Phun Phin, a town about 14km to the west where the station is located. You don't necessarily have to leave Phun Phin to reach your Andaman coast beach destination as there are buses directly from the train station to Phuket, Phang-Nga and Krabi. They may not have air-con and their departures may not fit your arrival schedule, but if you catch the right bus at the right time you could save yourself a few hours' worth of back-and-forth-to-Surat travel time. Look for the big white wall just south of the train station – there's a Pepsi symbol and sign proclaiming 'Coffee shop and fast food'. This is where those buses stop.

Of course, if you've missed the last bus (or Ko Samui is your actual destination – it's on the other coast), you'll have to hike it into Surat after all, as there are more transport options there. This isn't hard to do, as local orange buses chug between Phun Phin and Surat (9B, 25 minutes, departing every 10 minutes).

The tiny town has just one sleeping option, **Queen** (☎ 0 7731 1003; 916/10-13 Th Mahasawat; r 200-400B; ♿). Look for it around the corner from the train station, on the road to Surat Thani.

around. **Seatran** (☎ 0 7727 5060-2; www.seatranferry.com; 45/1 Th Talat Luang), whose office is near the night ferry pier, operates a bus/boat combination to Ko Samui (180B, three hours, departing hourly from 5.30am to 5.30pm) and a combo to Ko Pha-Ngan (280B, four hours, 3.30pm). **Raja Ferry** (☎ 0 7747 1151; Don Sak) also operates bus/boat combinations to Ko Tao (500B, four hours, at least two daily), Ko Pha-Ngan (280B, 3½ hours, hourly) and Ko Samui (180B, 2½ hours, hourly). You can buy any of these boat/bus tickets at **Phantip Travel** (☎ 0 7727 2230; 442/24-5 Th Talat Mai).

## BUS & MINIVAN

Most long-distance public buses run from the Talat Kaset bus terminals 1 and 2. Air-con minivans leave from Talat Kaset 2; they tend

to have more frequent departures than buses, though they're not always cheaper.

There's a bus terminal 2km west of town (on the way to Phun Phin train station), but it's used less frequently than the two terminals in town. To get into town from there, take an orange local bus (15B), which comes by every 10 minutes. Just make sure it's going back into town rather than out to Phun Phin (it does a loop). *Sāwngthāew* are another option into town; they also cost 15B.

Air-conditioned buses and minibuses to Khao Sok (two hours) can be booked through travel agencies and should cost no more than 80B to 100B. You can also catch certain Phuket-bound buses from the two bus terminals in town and ask to be let off at Khao Sok – a better option since some pushy minivan drivers double as touts for Khao Sok hotels.

## TRAIN

There are several trains from Bangkok to Phun Phin. Fares for fan/air-con are: 227/297B in 3rd class, 368/478B in a 2nd-class seat, 498/658B in an upper 2nd-class sleeper, 568/748B in a lower 2nd-class sleeper, and 1179B in 1st-class. The trip takes around 11 to 12 hours, so if you take an early evening train from Bangkok you'll arrive in the morning.

The train station has a 24-hour left-luggage room that charges 20B a day. The advance ticket office is open from 6am to 6pm (with an 11am to noon lunch break) daily.

At certain busy times it's difficult to book long-distance trains out of Phun Phin; taking the bus can be easier, especially if heading south. Trains are often full, and it's a pain to take a bus to the train station just to be turned away – though you could buy a 'standing room only' 3rd-class ticket and see if a seat becomes available. Many travel agencies in town make advance train reservations, so if you have a fixed return schedule you can make an onward reservation before getting on a boat to the islands.

## Getting Around

Vars with air-con to/from the Surat Thani airport cost around 70B per person. They'll drop you off at your hotel. Purchase tickets at travel agencies.

Orange buses run from Phun Phin train station to Surat Thani every 10 minutes from 6am to 8pm (15B, 25 minutes). For this ride taxis charge 200B. Other taxi rates are posted

## BUS & MINIVAN SERVICES FROM SURAT THANI

Services to/from Surat include the following, although unless you specify which class of minivan or bus you'd like, you will likely be on the first one to leave. The prices below are a guide only; prices are sometimes given arbitrarily.

Destination	Bus type	Fare	Duration
Bangkok	VIP	660B	10hr
	1st class	450B	10hr
	2nd class	370B	11hr
Hat Yai	ordinary	270B	11hr
	1st class	310B	4hr
	2nd class	210B	5hr
Krabi	minivan	190B	3½hr
	1st class	340B	3hr
	2nd class	170B	4hr
Nakhon Si Thammarat	minivan	160B	2hr
	1st class	130B	2hr
	2nd class	90B	2hr
Phang-Nga	minivan	95B	2hr
	1st class	200B	3hr
	2nd class	170B	4hr
Phuket	minivan	210B	3hr
	1st class	240B	5hr
	2nd class	200B	6hr
Ranong	minivan	220B	4hr
	1st class	150B	4hr
	2nd class	120B	5hr
Trang	minivan	130B	3½hr
	2nd class	120B	3hr
	minivan	130B	2½hr

just north of the train station (at the metal pedestrian bridge).

Taxis from Surat Thani to Don Sak pier cost around 500B; **Phantip Travel** (☎ 0 7727 2230; 442/24-5 Th Talat Mai) runs frequent vans for 60B per person, but this is included when you buy a ferry ticket.

Around town, *sǎwngthǎew* cost 20B, while *sǎamlǎw* (three-wheeled vehicles) charge about 150B to 200B per trip.

## AROUND SURAT THANI

### Chaiya

ไชยา

pop 12,500

Most folks visit tiny Chaiya, 60km north of Surat Thani, to partake in an excellent monthly meditation retreat. One of the oldest cities in Thailand, dating back to the Srivijaya Empire, it is a calm and friendly spot offering a glimpse into small-town life not often found in this region. Browse the vibrant day market and small stores or stop into one of the plentiful Chinese teashops.

**Wat Suan Mokkhaphalaram** (Wat Suanmok; ☎ 0 7743 1522) is a famous Buddhist meditation centre renowned for its monthly retreats. A very calm and nonshowy modern forest wat, it was founded by Ajahn Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, arguably Thailand's most famous monk.

Buddhadasa's philosophy was ecumenical in nature, comprising Zen, Taoist and Christian elements, as well as the traditional Theravada schemata. Today the hermitage is spread over 120 hectares of wooded hillside and features huts for up to 70 monks, a 'spiritual theatre' and a museum-library.

#### A MOST FAMOUS MONK

Born in Chaiya in 1906, Buddhadasa was ordained as a monk when he was 21 years old. He spent many years studying Pali scriptures before retiring to a forest for six years of solitary meditation. Returning to ecclesiastical society, he was made abbot of Wat Phra Boromathat, a high distinction, but conceived of Suanmok as an alternative to orthodox Thai temples. During Thailand's turbulent 1970s he was branded a communist because of his critiques of capitalism, which he saw as a catalyst for greed. Buddhadasa died in July 1993 after a long illness.

This latter building has bas-reliefs on the outer walls that are facsimiles of sculptures at Sanchi, Bharhut and Amaravati in India. The interior walls feature modern Buddhist painting – eclectic to say the least – executed by the resident monks.

The retreats cost 1500B for 10 days of teaching, food and accommodation. Just show up on the evening of the last day of any given month to sign up (retreats are always during the first 10 days of each month).

To get to Chaiya you can catch one of the frequent 3rd-class local trains from Phun Phin (10B, one hour) or a *sǎwngthǎew* (50B, 45 minutes) from Surat's Talat Kaset bus terminal 2. Alternatively, if you're heading to Surat Thani by train from Bangkok, you can get off at the small Chaiya train station. From Chaiya, Wat Suan Mokkhaphalaram is about 7km. Until late afternoon there are *sǎwngthǎew* from Chaiya's train station to Wat Suan Mokkhaphalaram for 15B per passenger. If those aren't running, you can hire a motorcycle taxi for 50B anywhere along Chaiya's main street

## KHAO SOK NATIONAL PARK

อุทยานแห่งชาติเขาสก

You'll feel as if you've stepped into a *George of the Jungle* movie when you take the time to visit extraordinary **Khao Sok National Park** (☎ 0 7739 5025; www.khaosok.com; admission 200B). It offers a good break from dozing in the sand and encompasses 646 sq km of thick native rainforest and rugged mountains. Here, waterfalls tumble over soaring limestone cliffs and hiking trails follow rivers to an island-studded lake. Enjoy the solitude as your feet squish through deep brown dirt and the sun filters through gnarled and ancient trees. Keep an eye out for the plethora of wildlife the park shelters – wild elephants, leopards, serow, banteng, gaur, dusky langurs and, if you're really lucky, tigers and Malayan sun bears, not to mention more than 180 species of bird.

Established in 1980, Khao Sok lies in the western part of Surat Thani Province, off Rte 401 about a third of the way from Takua Pa to Surat Thani. According to Thom Henley, author of the highly informative *Waterfalls and Gibbon Calls*, the Khao Sok rainforest is in fact a remnant of a 160-million-year-old forest ecosystem that is much older and richer than the forests of the Amazon and central African regions.

Khao Sok is connected to two other national parks, Kaeng Krung and Phang-Nga, as well as the Khlong Saen and Khlong Nakha wildlife sanctuaries. Together, these reserves form the largest contiguous nature preserve – around 4000 sq km – on the Thai peninsula. A major watershed for the south, the park is filled with lianas, bamboo, ferns and rattan, including the *wǎi tào phráw* (giant rattan) with a stem more than 10cm in diameter. A floral rarity in the park is the *Rafflesia kerrii* Meijer, known to the Thais as *bua phút* (wild lotus), one of the largest flowers in the world. Found only in Khao Sok and an adjacent wildlife sanctuary (different varieties of the same species are present in Malaysia and Indonesia), mature specimens can reach 80cm in diameter. The flower has no roots or leaves of its own; instead it lives parasitically inside the roots of the liana, a jungle vine. From October to December buds burst forth from the liana root and swell to football size. When the bud blooms in January and February it emits a potent stench resembling rotten meat, which attracts pollinating insects.

## Orientation & Information

The park headquarters and visitors centre are 1.8km off Rte 401, close to the Km 109 marker.

The best time of year to visit Khao Sok is December to May, when trails are less slippery, river crossings easier and river-bank camping safer due to the lower risk of flash flooding. On the other hand, during the June to November wet season you're more likely to see Malayan and Asiatic black bears, civets, slow loris, wild boar, gaur, deer and wild elephants, and perhaps even tigers, along the trail network. During dry months the larger mammals tend to stay near the reservoir in areas without trails.

Leeches are quite common in certain areas of the park, so make sure to take the usual precautions – wear closed shoes when hiking and apply plenty of repellent (see also p778).

## Sights & Activities

Various trails from the visitors centre lead to the waterfalls of **Sip-Et Chan** (4km), **Than Sawan** (9km) and **Than Kloy** (9km), among other destinations. A rough map showing trails and sights can be obtained at the visitors centre, or any guesthouse in the area will happily arrange guided tours and hikes.

An hour's drive east of the visitors centre is the vast **Chiw Lan Lake**, 165km at its longest point. It was created in 1982 by the 95m-high, 700m-long, shale-clay dam of Ratchaphra (Kheuan Ratchaphra or Kheuan Chiaw Lan). Limestone outcrops protruding from the lake reach a height of 960m, over three times higher than the formations in the Phang-Nga area. A cave known as **Tham Nam Thalu** contains striking limestone formations and subterranean streams, while **Tham Si Ru** features four converging passageways used as a hideout by communist insurgents between 1975 and 1982. The caves can be reached on foot from the southwestern shore of the lake. You can rent boats from local fishermen to explore the coves, canals, caves and cul-de-sacs along the lakeshore.

The recommended, environmentally conscious Khao Sok Rainforest Resort runs a variety of tours in and around the park starting at 350B – visit its website for an entire list. This would be a good spot to try **elephant trekking**, as the company has a holistic reputation. There is only one elephant, 40-year-old Linda, but she takes guests on short, but invigorating, trail rides in rainforest near the park (800B). Afterwards help the mahout wash her down.

Spending a night on a **floating lodge** (per person 2500B) in the river is another popular option. The price includes three meals and optional activities like hiking. The best bit is stepping out of your bedroom and into the warm water.

## Sleeping & Eating

Along the road from Hwy 401 to the visitors centre and down a dirt side road are several private, simple guesthouses and their restaurants. All have rooms with fans; there are no rooms with air-con in these parts. Prices rise in the high season from about November to February. The following accommodation options are on the highway.

**Khao Sok Rainforest Resort** (☎ 0 7739 5006; www.krabidir.com/khaosokrainforest; bungalows 400-600B) Blending easily into the jungle where they reside, these bungalows have some rather appalling coloured polyester bedspreads, but many resemble ultracool crosses between huts high on stilts and tree houses. The resort is right on the river, which is perfect for cooling down on hot afternoons. It's big on conservation and offers slide lecture

programmes and tips on low-impact hiking. It also runs rehabilitation and forest-restoration projects.

**Bamboo House II** (☎ 0 7739 5013; r 300-500B) On the other side of the river from the Rainforest Resort, Bamboo House II has bright, well-built concrete and brick bungalows with tiled floors and verandas.

The following are on the dirt side road leading off the highway.

**Our Jungle House** (☎ 0 9909 6814; www.losthorizons.asia.com; bungalows 400-600B) In a brilliant location across from a limestone cliff, this Australian-run place is another ecotourism venture. It offers a variety of riverside bungalows and tree houses with simple décor and oil lights set on junglelike paths along a river. The restaurant serves Western and Thai food, including a nightly Thai buffet with lots of fresh fruit.

**Art's Riverview Jungle Lodge** (☎ 0 7739 5009; bungalows 350-550B) Art's has a pleasant range of simple, solid and airy rooms with mosquito nets. The more expensive ones have verandas and hammocks, and all are in a beautiful, tranquil and lush setting. You can watch wild macaques from the riverside restaurant.

## Getting There & Around

Khao Sok is about 100km from Surat Thani. Transport to the park by minivan from Surat Thani (80B, one hour, at least twice daily) can be arranged through most travel agents in Surat, but be aware that some minivan companies work with specific bungalow outfitters and will try to convince you to stay at that place. Otherwise, from the Surat Thani area you can catch a bus going towards Takua Pa – you'll be getting off well before hitting this destination (tell the bus driver 'Khao Sok'). You can also come from the west coast by bus, but you'll have to go to Takua Pa first. Buses from Takua Pa to the park (25B, one hour, nine daily) drop you off on the highway, 1.8km from the visitors centre. If guest-house touts don't meet you, you'll have to walk to your chosen guesthouse (from 50m to 2km).

To arrive at Chiaw Lan Lake, go east on Rte 401 from the visitors centre and take the turn-off between the Km 52 and Km 53 markers, at Ban Takum. It's another 14km to the lake. If you don't have your own wheels, you'll have to bus it to Ban Takum, then hope to hitch a ride to the lake. The best option without private transport would be to join a tour, which any

guesthouse can arrange for 1000B (2000B to 2500B with an overnight stay).

## KO SAMUI

เกาะสมุย  
pop 39,000

In 1971 two tourists arrived on Thailand's third-largest island via a coconut boat from Bangkok and stumbled upon paradise – white-sand beaches with palms blowing in the wind and clear green seas sparkling in the sunlight. It was a picture-perfect background of lush green hills and brown roads interspersed with rough wooden structures.

More than 30 years after the first rough-hewn hut went up on Ko Samui, the island and the archipelago that includes 80 smaller islands, has become the Asian travel markets' most enigmatic chameleon – as attractive to fire-twirling backpackers as to flashpackers toting Louis Vuitton. On the map alongside places like Goa and Bali, Samui has polished its reputation as a hippy island paradise that remembers to provide the best of the creature comforts from home.

In the last five years, Samui has become as popular as Phuket, and at times as trendy – Bo Phut has become the romantic boutique darling of Samui, if not any beach destination in Thailand. But it's also managed to retain the legendary status among Asian backpackers that it has held for the past quarter century.

The Ko Samui of today is changing however, and the cheap fan bungalows are hard to come by this decade. Most accommodation is midrange and top-end options, beachfront properties boasting beautifully decorated rooms, crisp white sheets, lush gardens and lavish pools.

Despite its upmarket trend, Ko Samui still offers something for everyone. There are crowded beaches where young boys peddle coconuts and mangoes to oil-slicked, bikini-clad tourists, and jet skis churn up whitewash on clear seas. There are isolated spots where serenity and seclusion are the name of the game and you can escape the sun in simple air-con cottages and check out the latest MTV video. There are cheap food stalls and top-class restaurants, crowded modern shopping strips with Starbucks, McDonald's and store after store featuring knock-off Von Dutch T-shirts and Gucci sunglasses, and stretches of rough dirt roads and ramshackle huts. Western bars dish up burgers and chips and pump



classic tunes from giant speakers late into the night. Lady-boys and beautiful girls in strappy sandals and tight skirts seek out customers in side alleys, while drunken Westerners pound the keyboards at late-night internet cafés.

Some travellers plan to stay a week and three months later are still entranced. Others look around, say 'it's done', and move on. Popularity doesn't come without a price – more people means more traffic, more noise and more rubbish. Whatever your opinion, however, no one can deny Ko Samui is a beautiful place. You'll have to visit for yourself to decide whether it's worth staying.

The best time to visit is during the hot and dry season, from February to late June. From July to October it can be raining on and

off, and from October to January there are sometimes heavy winds. On the other hand, many travellers have reported fine weather (and fewer crowds) in September and October. November tends to get some of the rain that also affects the east coast of Malaysia at this time. Prices soar from December to July, whatever the weather.

## Orientation

Samui has plenty of beaches to choose from, with bungalows popping up around more small bays all the time. The most crowded beaches are Chaweng and Lamai, both on the eastern side of the island. Bo Phut is quickly developing into an upmarket boutique destination, with some of the coolest lodging

**WHICH BEACH?**

So you've just stepped off the ferry (or maybe you're still on it) and suddenly you're surrounded by hotel touts, thrusting brochure after brochure into your face. The choices are mind-boggling, enough to give you a major headache. Don't despair. Most beaches are relatively near each other; if you're not satisfied with one, simply catch a *săwngthăew* to the next. If the beach you've arrived at looks appealing, your driver should be more than willing to take you to as many resorts as you'd like to see (they make a commission if you book a room), so check a few places before deciding.

**Hat Chaweng**

หาดชะง

Clear blue-green water, coral reefs and plenty of nightlife greet you at Ko Samui's longest and most popular beach. Free beach chairs line the 6km strip where hawkers ply anklets, drinks and pineapples, and adrenalin-pumping water sports abound. Chaweng has the island's widest range of sleeping, eating, drinking and shopping options, and attracts everyone from backpackers to those in search of top-notch pampering. If you're looking to party, or travelling solo, it's probably your best bet for meeting other folks. It's also by far Samui's most congested and commercialised beach, and the constant onslaught of touts, vendors and other tourists can make the place feel overwhelmingly claustrophobic.

**Hat Lamai**

หาดละไม

Some say Samui's second most popular beach is even more beautiful than Chaweng. You can swim year-round here – head to the beach's southern end, which is studded with elegant granite boulders. South of town are the interesting Grandfather and Grandmother rock formations. These explicit natural formations attract plenty of giggling Thai tourists. Slightly quieter and smaller than Chaweng, it doesn't attract as many hawkers. Lamai's drawback is the rather sleazy strip of beer bars on the main road. They're not necessarily offensive, just of the girlie-bar variety. That said there are also good expat watering holes and high-quality restaurant and accommodation options.

**Hat Bo Phut**

หาดบ่อผุด

Our favourite beach on the island, Hat Bo Phut serves up the Samui you didn't think existed anymore. World's away from the clutter of Chaweng and Lamai, Bo Phut is a quiet and romantic spot. Mainly boutique-style resorts line the beach about 2km west of the fishermen's village. The water isn't as clear here as it is in other places, but who cares when you never have to worry about throbbing discos, crowds and in-your-face hawkers.

on the island. Other less crowded beaches include Mae Nam (popular with backpackers) and Hat Bang Rak (Big Buddha Beach) on the island's northern end near the pier. Ao Thong Yang, on the island's western side, is even more secluded. The southern part of the island now has many bungalows that are set in little out-of-the-way coves – it's worth seeking them out if you are looking for total isolation. On the northwestern side of Ko Samui you'll find Na Thon, which is the arrival point for express and night passenger ferries from the piers in Surat Thani. If you're not travelling on a combination ticket, you'll

probably end up spending some time in Na Thon on your way in and/or out, waiting for the next ferry.

Car ferries from Don Sak and Khanom land at Thong Yang, about 10km south of Na Thon.

For descriptions of what these places have to offer, see the boxed text, above.

**Information BOOKSHOPS**

**Book Corner & Coffee World** (Map p590; ☎ 0 7741 3908) Stock up on English novels and espresso at this bookstore, which has branches around Samui.

Bo Phut has been popular with the French for the last decade, but it's now attracting a growing number of tourists from all nationalities. The village is a charming strip of old Chinese shophouses, many of which have been converted into upmarket bars, restaurants, guesthouses and galleries. The place has a distinctly Mediterranean feel, but doesn't offer much for solo travellers or those seeking to party. From October to April the water may become too shallow for swimming.

**Hat Mae Nam**

หาดแม่รำ

Still a good choice for budget accommodation, with a long strip of cheap bungalows, it's also home to several five-star resorts. The beach is rather quiet and secluded, but the water isn't as stunning as at Chaweng and can become too shallow for swimming from October to April. The beach in front of Wat Na Phalan is undeveloped; please avoid going topless here.

**Hat Bang Rak**

หาดพระใหญ่

Very close to the airport and the main pier Hat Bang Rak (Big Buddha Beach) isn't even close to being a runner-up for Samui's most pretty beach. However, it is convenient if you've got an early plane to catch or are seeking out two of the islands better budget bets – both located on this beach.

**Ao Bang Po**

อ่าวบางปอ

This secluded, quiet bay has fair snorkelling and swimming, and two new-age resorts featuring everything from meditation to tarot card reading (see p593).

**Ao Thong Sai & Hat Choeng Mon**

อ่าวท้องทราย/หาดเชิงมน

Clean and quiet, this large cove and beach is recommended for families or those who don't need nightlife and a plethora of restaurants (easily found at nearby Hat Chaweng) to survive.

**Na Thon**

หน้าทอง

The beach is smelly and otherwise pierlike, and there's really no reason to stay here. The town is mostly just a ferry departure point. If you want to look around it sports a few old teak Chinese shophouses, cafés and a colourful day market.

**Saai Bookshop** (Map p590; ☎ 0 7741 3847) Friendly small bookstore selling new and used books, and magazines in several languages.

**EMERGENCY**

**Tourist police** (Map p588; ☎ emergency 1155, non-emergency 0 7742 1281) Located at the southern end of Na Thon.

**IMMIGRATION OFFICES**

**Ko Samui Immigration office** (Map p588; ☎ 0 7742 1069; ☎ 8.30am-noon & 1-4.30pm Mon-Fri, closed public holidays) Extends tourist visas by 30 days (500B). It's about 2km south of Na Thon.

**INTERNET ACCESS**

There are places all over the island offering internet access, even at the less popular beaches. The going rate is between 1B and 2B per minute.

**INTERNET RESOURCES**

The following websites cover dive centres, accommodation and tours, as well as having timetables for Bangkok Airways, ferries, trains and VIP buses.

**Ko Samui Thailand** ([www.sawadee.com](http://www.sawadee.com))  
**Tourism Association of Ko Samui** ([www.samuitourism.com](http://www.samuitourism.com))

**MEDIA**

A locally produced, tourist-oriented newspaper with articles in German, English and Thai, *Samui Welcome* is published monthly (free). *What's on Samui*, *Samui Guide* and the pocket-sized *Accommodation Samui* are also free and have listings of hotels, restaurants and suggestions of things to do – buried beneath a heap of ads.

**MEDICAL SERVICES**

There are several hospitals on the island and nursing-care units for stubbed toes, scraped knees, pregnancy tests and earaches.

**Hyperbaric chamber** (Map p585; ☎ 0 7742 7427) The only hyperbaric chamber on the island is in Hat Bang Rak (Big Buddha Beach).

**Samui International Hospital** (Map p585; ☎ 0 7723 0781, 0 7742 2272; www.sih.co.th) For any medical or dental problem. Emergency ambulance service is available 24 hours and credit cards are accepted. Opposite the Muang Kulaypan Hotel.

**MONEY**

Changing money isn't a problem in Na Thon, Chaweng or Lamai, where several banks (with

ATMs) or exchange booths offer daily exchange services. See the maps for some locations.

**POST**

There are privately run post-office branches on the island. Many bungalow operations also sell stamps and can mail letters, but they often charge a commission. If you're heading to the mainland, it's probably a good idea to wait until you get there to post something – island mail doesn't have an outstanding reputation.

**Main post office** (Map p588; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat) In Na Thon.

**TELEPHONE**

Many private telephone offices on the island will make a connection for a surcharge above the Telephone Organisation of Thailand (TOT) or Communications Authority of Thailand (CAT) rates.

**CAT** (Map p588; ☎ 7am-10pm) Provides international telephone service at the main post office.

**TOURIST INFORMATION**

**TAT** (Map p588; ☎ 0 7742 0504; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm) Friendly and helpful, it has scores of brochures and maps.

**TRAVEL AGENCIES**

**Asia Travel** (Map p588; ☎ 0 7723 6120) Deals especially with airline tickets.

**Travel Solutions** (Map p590; ☎ 0 7723 0203; ttsolutions@hotmail.com) Efficient and reliable, it's on Chaweng beach. It can help with international travel plans, transport bookings, accommodation and visa arrangements. Languages spoken include English, Spanish, French and Thai.

**Dangers & Annoyances**

Several travellers have written to warn others to take care when making train, bus and air bookings. These sometimes aren't made at all, the bus turns out to be far inferior to the one expected or other hassles develop. We too have had trouble with buses/boat combos, and our last research trip included a harrowing minibus ride from Phuket to Surat Thani that left us biting our nails and screaming for our money back. Unfortunately there is little you can do to avoid this, except make sure to ask as many questions as possible when booking tickets. Air scams include travel agents telling customers that economy class on planes is fully booked and only business class is available; the agent then sells the customer an air ticket – at business-class prices – that turns out to be economy class.

As on Phuket, the rate of fatalities on Samui from road accidents is quite high. This is due mainly to the large number of tourists who rent motorcycles only to find out that Samui's winding roads, stray dogs and coconut trucks can be lethal to those who have never dealt with them. If you feel you must rent a motorcycle, protect yourself by wearing a helmet, shoes and appropriate clothing when driving.

Theft isn't unknown on the island. If you're staying in a beach bungalow, consider depositing your valuables with the management while off on excursions around the island or swimming at the beach.

**Sights**

Most people come to Samui to laze on the beaches, snorkel in its azure water or churn life up with a whirl on the jet ski. There are a few options if you tire of bronzing and massages on the beach (sounds terrible...).

**ANG THONG MARINE NATIONAL PARK**

อุทยานแห่งชาติหมู่เกาะอ่างทอง

Easily the most popular activity in Samui is a boat trip around this picture-perfect archi-

pelago made up of around 40 small islands. Sheer limestone cliffs, white-sand beaches, hidden lagoons and dense vegetation all add to the cosmetic beauty. The park lies 31km northwest of Ko Samui and encompasses 18 sq km of islands, plus 84 sq km of marine environments.

Any travel agency can book a day trip to Ang Thong, and tours usually include pick-up from your hotel. Travel agencies simply act as booking agents for the tour companies, which all offer nearly identical trips in terms of quality and itineraries. Lunch and snorkelling are included, along with a climb to the top of a 240m hill to view the whole island group; some tours visit **Tham Bua Bok**, a cavern containing lotus-shaped cave formations, and other tours offer sea kayaking. There's officially a 200B admission fee for foreigners, though it should be included in your tour. Bring shoes with good traction, a hat, plenty of sunscreen and drinking water. Tours cost about 1700B. Overnight tours are also available. At the **park headquarters** (☎ 0 7728 6025), on Ko Wat Ta Lap, there are bungalows, but you may not be able to reserve them unless you go with a tour.

**MUMMIFIED MONK**

Samui's strangest attraction by far is the ghostly mummified monk at Wat Khunaram, south of Rte 4169 between Ban Thurian and Ban Hua Thanon. The monk, Luang Phaw Daeng, has been dead over two decades but his corpse is preserved sitting in a meditative pose and sporting a pair of sunglasses.

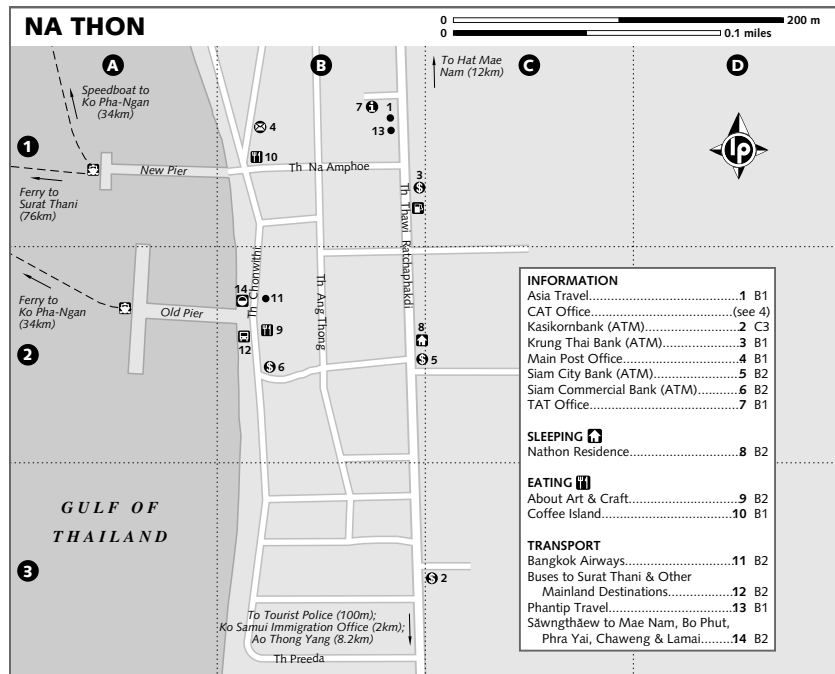
**Activities**

Water sports are big on Hat Chaweng; you can hire sailboards, go diving, sail a catamaran, charter a junk and so on. Parasailing costs around 450B. Jet skis cost 700B or 800B per 20 minutes, depending if you want a one- or two-person boat.

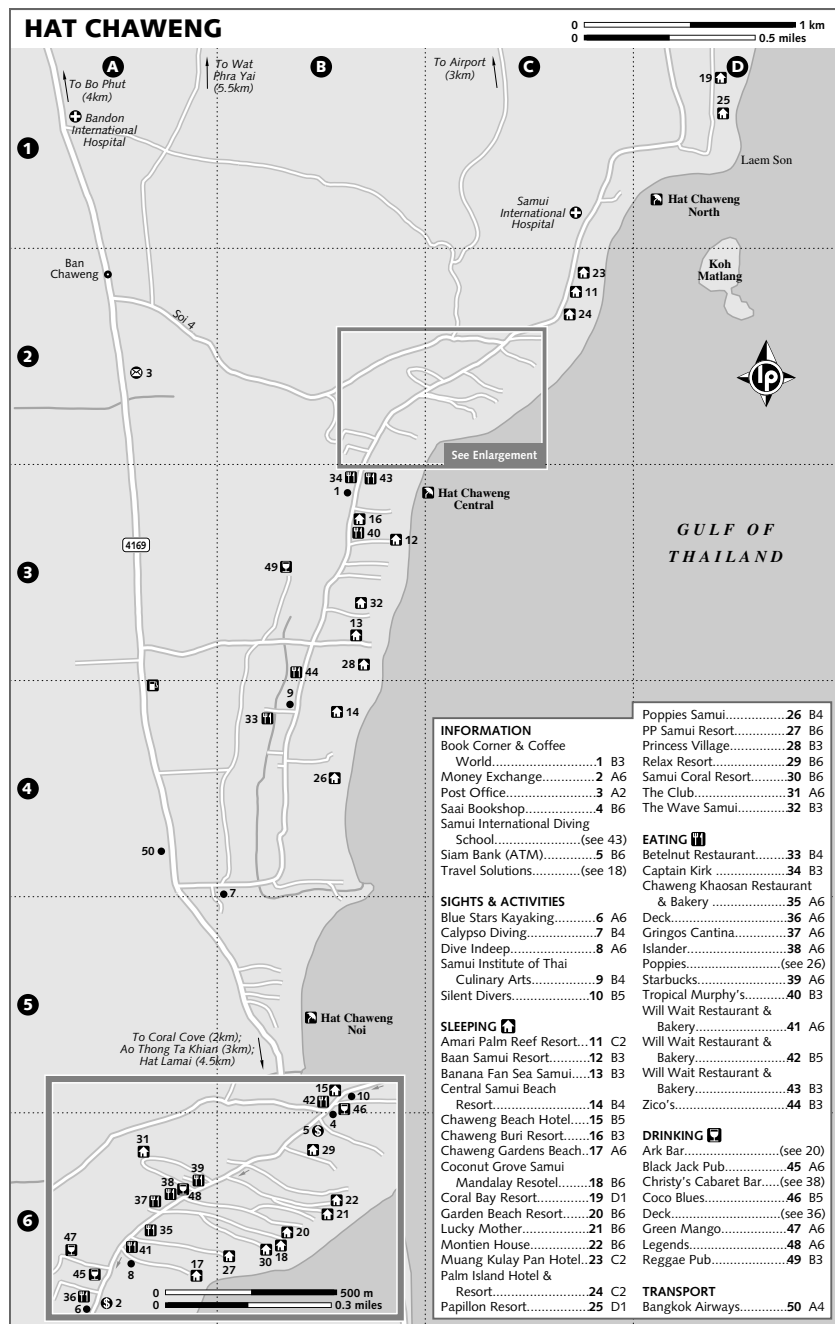
**DIVING & SNORKELLING**

The best diving is in the Ko Tao area and plenty of dive trips from Samui end up there. Better-known shops are often good, but smaller shops may try harder – and some go out with smaller groups as well. The hyperbaric chamber on the island is at Hat Bang Rak.

Beach dives cost as little as 800B per dive, but then again there's very little to see. Dives from boats range from 3500B to 5000B, and







## CARING FOR FIDO

If you've been on the islands for a while, you can't help but notice the roving packs of dogs. They wander from restaurant to restaurant looking for scraps, chill next to you on the beach or start nightly street brawls with other mutts. As is the case throughout Thailand (especially on the islands), an influx of animal-loving tourists and the resulting excess of food scraps have led to an abundance of stray dogs on Ko Samui and Ko Pha-Ngan. The stress of living in an overpopulated environment, however, leads to disease and injuries, which fester easily in the tropical climate and can end up threatening humans. Thais have been trying to keep the dog population under control through annual poisoning, which is administered by blowing poison-tipped darts through bamboo poles – not a very nice way for the poor animals to die.

The dog rescue centre, appropriately called **Dog Rescue Centre Samui** (☎ 0 1893 9443; www.samuidog.org), is the original organisation and has played an integral role in keeping the island's dog population down through an aggressive spaying and neutering programme. The centre has also vaccinated thousands of dogs against rabies, and Samui is now proud to claim its canine friends are 100% rabies free! The rescue centre is always in need of donations. If you want to adopt one of the island strays, this can also be arranged – one European woman had arranged to adopt and transport more than one older dog across a few oceans when we were in town. The Wave Samui (p596) in Chaweng is super supportive of the dog rescue; ask owners Dave or Pete for the low-down.

Thanks to the sponsorship of the Dog Rescue Centre Samui and the Animals Asia Foundation, **Pha-Ngan Animal Care (PAC)** (☎ 0 9875 7513; www.pacthailand.org) was opened by veterinary surgeon Shevaun Gallwey in September 2001. Since then almost 20% of the island's female dogs have been sterilised. Perhaps most importantly, the organisation has managed to convince the island government to refrain from the annual stray-dog executions as long as it continues to perform sterilisation procedures. Nurses who can stay and work here for at least three months are offered free accommodation and a basic wage.

two- to four-day certification courses cost from 8600B to 14,000B. An overnight dive trip to Ko Tao, including food and accommodation, can be done for about 4000B to 5000B.

The highest concentration of dive shops is at Hat Chaweng. We recommend the following centres:

**Calypso Diving** (Map p590; ☎ 0 7742 2437; www.calypso-diving.com; Hat Chaweng)

**Dive Indeep** (Map p590; ☎ 0 7723 0155; www.diveindeep.com; Hat Chaweng)

**Samui International Diving School** Hat Chaweng (SIDS; Map p590; ☎ 0 7724 2386; www.planet-tec.net; Hat Lamai (☎ 0 7723 2069; www.planet-tec.net)

**Silent Divers** (Map p590; ☎ 0 7742 2729/30; www.silentdivers.com; Hat Chaweng)

## KAYAKING

Any travel agency worth its salt should be able to book a sea-kayak tour.

**Blue Stars Kayaking** (Map p590; ☎ 0 7741 3231; www.gallerylafayette.com/bluestars; Hat Chaweng) offers guided sea-kayak trips in Ang Thong National Marine Park (1990B) as well as two-day overnight tours to a spectacular bay (4750B). There are free pick-ups and drop-offs from your hotel.

## MASSAGES, SPAS & YOGA

When it comes to pampering Samui is in a spa renaissance. With around 25 classy spas, offering everything from private treatment suites with lotus-filled Jacuzzis built for two to salt-water floatation tanks, relaxation is unavoidable. Nearly all the posh hotels have spas attached, and most accept clients even if they are not staying at the hotel. Treatments and massages start at around 800B.

The **Spa Samui Village** (☎ 0 7723 0976; www.spasamui.com) was the island's original health destination, and is still known for its original 'clean me out' fasting programme.

For a unique and truly special experience, try **Tamarind Springs** (p598). This gorgeous place features a dip pool tucked against limestone boulders, in a natural setting filled with waterfalls, canals and wooden walkways. Tamarind offers plenty of packages designed especially for couples.

The **Health Oasis Resort** (p593) on the island's quiet north shore, offers one- to eight-day courses and certification in Thai and Swedish massage, aromatherapy, reiki, meditation, yoga and 'life training' for 6000B to 30,000B.

The length and tuition of all courses can be adjusted to suit the individual. The place also features day rejuvenation packages, including deep colon cleansing, and Thai massage for mental and physical wellbeing.

For up-to-date info on the latest hot spas check out the free *Samui Health & Spa Guide* (released four times a year) or visit [www.siamspaguide.com](http://www.siamspaguide.com).

At the other end of the spectrum, you can get a more informal massage on a mattress on a raised platform overlooking the action on Hat Chaweng (among other spots). These only cost around 250B to 300B for one hour, and if you get the right therapist a Thai massage can be just as beneficial as the fancy spas. There are also plenty of beauty shops offering massage for 250B per hour, along with manicures and pedicures (100B for both).

Many spas incorporate yoga into regimens – the ancient art of stretching and toning is an integral part of Thai massage. For straight up yoga, head to the Bo Phut Fisherman's Village and check out **Absolute Yoga** (☎ 0 7743 0290; [www.absoluteyogasamui.com](http://www.absoluteyogasamui.com)), which offers hot, flow and yin yoga classes. There's no need to reserve in advance, just show up. Check the website for prices.

### COOKING

It seems as if everyone wants to learn how to cook Thai cuisine these days, and Samui offers a fine place to try your hand at cooking local specialities.

**Samui Institute of Thai Culinary Arts** (SITCA; Map p590; ☎ 0 7741 3434; [www.sitca.net](http://www.sitca.net); 46/6 Soi Colibri, Hat Chaweng) offers daily Thai-cooking classes, as well as courses in the aristocratic Thai art of carving fruits and vegetables into intricate floral designs. Quick lunchtime classes cost 1600B (three courses), while dinner classes are 2000B (four courses). Of course, you get to eat your work, and even invite a friend along for the meal. DVDs with Thai-cooking instruction are also available so you can practise at home.

### Sleeping

There is a mind-boggling array of sleeping options on Ko Samui, and the following list is by no means exhaustive. Budget places offering simple bungalows with thatched roofs and walls of local materials are nearly nonexistent now on Hat Chaweng, which is pretty much the domain of midrange and top-end joints. Hat Lamai is also changing. Most midrange places do, however, offer the option of renting smaller fan rooms for under 700B.

Prices on the island fluctuate depending on the time of year and demand. At peak times operators have been known to triple their prices, but then you can find some good deals when the going is slow.

In this section, we start with Na Thon, the point of entry for most travellers (although far from the nicest place on the island) and then work our way clockwise around Ko Samui.

### WHAT TO EXPECT IN KO SAMUI

We list high-season rack rates for midrange and top-end hotels. Search online booking agencies or individual hotel websites for lower promotional rates.

The difference between budget and midrange places on Samui is whether the place has a fan or air-con. Most operations in these price brackets offer both.

- Budget (under 800B) – Don't expect much in the low end of this price range. From 100B to 300B, you'll get a bed and four walls. You'll share a bathroom (no hot water) and a rickety fan will chase the hot air around the room. Once you step up to the 400B range, you should start to expect air-con, private bathroom with hot-water shower and walls thick enough to block out noise.
- Midrange (800B to 1200B) – Sleeping options in this bracket are larger than the budget huts and usually come with real beds, nicer furnishings and less claustrophobic bathrooms. Nearly all have air-con and many have on-site swimming pools, spas and restaurants.
- Top end (over 1200B) – Places in this price range come with all the mod cons and will generally have an upmarket restaurant, bar, and some sort of luxury-oriented spa and Thai-massage facility on site. You can expect room service, big swimming pools, tasteful furnishings and international standards.

To get an idea about which beach offers what, see p586.

### NA THON

The island's main settlement is dominated by the ferry pier and is not much to look at. There's really no reason to stay here, but if for some reason you feel compelled, try the following.

**Nathon Residence** (Map p588; ☎ 0 7723 6058; Th Thawi Ratchaphakdi; r 500B; 📶) Most places in this town are on the drab side, but this is your best bet. There are big, sparkling tiled rooms here as well as a downstairs café and great staff. The rooms all come with satellite TV.

### AO BANG PO

This bay, with its main town of Ban Tai, has fair snorkelling and swimming. There's a small enclave of charming and isolated budget places resisting the urge to upgrade – though their prices have been creeping up.

**Health Oasis Resort** (☎ 0 7742 0124; [www.healthoasisresort.com](http://www.healthoasisresort.com); bungalows 675-4000B; 📶) If the term 'Vortex Astrology' scares you, you should probably give this place a miss. New Age is all the rage here and this resort is geared towards cleansing (both of the physical and mental variety). There are bright, modern bungalows as well as plenty of greenery and sunshine. There's also a vegetarian restaurant on site (of course).

Also recommended:

**Moon** (☎ 0 7744 7129; bungalows 250-800B)

**Ban Tai** (☎ 0 9874 7357; bungalows 350-450B)

**Sunbeam** (☎ 0 7742 0600; bungalows 500-800B)

### HAT MAE NAM

When it comes to Samui standards, Hat Mae Nam's accommodation is still refreshingly cheap and backpacker-esque, although it doesn't occupy the best beach in town and spreads inland along sand tracks. There are a couple of bars and restaurants here that should keep you from having to stray too far.

**Harry's** (☎ 0 7742 5447; [www.harrys-samui.com](http://www.harrys-samui.com); bungalows 800-1200B; 📶) If you ever wanted to hang out in a miniature teak-wooden palace, then this is your chance. In the traditional Thai lobby polished teak abounds, pointed roofs reach for the sky and the dining area is punctuated by massive twisting trees providing shade. The basic concrete bungalows lie scattered around a verdant garden.

**Sea Fan** (☎ 0 7742 5204; [www.seafanresort.com](http://www.seafanresort.com); r 2400-3300B; 📶) Offering huge luxury thatch and wood bungalows connected by wooden walkways, with colourful flora abounding, this is a fine place to stay. The beautiful beachside pool has a small kid's area.

**Paradise Beach Resort** (☎ 0 7724 7727-32; [www.samuiparadisebeach.com](http://www.samuiparadisebeach.com); r 5500-12,000B; 📶) A classy, child-friendly place, Paradise Beach Resort features Thai-style bungalows and rooms with private balconies in a tropical garden setting. There are two swimming pools, a Jacuzzi, a children's playground, an on-site dive centre, all sorts of water sports and a seaside restaurant.

### HAT BO PHUT

Now is the time to visit Bo Phut, a lovely beach with fabulous boutique hotels that, unlike most bungalows in Thailand, actually differ from each other. More relaxed and isolated than Samui's east coast beaches, look for accommodation off the main road and west of the central village area, and on the inland side of the road/village, just a few steps from the beach. Most resorts have snazzy restaurants attached, or you can wander down to the charming fisherman's village, home to a range of wonderful old Chinese shophouses perfect for a cocktail or a romantic dinner. You can rent kayaks and kite-boards on the beach, or grab a massage on a platform overlooking the sea.

**Chalet Villa** (☎ 08 9591 7340; bungalows 400-600B)

The yard here is swampy looking and littered with hulks of old motorboats, but the bungalows are cheap and popular. One traveller described the place as 'primitive but plenty comfortable'. The most expensive huts have TV but no air-con. Many have porches facing the ocean.

**Free House** (☎ 0 7742 7516; bungalows 400-1200B; 📶) Yes, the fan rooms are the size of a shoebox, but they have windows on two sides, which make them far from claustrophobic and some of the best in their class on Samui. The floors are made from simple wood planks and the bed is just a mattress on a raised platform covered by a mozzie net. Considering the price the baths are positively spacious, with no rot and a shower separated from the toilet. The air-con rooms are bigish and beds have real comforters, but otherwise are nothing special. We liked the loungy pillows and book-recycle area at the restaurant serving

lots of curries. Look for it to the east of the Samui Palm Beach.

**Eden** (☎ 0 7742 7645; www.sawadee.com/samui/eden; bungalows 800-1600B; 🏠 📺 📺) Eden is an exceptional find. Another boutique-style place, it has 12 spacious and creative rooms, and a gorgeous garden with a pool. Reconfirm reservations before you arrive.

**Sandy Resort** (☎ 0 7742 3534; fax 0 7742 5325; bungalows 800-2600B; 🏠 📺 📺) The old adage, you get what you pay for is true at Sandy's. The fan bungalows have the saggiest mattresses, while the most expensive places are quite roomy with nicer baths, beds and sheets. Even the smallest bungalows are far from crummy, however, and come with nice touches like art on the walls. The public areas are well maintained and the place is popular even in low season.

**World Resort** (☎ 0 7742 5355; www.samuiworldresort.com; bungalows incl breakfast 1500-3500B; 🏠 📺 📺) World Resort is a step down in luxury, but we found it quite peaceful. The bungalows are old-style Samui, with rattan-woven walls, thick mattresses and nonscratchy sheets. They are very spacious and clean, although bathrooms could use an upgrade and the walls tend to be a tad thin. The swimming pool is lovely and you can partake in a massage overlooking the sea. A Philippine band plays twice a week at the on-site restaurant. The selection of bungalows is huge – the ones closest to the beach are best.

**Zazen** (☎ 0 7742 5085; www.samuizazen.com; r from 3500B; 🏠 📺) Off the main road and west of the village area, Zazen is an absolute stunner, possibly our favourite boutique hotel in Thailand and still very affordable. The 28 artistically decorated, multilevel abodes are trimmed in wood and beautifully painted. Public spaces feature fabulous attention to detail. We loved the open-air spa in the middle of a lagoon, where massages are given on beds of silk. Other highlights include a billiard-table pavilion, swimming pool and a restaurant known for excellently presented world cuisine. The only downer was suspicious, and at times surly, staff.

**Samui Palm Beach Resort** (☎ 0 7742 5494; r from 6500-24,000B; 🏠 📺 📺) This swanky, Mediterranean-style place has white villas on manicured grounds, multiple swimming pools, a restaurant, a bar with cabaret shows, and an icy-cold lounge where you can check your email or watch a movie on the flatscreen TV. Abodes are luxurious and have a maritime theme. It's popular with Europeans.

## HAT BANG RAK

Otherwise known as Big Buddha Beach, this area around one of Samui's main ferry piers is rather ugly and the only reason to sleep here is for two particularly good budget resorts. The moniker comes from the huge golden Buddha that acts as overlord from the small nearby island of Ko Fan, which is connected to Samui by a causeway.

**Shambala** (☎ 0 7742 5330; www.samui-shambala.com; bungalows 500-1000B) A laid-back, English-run place, Shambala has plenty of communal cushion seating and a hip beachside wooden sundeck. The grounds are spacious, the bungalows are bright and roomy, and the spiritual ambience has a slightly hippy feel to it.

**Secret Garden Bungalows** (☎ 0 7724 5255; www.secretgarden.co.th; bungalows 500-1800B; 🏠) Another English-run establishment, Secret Garden has a great big restaurant and bar as well as lovely A-frame bungalows. The cheaper fan bungalows are as nicely finished in wood trimmings as the much pricier air-con rooms and offer the best value. There's live music and a party scene on weekends, but it's fairly subdued the rest of the time.

## AO THONG SAI & HAT CHOENG MON

The largest cove following Ao Thong Sai has several names, but the beach is generally known as Hat Choeng Mon. This area also boasts a few luxury resorts – see the boxed text, p 595.

**White House** (☎ 0 7724 5315; info@samuidreamholiday.com; r 4500-7000B; 🏠 📺) Perfect for a cosy getaway, beautifully appointed rooms at the White House are artistically decorated with creative wooden details and peaked roofs. Duvets top every bed, and on arrival there are fresh fruit and flowers. Water-filled urns dot the lush garden paths and there's an elegant pool, restaurant and private spa areas – it's simply a gorgeous place.

## HAT CHAWENG

Packed end-to-end with hotels and bungalows, Hat Chaweng is the eye of the tourist storm in Samui. Snazzy resorts rule. While most real budget places have long since been squeezed out, a few remain hidden in the masses.

Central Hat Chaweng is an urban strip that is home to plenty of video-playing restaurants, bars (including the girlie kind), discos, mini-marts, film-processing labs, tailors, souvenir shops and foreign-exchange booths. Despite

the havoc and chaos on the main road, the beautiful stretch of beach (about 400m away) and many places to stay are well protected from street sounds.

North Chaweng is far enough from the noise, but still close enough to the action, and houses mostly midrange to top-end resorts along the still leafy beachfront. Meanwhile, around a headland south of central Hat Chaweng, there is a fetching little area known as Hat Chaweng Noi, which offers respite of the luxurious kind.

## North

**Amari Palm Reef Resort** (Map p590; ☎ 0 7742 2015; www.amari.com; r & bungalows from 5500B; 🏠 📺 📺) A luxurious, ultra tastefully decorated resort,

this place has a gorgeous pool area, spacious, comfortable rooms and public lounge areas feature silk-pillow day beds. It's the most environmentally conscious luxury resort on the island, using filtered sea water for most first uses and recycled grey water for landscaping. The place fills quickly, probably because it's such a good deal considering its amenities and *haute couture* style.

**Chaweng Beach Hotel** (Map p590; ☎ 0 7742 2747; chawengbeachhotel@yahoo.com; r 800-1200B; 🏠 📺) On the opposite side of the road from the beach is this very good-value hotel – much better than many of the cheap bungalow operations right on the beach and less noisy. You have to climb a few stairs to reach it, but once you do you'll find rooms larger than expected. Beds

## SAMUI'S TOP FIVE TOP-END RESORTS

There's no shortage of places on Samui willing to help you live the rock-star lifestyle. If hearing prices quoted in US dollar triple figures doesn't give your accountant a heart attack, then the following list of unique top-end resorts might be for you.

**Imperial Boat House Hotel** (☎ 0 7742 5041-52; www.imperialhotels.com; Hat Choeng Mon; r US\$160-220, boat ste US\$270; 🏠 📺) This place is something else. It has a three-storey hotel as well as free-standing, two-storey bungalows made from teak rice barges complete with separate lounge areas and a patio on each bow. There's also a boat-shaped swimming pool. It's a sophisticated and unique place.

**Le Royal Meridien Baan Taling Ngam** (☎ 0 7634 0480; www.lemeridien.com; Ao Taling Ngam; r & villas US\$180-800; 🏠 📺 📺) The finest resort on Samui and arguably one of the best in Thailand, Le Meridien dominates the northern end of this shallow curving bay from its perch atop a steep hill. It boasts tennis courts, two swimming pools, a fitness centre and a full complement of equipment and instructors for kayaking, windsurfing and diving. Luxuriously appointed guest accommodation contains custom-made Thai-style furnishings and the service here is impeccable. As it's not right on the beach, a shuttle service transports guests back and forth; airport and ferry transfers are also provided.

**Central Samui Beach Resort** (Map p590; ☎ 0 7723 0500; www.centralhotelsresorts.com; Hat Chaweng; r US\$188-1000; 🏠 📺 📺) One of Samui's best, this place has what you would expect at an internationally rated four-plus star resort. The green palm-studded garden rolls into the sea, your bath comes filled with aromatherapy bits and bobs, and there are childcare facilities, a spa, library, fitness room, outstanding service and four restaurants. All the hotel-style rooms have sea views and balconies.

**Tongsai Bay** (☎ 0 7724 5480-5500; www.tongsabay.co.th; Hat Choeng Mon; ste 11,000-30,000B; 🏠 📺) For serious pampering, head to this secluded, luxurious place. Expansive, impeccably maintained with hilly grounds make buildings here look like a small village, and golf carts are employed to zoom guests around. All the swanky suites have day-bed rest areas, gorgeous romantic décor, stunning views, large terraces and creatively placed tubs (you'll see). Facilities include salt- and fresh-water pools, a tennis court, spa and three restaurants.

**Muang Kulay Pan Hotel** (Map p590; ☎ 0 7723 0849-51; www.kulaypan.com; Hat Chaweng; r 12,000B; 🏠 📺 📺) This resort has a distinctive style; it's designed with minimalist Japanese, Thai and Indonesian influences that are fused in an unassuming but very elegant look. Sleek villas are gracefully appointed and include original works of art. The pool is fabulous with a waterfall and an artificial beach that allows you to walk down an inclined entrance to the water – allowing you to get wet at your own speed. Fish-filled canals run around the foliage-heavy property.

have firm mattresses and bathrooms feature separate shower stalls.

**Coral Bay Resort** (Map p590; ☎ 0 7742 2223; www.coralbay.net; r & bungalows 4000-7000B; 🏠 🚿) Accommodation here is fabulous, sporting natural materials and unique wooden details in spacious surroundings. Gardens are lush, hilly and meandering, and there's an enticingly designed pool area with an overlooking restaurant. Other facilities include a spa and an overhead projector showing news and movies.

**Papillon Resort** (Map p590; ☎ 0 7723 1169; www.papillonsamui.com; r & bungalows 1600-5500B; 🏠 🚿) This place offers imaginative, two-level rooms with elegant décor and lofts, along with a lush garden, beautiful restaurant and a tiny pool.

### Central

**The Wave Samui** (Map p590; ☎ 0 7723 0803; www.thewavesamui.com; r from 350-850B; 🏠 🚿) The only true backpackers on Samui, the Wave is a relatively new place run by two friendly Brits. The fan rooms are some of the best on the island; they are all decent sized and freshly painted (although baths are shared), and come with cable TV and fridge. Air-con rooms are also fairly priced. There is a single two-storey suite (1650B) that is a real steal; it sleeps four, has a private rooftop deck and a TV with a DVD player. The bar and restaurant offers cheap beers, solid food and lively ambiance. The owners are huge supporters of the Samui Dog Rescue, so you'll see plenty of four-legged friends hanging around.

**The Club** (Map p590; ☎ 0 1894 2327; bungalows 450-1200B, villas 3500B; 🏠 🚿) The drive up the roughshod dirt road to this isolated mountain getaway is totally worthwhile once you get a load of the awesome views. The bungalows in this French-Thai-run place have unpretentious back-to-nature design and a share of the magnificent vistas. There's a great horizon pool and French restaurant, and you can call ahead for a pick-up. This is easily the best value on this beach.

**Lucky Mother** (Map p590; ☎ 0 7723 0931; bungalows 400-600B; 🏠 🚿) Lucky Mother offers some of the cheapest, and smallest, rickety old Samui bungalows left on this beach – an alternative if the Wave is full. These are pretty bad as far as bungalows go – the cheapest ones have rotting walls, broken fans and grimy bathrooms, and the air-con ones are similar only larger – but considering Samui's serious lack of budget

accommodation they remain popular with the backpacking crowd and can fully book out.

**Relax Resort** (Map p590; ☎ 0 7742 2280; fax 0 7742 2113; r 600-1200B; 🏠 🚿) The resort has nice rooms with fans in an appalling location off a driveway. On the other hand, the rooms with air-con are gorgeous and charming, with attractive architecture (some have wonderful lofts) and creative details. They're in the back, along nice garden paths.

**Coconut Grove Samui Mandalay Resotel** (Map p590; ☎ 0 7723 1157; bungalows 800-1000B; 🏠 🚿) Good value for its central location, this place has cosy wooden bungalows with satellite TV and mattresses on the floor. They don't let in a lot of light but they're large enough. The on-site bar and restaurant is very popular and the place can be really loud at night – ask for a bungalow away from the bar and down the beach, as these are quieter and nicer.

**Samui Coral Resort** (Map p590; ☎ 0 7742 2364; www.samuicoralresort.com; bungalows incl breakfast 800-1500B; 🏠 🚿) The bungalows closest to the beach are dark wooden stilt boxes with slats missing from the floors and weathered woven rattan walls, but they're as tidy as can be and the mattress doesn't sink too bad. Further back, two-storey whitewashed modern bungalows have big glass windows and more space. The cement exterior fronting the beach is far from attractive, but the bar in the sand attracts plenty of people; plus the pool is clean and bigger than most.

**Palm Island Hotel & Resort** (Map p590; ☎ 0 7741 3140; www.palmislandsamui.com; bungalows from 1100B; 🏠 🚿) It's far from special, but a good deal for this part of Chaweng. Rooms are not just big enough to move in, they even have space for a night table and a TV with a wide range of channels in English. The décor may not be to everyone's taste, and lends a sort of black-leather studded dog-collar accent to the chipped furnishings. The two-tiered pool right off the beach is a plus.

**Garden Beach Resort** (Map p590; ☎ 0 7741 3798; www.ark-bar.com; bungalows r from 1200B; 🏠 🚿) Although we're not sure why, the Garden Beach Resort is a huge hit with the 20-something crowd. The cement bungalows are small, overpriced and far from special, featuring cheap brown furniture. The location, right in the middle of the beach, is pretty killer though. The bar and restaurant on the sand is also wildly popular with backpackers, and it makes sense to sleep where you party. It's often fully booked.

**Princess Village** (Map p590; ☎ 0 7742 2216; www.samuiprincess.com; bungalows 4100-6000B; 🏠 🚿) Stunning Ayuthaya-period Thai stilt homes lie among ponds and a sea of green in this romantic getaway. The bungalows are beautifully constructed and decorated, and the whole place is hushed with silence. It's a very special place, perfect for honeymooners.

**Baan Samui Resort** (Map p590; ☎ 0 7742 2415; www.see2sea.com; r from 4500B; 🏠 🚿) Whether you consider Baan Samui eccentrically charming or a major eyesore, one thing is for sure – you can't miss this pink adobe joint with blue trim. The décor is southwest USA meets Miami Art Deco. The rooms continue the theme with bright colours, Navajo rugs and clean white duvets. The Moon Dance restaurant lets you dine under the stars and does a seafood barbecue for about 350B.

**Poppies Samui** (Map p590; ☎ 0 7742 2419; www.poppiesamui.com; r 7200B; 🏠 🚿) The gorgeous garden at Poppies comes with a bubbling stream, while the cottages are luxuriously comfortable. Boulders edge the small swimming pool and the restaurant is top-notch. It has been a long-time Samui favourite for jet-setters.

Also recommended:

**Chaweng Gardens Beach** (Map p590; ☎ 0 7742 2265; bungalows 600-2200B; 🏠 🚿) A long-time establishment.

**PP Samui Resort** (Map p590; ☎ 0 7742 2540; fax 0 7742 2324; r 1050-2500B; 🏠 🚿)

**Montien House** (Map p590; ☎ 0 7742 2169; montien@samart.co.th; r & bungalows 1700B) A special place with a beautiful pool by the beach.

**Banana Fan Sea Samui** (Map p590; ☎ 0 7741 3483-6; www.bananafansea.com; r & bungalows 4000-14,000B; 🏠 🚿) Appealing upmarket option; wonderful Thai-style rooms.

**Chaweng Buri Resort** (Map p590; ☎ 0 7742 2466; www.chawengburi.com; bungalows 4500B; 🏠 🚿) Romantic atmosphere and great grounds.

### HAT LAMAI

After Chaweng became too crowded, travellers started to turn up to this much mellower location, which boasts super calm waters thanks to an offshore reef. However, its popularity today – just look around – means those looking for solitude have moved on to more secluded spots. The Lamai nightlife is Samui's most tawdry, attracting tourists by the boatload to down buckets of booze while go-go dancers 'polish poles' in the open-air hostess bars. Generally, attractive accommodation at the northeastern end of the beach

is quieter and moderately priced in the low season, though the beach is a bit rougher and the water deeper. The action centres on Ban Lamai. The vibe here is more laid-back than Chaweng, and sleeping options tend to be less claustrophobic and better value. All the usual traveller services and provisions exist here. Hinta Hinyai, at the southern end of Lamai, is famous for its suggestive, giggle-inspiring formations called the Grandmother and Grandfather rocks.

### Budget

Heaps of cheap fan bungalows scattered about on Hat Lamai mean there's no shortage of options for any length of stay, but if you need air-con expect to pay at least 600B.

**Amity** (☎ 0 7742 4084; amitytravel@yahoo.com; bungalows 350-1200B; 🏠 🚿) Another welcome cheapie in a constantly upward-moving market, the most expensive bungalows at Amity are large, updated and on the beach. B-level rooms include air-con, while the dirt-cheap ones seem rather neglected and share bathrooms. Basic, comfortable and economical are the tenets, so go ahead, have those extra Singha's and relax.

**Beers House** (☎ 0 7723 0467; bungalows 350-6000B) Popular and friendly, with an old-school feel, Beers House has closely situated shady bungalows (the best ones right on the beachfront), a welcoming restaurant and helpful staff. The cheapest accommodation shares bathrooms.

**Magic Resort** (☎ 0 7742 4229; bungalows 400-1200B; 🏠 🚿) The teal bungalows are newly painted while the older structures resemble tiny wooden thatched-roof houses perched on stilts. All have a front porch and are within walking distance to the sea. Put simply, it's a good deal on no-frills accommodation. Don't expect a TV or mini-fridge; however, the renovated units have additional living space with newer bathrooms.

**Utopia** (☎ 0 7723 3113; www.utopia-samui.com; bungalows from 500B; 🏠 🚿) Sleep in fan-only Thai-style cottages or fancier air-con teak-appointed rooms with terraces overlooking exotic tropical gardens. Dine on fresh seafood, Thai or international cuisine while sitting under the stars at the in-house restaurant. The beach here is Samui's best as far as sand, sea and scenery go.

### Midrange

Midrange options are plentiful on Hat Lamai, but check out a few places because quality changes very quickly here.

**Spa Resort** (☎ 0 7723 0976; www.spasamui.com; bungalows 500-3000B; 🏠 🚿) Though this place has gone more upscale of late, it still maintains bargain-priced rustic beach bungalows. New Age and holistic treatments like herbal sauna packages, body wraps, clay facials, and colon cleansing are available for guests and nonguests alike. Thai herbal massage, cleansing fasts and more intensive programmes (minimum three-night stay) are also available. Activities include *taijiquan* (tai chi), meditation, yoga and cooking classes. Reserving a place ahead of time (email is best) is advised as it's often fully booked.

**Long Island Resort** (☎ 0 7742 4202; www.longislandresort.com; bungalows 750-3000B; 🏠 🚿) A well-liked establishment, the Long Island features nicely situated thatched-roof bungalows alongside brick pathways spanning over three acres of tropical landscape. Affordable luxury, a peaceful vicinity and friendly, attentive staff are all reasons why we like it.

**Bill Resort** (☎ 0 7742 4403; www.thebillresort.com; r & bungalows from 1000B; 🏠 🚿) Colourful materials and textures mix freely, complementing the blossoming overgrown garden, Jacuzzi and pool areas. Accommodation ranges from wicker beds and furniture to platform beds, with handcrafted features like funky spiralling bedposts made from local timber.

**Sand Sea Resort** (☎ 0 7723 1127; www.samuisandsea.com; bungalows 1000-4700B; 🏠 🚿) Contemporary upmarket Thai furnishings, unpretentious comfort and convenience is what to expect at the newly renovated Sand Sea. Laze contentedly under coconut palm canopies then pamper yourself with a spa treatment, or indulge at the weekly beach barbecue.

**Golden Sand** (☎ 0 7742 4031/2; www.goldensand-resort.com; r & bungalows 1470-4800B; 🏠 🚿) On the main road and easy to find, two types of accommodation are offered here set amid beautiful expansive grounds. Take your pick of modern hotel rooms inside a low-rise building, or bungalows surrounded by coconut trees, some with glass fronts that get heaps of light. The restaurant overlooks the central garden, while the bar sits on the beach.

**Galaxy Resort** (☎ 0 7742 4441; www.samui-hotels.com/galaxy; r & bungalows incl breakfast 1500-3800B; 🏠 🚿) Thai-style architecture, huge bathtubs and beautifully presented interior décor are featured in the most lavish rooms at this resort. The cheaper ones are clean, adequate and comfortable, although they can be a little rough around the edges.

**Jungle Park Hotel** (☎ 0 7741 8034-7; www.jungle-park.com; r incl breakfast 1500-4800B; 🏠 🚿) Luxury for less, need we say more? Rooms are tidy, well maintained and attractively decorated. Leafy foliage abounds creating an inviting atmosphere coupled with an intimate sense of exclusivity. A brilliant amoeba-shaped pool near the beach, with a restaurant and bar situated alongside, make this an excellent choice.

**Aloha** (☎ 0 7742 4418; www.alohasamui.com; r & bungalows from 2000B; 🏠 🚿) Soft waxen sand, cerulean water, coconut trees and serene forested hills swathe you in idyllic tranquillity at Aloha. Sadly, the rooms are very plain with modest furnishings and do not live up to the amazing natural beauty just outside your door. The greatest asset is the wonderfully tropical, blue-tiled pool that overlooks the beach.

#### Top End

There are several top-end places to stay on Hat Lamai, many of the spa-resort variety.

**Star Bay Beach & Garden** (☎ 0 7742 4546; www.starbay-beach.com; 1- & 2-bedroom houses from US\$50 per day; 🏠 🚿) Travellers with children or in small groups looking for extended stays on the island will likely enjoy these lodgings. It caters to longer-term guests (two weeks or so) with fully furnished, roomy and striking residences near the beach, combining the best of Thai character and Western comfort. There is a beachside restaurant and the gardens are tropical paradises. If business is slow, shorter stays may be possible.

**Tamarind Retreat Resort** (☎ 0 7742 4221; www.tamarindretreat.com; r & villas from 3200B; 🏠 🚿) Resting against a forested hillside oasis, Tamarind offers gorgeously designed and crafted holiday homes – each with a distinctive theme. Some integrate boulders into walls and floors, private ponds or inventive open-air bathrooms in the vein of the appropriately named 'Rock 'n Wood' suite. There is a five-night minimum stay, seven nights during peak season, including free airport round-trip transfer and breakfast. Tamarind Springs is the attached day spa that has all the usual services and packages. It's regularly fully booked, so reserve well in advance.

**Pavilion Resort** (☎ 0 7742 4420; www.pavilionsamui.com; r & bungalows incl breakfast from 9500B; 🏠 🚿) Chalet-chic Pavilion caters exclusively to travellers' privacy and pampering whims. Even though the boutique cottages seem commu-

nally heaped, they still endow an exceptionally cosy, handsome and airy interior feel. The spacious pool mirrors, the sky overhead and the turtle statuette fountains trickling azure rivulets of water create an atmosphere of tranquillity.

In the following places, just south of Hat Lamai, you pay for the atmosphere and ecological sensitivity more than for amenities.

**Laem Set Inn** (☎ 0 7723 3299; www.laemset.com; bungalows 1200-15,950B; 🏠 🚿) A secluded place connected by stairways and waterways, and surrounded by a tropical garden, it has a minor art gallery on the premises and a good Thai restaurant, as well as a full-service spa.

**Central Samui Village** (☎ 0 7742 4020; www.centralhotelsresorts.com; bungalows 4500-5500B; 🏠 🚿) These chic, modern wooden cottages are linked by wooden walkways over a rocky landscape. The village has well-designed grounds, a pool and a mixed Thai and foreign clientele. Cottages have either a garden or sea view.

#### WEST COAST

Several bays along Samui's western side have places to stay, including Thong Yang, where the Don Sak and Khanom ferries dock. The beaches here turn to mudflats during low tide, however, so they're not very popular with beach fans. With the exception of Samui's most exclusive resort, Le Royal Meridien Baan Taling Ngam (see box text, p595), there is little reason to stay here.

**Simple Life Bungalow** (☎ 0 7733 4191; bungalows 300-800B; 🏠 🚿) Around Laem Hin Khon, on the southern end of Samui's west, is a little bay called Emerald Cover. Here you'll find Simple Life Bungalows, which delivers on its promise. The reasonable, bare-bones rooms set around a flora-filled path are far from pretty much anywhere. The owner can arrange day trips to Ko Taen for 1000B per boat.

**Coconut Villa** (☎ 0 7733 4069; coconutvilla@sawadee.com; bungalows 400-1200B; 🏠 🚿) Not far from Simple Life, these perky-coloured little huts are a slightly fancier affair. The beach here is slim but enticing, and the isolation can be bliss after spending time in the rush-hour of the east coast. There's a restaurant on the premises.

**Wiesenthal** (☎ 0 7723 5165; wisnthal@samart.co.th; bungalows 500-1500B; 🏠 🚿) Located on Ao Taling Ngam, this place sits amid a pleasant garden with coconut palms. The well-spaced bungalows have either partial or full sea views.

#### Eating

The number of eating establishments on Samui is overwhelming. Fans of Italian food will not be disappointed, especially on Chaweng, where it seems Italian-owned restaurants outnumber everything else combined. Nearly all bungalow operations have their own restaurant, but because the ownership and management of various lodgings around the island change so frequently it's difficult to name favourites.

#### NA THON

There are several good restaurants and watering holes in Na Thon, many of which fill quickly with travellers waiting for the night ferry. A giant supermarket and a day market are on Th Thawi Ratchaphakdi, the third street back from the harbour.

**About Art & Craft** (Map p588; ☎ 0 1499 9353; Th Chonwithi; dishes 20-120B; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) This is a jewellery and art gallery that also serves delicious organic and sugar-free vegetarian food and juices. There is a peaceful, spiritual atmosphere here – surprising for Na Thon.

**Coffee Island** (Map p588; ☎ 0 7742 0153; Th Chonwithi; dishes 30-190B; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Great if you arrive at the pier early morning and need a real espresso to wake up. Coffee Island also has cures to settle queasy tummies, the huge menu offers baked goods, full breakfasts, and Thai and Western staples such as sandwiches and curry. It's run by the Ruang Thong restaurant chain in Na Thon.

#### HAT BO PHUT

Hat Bo Phut is as wonderful for eating as it is for sleeping. The romantic Fisherman's Village is host to a number of trendy restaurants serving food that tastes as good as the surroundings look. Resorts further to the west along the beach also boast a few great restaurants.

**Billabong Surf Club** (☎ 0 7743 0144; Fisherman's Village; dishes from 100B; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) An Aussie restaurant that serves giant portions of steaks, barbecue ribs and lamb chops, along with burgers, bar snacks, Aussie-rules football and, for some reason, Indian curries. The beer flows late into the night.

**The Shack Bar & Grill** (☎ 0 7724 5041; Fisherman's Village; dishes from 200B; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Well-presented flame-grilled dishes are served in intimate settings at this restaurant featuring Californian cuisine and a lengthy wine list.

## SAMUI'S TOP FIVE EATS

When dining options are plentiful and varied, one has to consider the overall experience: the food, the service and the ambience, before deciding what and where to eat. Ko Samui has some of the best chefs in the world plying their trade and delighting gastronomes with their inspired creations. Below are our favourite five.

**Betelnut Restaurant** (Map p590; ☎ 0 7741 3370; Hat Chaweng; dishes 200-650B; 🍷 dinner) With one of Samui's top reputations for seriously fine dining, Betelnut owner-chef Jeffrey Lord honed his chops at Poppies before going it alone, and the island's foodies remain loyal throughout. Imagine a highly innovative menu fusing Californian, European and Chinese styles with distinctive Thai twists. Reservations recommended.

**Poppies** (Map p590; ☎ 0 7742 2419; Hat Chaweng; 250-700B; 🍷 lunch & dinner) A long-time Samui institution, Poppies creates the ultimate balance: delectable, inspired cuisine presented in a relaxed but cordial beachside atmosphere in Chaweng. The romantic ambience with its candlelit tables, elegantly attired conscientious staff and unobtrusive live music provides the perfect setting for a memorable night.

**Zico's** (Map p590; ☎ 0 7723 1560-3; Hat Chaweng; 250-700B; 🍷 lunch & dinner) A contemporary and sleekly modern restaurant, Zico's gleams in the Brazilian national colours of green and yellow, and has concealed romantic alcoves, loveseats, waterfalls, under-lit glass terrazzo, and loads of plants. Its signature dish is the carnivorous churrasqueria gaucho-style barbecue, with passadors bearing laden skewers of every variety of meat conceivable doing a steady round of the tables. A genuine Brazilian samba band and dancers entertain guests nightly. The cocktail bar is well worth visiting in itself and for the chance of joining one of the scantily clad samba girls on the dance floor. It's on the beach road at the southern end of Chaweng.

**Laem Set Inn** (☎ 0 7742 4393; Ban Hua Thanon; 250-700B; 🍷 lunch & dinner) This place offers upscale dining featuring classical Thai cuisine, as well as creative Pacific Rim fare at one of the most well-established boutique resorts on Samui. The short menu changes daily and meals are always served in a traditional Thai wooden thatched *sálaa* where the sea views are fantastic.

**The Lai Thai Restaurant** (☎ 0 7742 9201; Hat Mae Nam; dishes 480-800B; 🍷 dinner) Located on the northern end of idyllic Mae Nam in the Napasi Resort, Lai Thai overlooks a romantic sheltered beach and combines elegant natural surroundings with 1st-class Thai service. Dining here is a memorable culinary treat. French chef Michel Chlaustre produces a brilliant selection of delicious European seafood and meat dishes entwining flavours and ingredients with enviable talent, while his sous chefs prepare a fine medley of classic Thai dishes, many of which were originally conceived in the kitchens of the Royal Palace. Reserving ahead in high season is highly recommended.

Jazz and blues music complement the dining experience.

**Baia** (☎ 0 7724 5566; Fisherman's Village; dishes 120-300B; 🍷 lunch & dinner) Baia smells delicious from the moment you step into its airy, environs. Grab a wooden table overlooking the water and scope out the Italian and Mediterranean menu. We liked the pizza here so much we ordered a second slice – it has a thin crust and is served with a delicious hot pepper dipping sauce.

**Zazem Restaurant** (☎ 0 7742 5085; Fisherman's Village; dishes 150-500B; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) The restaurant at this cool boutique hotel offers a fabulous fusion of Mediterranean and Thai food served in a stunning, romantic location right on the beach or under a private Thai *sálaa* (an open-sided, covered meeting space)

by the lagoon. The salads are mouthwatering and ultra fresh and there don't seem to be any bad choices on the menu. The cocktail menu is long and sweet.

**Villa Bianca** (☎ 0 7724 5041; Fisherman's Village; dishes 150-400B; 🍷 lunch & dinner) Serving classic Italian cuisine with a seafood slant, Villa Bianca is nestled among the old converted Chinese shophouses overlooking the water in Bo Phut Fisherman's Village. Its stark white walls, classy *objets d'art* and well-spaced candlelit tables covered in crisp white linen give the restaurant an unmistakably Mediterranean feel.

## HAT BANG RAK

**The Mangrove** (☎ 0 7742 7584; dishes from 200B) For an exceptional meal, check out the Mangrove on Ko Fan (the island connected to the mainland

by a causeway). An ex-Poppies chef runs the kitchen and cooks up an ever-changing menu of French cuisine. Reservations are highly recommended as seating is limited.

## HAT CHAWENG

Back on the 'strip' are dozens of restaurants and cafés serving Western cuisine. Italian places outnumber the rest, but many types of food are accounted for from stalls serving cheap Thai to Starbucks and McDonald's. For the best ambience get off the strip and head to the beach where many bungalow operators set up tables on the sand and have glittery fairy lights at night. With the waves providing the background soundtrack, you can't get much more relaxed.

The following places are only a start – there are literally hundreds more. Also make sure to check out the boxed text on Samui's Top Five Eats (opposite).

**Will Wait Restaurant & Bakery** (Map p590; ☎ 0 7742 2613; dishes 50-200B; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) It's been around forever it seems, and never loses popularity, which says a lot in Samui's fickle eating market. The eatery has a few locations on Chaweng's main strip. In addition to cakes and pastries, it serves pizza, Thai food and decent Western breakfasts at three locations in south and central Chaweng.

**Chaweng Khaosan Restaurant & Bakery** (Map p590; dishes from 60B; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Big and airy with a congenial atmosphere, it seems as popular with *faràng* (Westerners) as with Thais. The menu has everything you could be craving and then some – from savoury pancakes to pizza, pasta, baguettes and seafood. It shows movies at night, does big breakfasts in the morning and always seems to be filled.

**Starbucks** (Map p590; ☎ 0 7742 1234; coffee & snacks 60-185B; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) When you're feeling homesick and can't stomach another fried breakfast tasting vaguely of last night's *phát thai*, come home to Starbucks. Sure, it's a global corporate conglomerate, but sometimes you just need to regroup over a vanilla latte and blueberry scone that tastes the same in Ko Samui as it does in Los Angeles or London.

**Captain Kirk** (Map p590; ☎ 08 1270 5376; dishes 140-400B; 🍷 dinner) A tropical rooftop garden restaurant in the heart of Chaweng, Captain Kirk's is as popular for its ambience as it is for its food. A mixture of high quality, well-presented, fresh food from Thailand and the world is on the diverse menu – which has

more than 80 different choices. After dinner linger over cocktails on bamboo cushioned chairs.

**Deck** (Map p590; ☎ 0 7723 0897; dishes 80-200B; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Eat upstairs in Thai-style, with loads of cushions, or downstairs off the sidewalk, so you can check out the street traffic. The three-course 170B breakfast is served all day and is a good deal – choose from healthy (fruit, salad and yoghurt with toast and juice) to unhealthy (we're not kidding this is the name, and it includes Coke, fried eggs, fried toast, bacon and French fries). At lunch and dinner it cooks up Thai food, burgers, souvlaki, pasta and salad, among other dishes. The bar is popular at night.

**Gringos Cantina** (Map p590; ☎ 0 7741 3267; dishes 145-230B; 🍷 dinner) This is a popular Mexican *cocina* serving quesadillas, tacos, tostadas and burritos that are best washed down with margaritas, piña coladas and tequila shooters. Of course, it has the requisite pizzas and burgers as well.

**Islander** (Map p590; ☎ 0 7723 0836; dishes 90-210B; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) *Faràng* pack this partially al fresco joint off the busy beach road day or night. The brekkies are served all day long and include coffee and lots of meats. Starting at 135B, these are a good sop-up-the-booze morning fuel. Other choices take you around the world and include quesadillas, pizza, Thai and lots of Brit staples, and veggie options. Service is slow.

**Tropical Murphy's** (Map p590; ☎ 0 7741 3614; dishes 150-350B; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) This place is fairly similar to the Islander and just as popular with *faràng*. On the menu are steak-and-kidney pie, fish and chips, lamb chops, Irish stew and desserts. The décor is dark old-world pub; fans keep the inside cool even when it's steaming outside. There is a great brew selection and live music four times per week.

## HAT LAMAI

Lamai has less variety than Chaweng when it comes to eating. Dining in your hotel's restaurant is agreeable for some, but endeavouring to go out for a meal is well worth the short walk. Fresh seafood, Italian and pub grub is nearly ubiquitous. However, several local Thai food stalls in the central beach are a superb means for sampling local flavours while saving bait.

**Rising Sun** (☎ 0 7741 8015; dishes 60-300B; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Popular with *faràng* for its

open-air, informal tables and chairs, this place does respectable burgers, steaks, veggie stuff, coffees and drinks.

**Bauhaus Bistro** (☎ 0 7741 8797; dishes 80-350B; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Inside this intricate woody behemoth, the regular carte du jour includes burgers, salads, sandwiches, munchies, and European and Thai food.

**Eldorado** (www.eldoradolamai.com; dishes 120-210B; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) West of the central crossroads, this popular, inexpensive Swedish restaurant blends international cuisine with Thai specialities and an all-you-can-eat barbecue every Wednesday at 7pm.

**Samui Shamrock** (☎ 0 1597 8572; dishes 120-500B; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Thai-erd of *phat thai*? Then head to the Samui Shamrock and fill up on generous, hearty portions of Irish fare while quaffing it down with a Guinness. Featuring live music five nights a week, a new stage and lighting system, the ever-hip Samui Shamrock is your ticket for entertainment in Lamai. It does a wonderful breakfast special/hangover cure called the 'Irish Fry-up' that's perfect for the morning after a long night out.

**Il Tempio** (☎ 0 7723 2307; dishes 130-230B; ☺ lunch & dinner) Il Tempio's area of expertise is Italian cooking, but it also does savoury Thai dishes and has a gelateria. It has appealing open courtyard seating that is straightforward and relaxing. If interested, you can watch *muay thai* (Thai boxing) action across the street.

## Drinking & Entertainment

Hat Chaweng and Hat Lamai have the most nightlife, but many bungalows and hotels all over the island have small- to medium-sized bars.

### HAT BO PHUT

Quiet and completely lacking in girly bars, Bo Phut's nightlife scene is mellow. That said, the place is hardly lacking in entertainment, with a few great pubs along its waterfront and in the Fisherman's Village. Most double as restaurants.

**The Frog & Gecko Pub** (☎ 0 7742 5248) This tropical British watering hole has become a bit of a Samui institution, famous for its 'Wednesday Night Pub Quiz' competitions and its wide selection of music. Live sporting events are shown on the big screen. There is a slate-bed pool table and the pub claims to serve the coldest beer on the island. It also does great pub grub (100B to 200B).

**Billabong Surf Club** (☎ 0 7743 0144) Great views across to Ko Pha-Ngan, as well as plenty of Aussie sports memorabilia make this restaurant (p599) and bar a popular drinking spot. Of course, the telly is always tuned to the sport.

### HAT CHAWENG

Soi Green Mango is the heart of Chaweng's pumping nightlife scene, with loads of bars concentrated on one long alleyway. All the watering holes, some sleazier than others, seem to constantly change names – in Thailand if a business doesn't work in the first month the owners often just cut their losses and pack up shop. At the time of research you could drink your way around the world on this strip, from the London Inn to the Kangaroo Bar to Henry's Africa; take a wander to see what's around.

**Reggae Pub** (Map p590; ☎ 0 7742 2331) Looming like a gorgeous monster at the end of a girlie-bar line-up, this two-storey, tastefully done, open building has been a hit for seemingly forever. A virtual Bob Marley shrine, it packs in nightly crowds to watch sports at the long bars or shoot a game of pool. There are plenty of places to sit, great lake views and live music played on the stage.

**Green Mango** (Map p590; ☎ 0 7742 2148) This place is so popular it has a whole soi named after it! Another Samui power drinking house, it is cavernous, very loud and very *faràng*. Green Mango has blazing lights, soccer on TV, expensive drinks and masses of sweaty bodies swaying to dance music.

**Coco Blues** (Map p590; ☎ 0 7742 2248; ☺ 10am-2am) Some of Samui's best live talent and international players can be found here (every night) if they're touring. This place is actually a promotional vehicle for the nearby Coco Real Estate company – after a few drinks we were pretty keen on some beachfront property.

**Deck** (Map p590; ☎ 0 7723 0897) An open-air, multiterraced bar with comfortable lounging platforms, the deck has good views of the street scene below. This place has recently been refurbished to have even more terraces and more lounging platforms. There is also a smaller related pub directly opposite called the Quarterdeck.

**Ark Bar** (Map p590; ☎ 0 7741 3798) One of the most popular of the beach bars, the Ark is lit up with paper lanterns at night. There are cushions on the sand, whiskey buckets, and

Wednesday night dance parties with live DJs and a free barbecue starting at 4pm.

**Legends** (Map p590) Right on the main strip, this bar is run by a friendly expat and draws in fistfuls of *faràng* for strong cocktails (try the Long Island Iced Tea to knock your socks off) and sport on the TV. It has a casual outdoor seating area.

**Black Jack Pub** (Map p590; ☎ 0 1748 3740) Small and cosy with sports TV and two pool tables, the Black Jack is run by an expat. Internet access is free from 5pm to 11pm.

**Christy's Cabaret Bar** (Map p590; admission free; show time 11pm) This bar offers transvestite cabaret nightly and attracts a mixed clientele of both sexes. Inside, the music's outdated and the show's not great, but it's something different.

### HAT LAMAI

Touristy seaside towns are infamous for their seedy Pattaya-style hostess bars, but there are other avenues for meeting, eating and partying in more tasteful settings. Lamai is beginning to lean away from that scene in areas. The Samui Shamrock (opposite) on the main strip has a great bar, a large dance floor, live music five nights a week and heaps of chilled-out ambience. Next door, the long-time favourite Bauhaus Bistro (opposite) looks like some sort of bacchanal resort in its own right and throws hugely popular foam dance parties on Fridays.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

**Bangkok Airways** (Map p590; ☎ 0 7742 2512) flies about 16 times daily between Ko Samui and Bangkok. The flight takes about one hour and 20 minutes. Other destinations from Samui include Phuket, Pattaya and Chiang Mai. During high season flights may be booked out six weeks in advance, so plan accordingly. If Samui flights are full, you might try flying to Surat Thani first, then taking a boat. Delays are also common, so plan accordingly for connecting flights.

The Samui airport departure tax is 500B for domestic and international flights. The attractive open-air airport has a nice bar, restaurant, money-exchange outlet and hotel-reservations counter.

There are almost 10 daily departures between Samui and Ko Pha-Ngan. These leave either from the Na Thong, Mae Nam or Bang Rak piers and take from 20 minutes to one

hour (130B to 250B). On Ko Pha-Ngan there are two piers (Hat Rin and Thong Sala), with the boats departing from Hat Bang Rak servicing Hat Rin, and the other boats Thong Sala. From the same piers, there are also around six daily departures between Samui and Ko Tao. These take 1¼ to 2½ hours and cost 345B to 550B.

Car ferries from Don Sak and Khanom land at Thong Yang, about 10km south of Na Thon.

### BUS

It can be cheaper and less stressful to get bus/ferry combination tickets that take you all the way to (and from) Ko Samui.

The government-bus fares from Bangkok's Southern bus terminal include the cost of the ferry. These are 900/700/500B for VIP/1st class/2nd class. Most private buses from Bangkok charge around 450B for the same journey and include the ferry fare. From Th Khao San in Bangkok it's possible to get bus/ferry combination tickets for as little as 280B, but service is substandard and theft occurs more frequently than on the more expensive buses. If an agency on Th Khao San claims to be able to get you to Samui for less, it is almost certainly a scam as no profit can be made at such low prices. The Surat Thani travel agency **Phantip Travel** (☎ 0 7742 1221) has offices in Na Thon.

From Na Thon, air-con buses fan out over Thailand and there are at least three daily departures for any given destination, the first one being at 7.30am.

### BUSES FROM NA THON

Destination	Price
Bangkok	400-875B
Hat Yai	400B
Khao Sok	360B
Krabi	270-380B
Penang	650-800B
Phuket	350-380B
Ranong	350-380B
Surat Thani	180B
Trang	400-450B

### TRAIN

You can buy train/bus/ferry tickets straight through to Samui from Bangkok. Buying these combination tickets saves you some hassle, though you really don't save much money –

especially if you include getting to the train station. For details on train travel, see p581.

## Getting Around

### TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

Private taxi fares from the airport are as follows: Chaweng (300B to 400B), Lamai (400B) and Na Thon (400B to 500B). Minivans also do the run. Destinations and rough prices: Bang Rak (80B), Bo Phut (100B), Chaweng (200B), Mae Nam (200B), Na Thon (200B to 250B) and Lamai (200B to 250B). Cheapest are the sawngthäew: Chaweng (100B), Lamai (100B), Mae Nam (100B) and Na Thon (150B).

### CAR & MOTORCYCLE

You can rent motorcycles (and bicycles) from several places in Na Thon, Chaweng and Lamai, as well as from various bungalows around the island. The going rate is 150B per day for a small motorcycle, but for longer periods try to negotiate a better rate. Take it easy on the bikes; every year several *faràng* die or are seriously injured in motorcycle accidents on Samui. A helmet law is enforced with occasional vigour.

Suzuki Caribbean jeeps can be hired for around 1500B per day from various travel agencies.

### SÄWNGTHÄEW

Fares from Na Thon include Mae Nam (30B), Bo Phut (50B), Hat Bang Rak (50B), Lamai (70B), Chaweng (70B) and Choeng Mon (70B). Säwngthäew drivers love to try to overcharge you, so it's always best to ask a third party for current rates, in case these have changed. Säwngthäew run regularly during daylight hours only.

A rough rate for motorcycle taxis is around 25B for a five-minute ride.

## KO PHA-NGAN

เกาะพะงัน  
pop 10,500

Ko Pha-Ngan is famous for its ability to party, attracting a crowd of nature lovers and shoe-string wanderers – the kind of folks happy to sleep in a simple reed woven bungalow or in a hammock strung between two palms. Ko Samui's rebellious little sister attracts backpackers like no other place in Thailand for its no-worries attitude and famous Full Moon parties. This is the kind of place where young revellers can slurp their booze buckets

without interruption until dawn, then nurse terrible hangovers while snoozing on white hot sand.

A half-hour boat ride north, 193-sq-km Ko Pha-Ngan boasts the same stupendous scenery found on Ko Samui, minus the glitz. The lack of an airport and relative absence of good roads have spared it from package-tour development, although the island is changing and one top-end resort has already set up shop. The view from the island's most popular beach, Hat Rin, yields rows of rather ramshackle bungalows and colourfully painted beach bars. Long-tail boats float alongside lazy swimmers in the clear green water. And while there are comfortable air-conditioned places, you'll have to look long and hard to find an in-room satellite TV or ornate furnishings.

Despite the throngs that flock here on a daily basis, Ko Pha-Ngan is a casual island with a sort of hippy fun-loving vibe, where backpackers still dominate the tourist trade. Those searching for a remote paradise can find it on many of the island's secluded beaches, where simple huts are the only accommodation and nights are passed in a make-your-own-fun fashion. If you're looking to party, as many coming to Ko Pha-Ngan are, head to Hat Rin, home of the legendary Full Moon parties (see p615), the biggest beach party in the world. Although nowadays it seems any phase of the moon is an excuse to get out the fire sticks, set up the mats on the sand and pump up the trance music – nightlife is huge here, and scantily clad revellers party on buckets of cheap Thai whisky on a regular basis.

### Orientation

Ko Pha-Ngan is approximately 20km from Ko Samui and 100km from Surat Thai.

About half of Ko Pha-Ngan's population lives in and around the small port of Thong Sala. This is where the ferries to and from Ko Tao, Surat Thai and Ko Samui dock. It's a taking-care-of-business town, with restaurants, travel agencies, banks, clothing shops and general stores.

The long cape of Laem Hat Rin is at the southeastern tip of the island and has beaches along both its western and eastern sides – this is officially the most popular place on Ko Pha-Ngan. Travel agencies, minimarts, tat-too shops and discos crowd the small streets off the pretty beaches. The eastern side has

the best beach, Hat Rin Nok (Sunrise Beach), a long, sandy strip lined with coconut palms, but there's more boat traffic than at the western beach. The snorkelling here is good, but between October and March the surf can be a little risky. Hat Rin Nok is famous for its monthly Full Moon parties. The western side of the cape, Hat Rin Nai (Sunset Beach), is more isolated and serves as an accommodation overflow if Hat Rin Nok is full. A pier on Hat Rin Nai serves boats from the northeastern coast of Ko Samui.

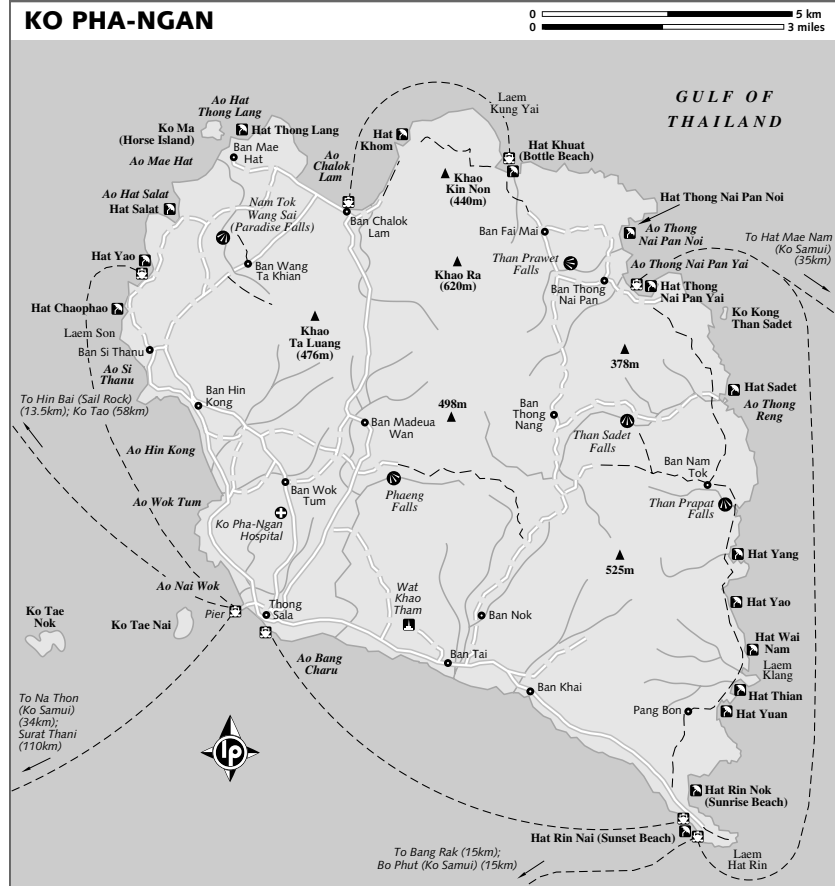
There are plenty of other places to stay on the island, although you will find many spots to be very remote (perfect if this is what you're looking for, but not if you're expecting to party). The northern destinations of

Hat Khuat (Bottle Beach) and Ao Thong Nai Pan/Yai are good if you're looking for beach options between 'too busy' and 'too isolated', while the beaches on the island's east coast are the most remote.

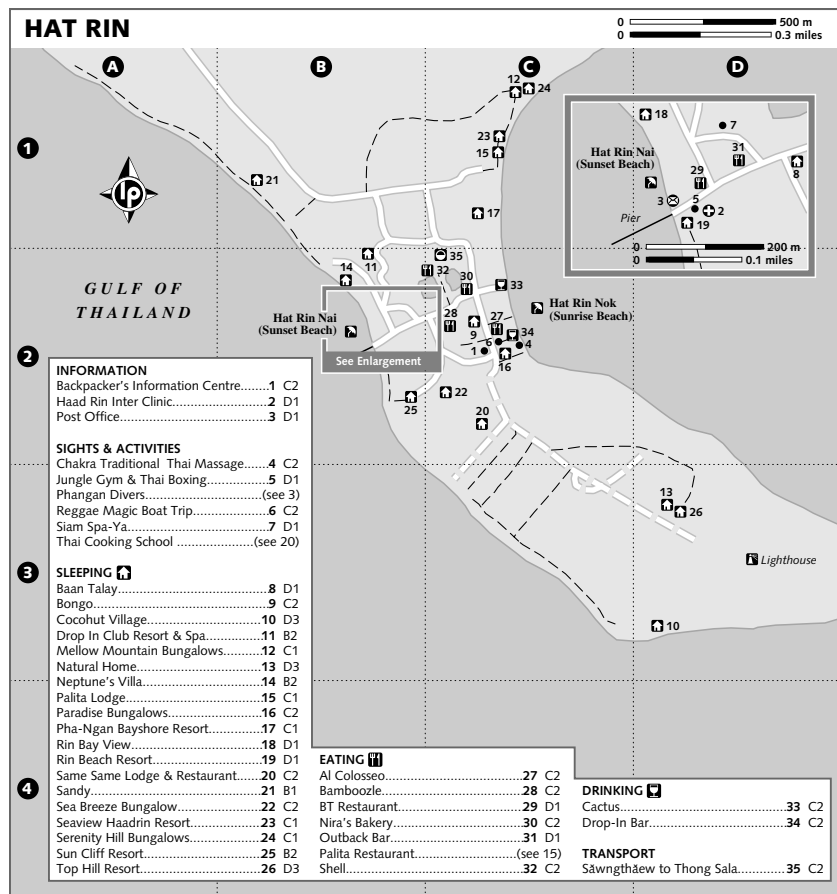
There are few paved roads on Pha-Ngan, so transport between places can be a bit of a hassle, although the situation is constantly improving as enterprising Thais set up taxi and boat services between beaches.

### Information

Thong Sala and Hat Rin are centres for internet activity, but every beach with development should have access. Rates are generally 1B to 2B per minute, with a 20B minimum. There are also numerous ATMs to withdraw baht.







**Backpacker's Information Centre** (☎ 0 7737 5535; www.backpackersthailand.com; Hat Rin) Stands out for its friendly, UK-born, ex-backpacker owner who will not only sell you a ticket, but also fill you in on all there is to do on Ko Pha-Ngan and in the rest of Thailand.

**Haad Rin Inter Clinic** (Map p606; ☎ 0 7737 5342; ☎ 24hr) Formerly 'Sang's Clinic', this has long been the spot to fix your 'Ko Pha-Ngan tattoo' (motorcycle accident scrape) in Hat Rin. It's expanded and now has 24-hour service (although head to the hospital for life-threatening emergencies). Look for the clinic near the pier.

**Ko Pha-Ngan Hospital** (☎ 0 7737 5103; ☎ 24hr) About 2.5km north of Thong Sala off the road to Chalok Lam, it offers 24-hour emergency services. Anything that can wait until Bangkok should, where medical facilities are better.

**Police station** (☎ 0 7737 7114) About 2km north of Thong Sala.

**Post offices** (☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat) There is a post office south of Thong Sala, and another at Hat Rin Nai on the road to Hat Rin Nok.

### Dangers & Annoyances

Doing drugs in Thailand is risky. Among other things it could land you in the mental ward. Over the past five years Suan Saranrom (Garden of Joys) psychiatric hospital in Surat Thai has to take on extra staff during full-moon periods to handle the number of travellers who freak out on magic mushrooms, acid or other abundantly available hallucinogens.

Those who come specifically seeking an organic buzz should take note: a hallucinogenic plant, newly exploited on the island, has caused a number of travellers to pay an

unscheduled visit to the local psychiatric hospital. Called *ton lamphong* in Thai, the plant is possibly related to datura, a member of the highly toxic nightshade family. Eating any part of the plant causes some people to be completely out of it for a couple of days.

Sampling the local herb could turn equally scary. There are constant reports of travellers being offered and sold marijuana and other drugs by restaurant or bungalow owners, and then being promptly busted by police officers who somehow know exactly, who, when and where to check.

The Thai government's war on drugs is no joke, and the police take it *extremely* seriously. There is a good chance that you could go to jail for more than just a few days for even possessing half a joint. Once in jail, you won't necessarily be able to count on your embassy, your daddy or even bribery to get you out. You'll probably have to wait in the cell until your paperwork creeps its way to the top before anything even starts to happen.

Police road blocks between Thong Sala and Hat Rin are becoming more common, especially in the week leading up to the Full Moon party on Hat Rin. These aren't cursory checks either; if you're on a motorcycle, the police look in the fuel tank, check the tyres and search all your gear.

As elsewhere in Thailand, riding motorcycles in Ko Pha-Ngan can be dangerous. Roads are hilly, narrow and unpaved in portions.

### Sights

#### WATERFALLS

In the interior of this island are four year-round waterfalls and a number of seasonal ones. Boulders carved with the royal insignia of Rama V, Rama VII and Rama IX, all of whom have visited the falls, can be found at **Than Sadet Falls**, which cascades along Khlong Than Sadet in the eastern part of the island. Rama V liked this island so much that he made 18 trips here between 1888 and 1909.

**Phaeng Falls** is off the main road between Thong Sala and Ban Chalok Lam, almost in the centre of the island. A third waterfall, **Than Prapat Falls**, is situated near the eastern shore in an area that can be reached by road or boat, while **Than Prawat Falls** is in the northeast near Ao Thong Nai Pan.

A fun way to get to experience the falls (and get to know some other travellers in the process) is by joining one of the 'Reggae Magic

Boat Trips' offered by **Cactus** (☎ 0 7737 5308; cruise 500B; ☎ departs noon), a bar in Hat Rin. The cruise includes an opportunity to see the falls and stops for snorkelling. Food, refreshments and snorkel gear are provided. Contact Cactus if you want to book, as the trips only depart when people are interested.

### WAT KHAO THAM

วัดเขาถ้ำ

This cave temple is beautifully situated on top of a hill near the little village of Ban Tai. An American monk lived in this temple for over a decade and his ashes are interred on a cliff overlooking a palm field below. It's not a true wat, since there are only a couple of monks and a nun in residence (among other requirements, a quorum of five monks is necessary for a temple to reach wat status).

Ten-day meditation retreats taught by an American-Australian couple are run during the latter half of most months – there are no retreats during the rainy season between September and November. The cost is 2900B. Check out the website of **Wat Khao Tham** (www.watkwahm.org) for more information. Anyone under 25 years of age must talk with the teachers before being accepted for the retreat. A bulletin board at the temple also has information.

### Activities

#### DIVING & SNORKELLING

As at Ko Samui, coral reefs can be found intermittently at various points around the island. The better bay-reef spots are at the island's northwestern tip and are suitable for snorkelling. There are also some rock reefs of interest on the eastern side of the island.

An outstanding site for scuba divers, a pinnacle called **Hin Bai** (Sail Rock) lies about 13.5km north of the island. An abundance of corals and tropical fish can be seen at depths of 10m to 30m and there's an interesting vertical swim-through called 'The Chimney'. Conditions are best from April to October, when divers sometimes enjoy visibility of up to 20m or more. Hin Bai can also be reached from Ko Tao, although the boating distance from the latter adds 4km to 5km to the trip.

**Phangan Divers** (☎ 0 7737 5117; www.phangandivers.com; 2 dives incl lunch 2000-3000B) has its main office near the pier at Hat Rin Nai. Its price depends on the distance of the dives. Full certification runs at 11,500B to 13,500B.

Snorkelling day trips (which often include trips to the waterfalls mentioned above) are popular. These circumnavigate the island, stopping at the best snorkelling spots, and include lunch and equipment. The following company departs daily at noon and returns around 6pm, unless the weather is bad. If you've booked ahead only to find it's windy and wet, you'll get a full refund.

**Reggae Magic Boat Trip** (Map p606; ☎ 08 1085 9137; Cactus Club; trips 500B) is the original around-the-island tour company, and offers the same long-tail trips it always has. Part of the popular bar Cactus, on the beach at Hat Rin, it is very popular with backpackers.

### TREKKING

Jungle trekking is taking off on Ko Pha-Ngan in a big way – the trails up to the 620m Khao Ra, the island's biggest mountain, are reasonably well marked. Those with eagle-eyes will spot wild crocodiles, monkeys, deer and boar along the way, and the views from the top are spectacular – on a clear day you can see Ko Tao. This long, sometimes steep trail begins at the village of Ban Madeua Wan; be sure to bring plenty of high-energy food and drinking water. Guides for this trek and to the Phaeng Falls can be arranged at the village for 500B per trip or you can contact **Phaeng Waterfall National Park** (☎ 0 7723 8275).

### YOGA & MASSAGE

The yoga retreat on Hat Chaophao, **Agama Yoga** (☎ 0 9233 0217; www.agamayoga.com; Bovy Resort), gets rave reviews from Lonely Planet readers for its holistic approach to the study of tantric yoga. Full day programmes start at 250B per day and longer workshops are also available. The centre is often closed from September to December while its instructors travel to India to work on their craft.

**Chakra Traditional Thai Massage** (Map p606; ☎ 0 7737 5401; 1/2hr 200/300B), located on a side street near the pier at Hat Rin Nai, offers expert massage. Yan, the proprietor, studied massage as a monk and is adept at traditional Thai massage as well as deep tissue techniques. Staff also practice reflexology, acupressure and reiki, and are adept at realigning chakras.

### OTHER ACTIVITIES

There are loads of opportunities to try your hand at water sports, including jet-skiing, kite-boarding, water-skiing, sea-kayaking,

wind-surfing and sailing. Back on land, alternative modes of transport include all-terrain vehicles (ATVs) or quad-bikes, and elephants. The friendly staff at the **Backpacker's Information Centre** (☎ 0 7737 5535; www.backpackersthailand.com; Hat Rin) can help you arrange any of these.

The island's newest high-calibre activity is paintball. **Paintball Warfare** (☎ 08 1804 6059; Thong Sala) offers six varieties of games, including the always popular capture the flag – where you try to capture the other teams flag. It costs 500B to play all day, and up to 12 folks can play at once. Afterwards chill out at the on-site bar that plays a range of tunes over the speakers and has both Thai and Western staff.

If you want to try your foot at kick boxing or work up a sweat on the Stairmaster, head to **Jungle Gym & Thai Boxing** (Map p606; ☎ 0 7737 5155), which has facilities in Hat Rin and Thong Sala. The gym offers day visitors a range of weights and cardio equipment, along with yoga (one- to three-day workshops) and personal fitness training. The gym's instructors have been teaching and training fighters for more than eight years now and offer all levels of training – from novice to prefight. Stop by or give them a ring for rates.

### Courses

Same Same Lodge runs a **Thai Cooking School** (Map p606; ☎ 0 7737 5200; www.same-same.com) and has one-/three-/five-day courses for 900/2500/4200B respectively. **Siam Spa-Ya** (☎ 0 7737 5563) runs 30-hour Thai massage certification courses over five or 10 days. These cost 4500B. You can also learn how to cook a multicourse Thai meal (800B; half-day classes beginning at 1pm).

### Sleeping

Beach-bungalow operations are concentrated to the north and southeast of Thong Sala and especially on the southern end of the island at Hat Rin, but there are many other places to stay. Pha-Ngan has just one top-end resort of the calibre found on Ko Samui, but that's likely to change soon. Although the budget bracket still predominates on this backpacker Mecca, quite a few more than decent mid-range options with air-con, hot showers and real décor are also present.

The following sleeping options are listed in a clockwise direction starting with Thong Sala. Remember, when you jump off the boat you may be surrounded by hotel touts push-

ing small (and sometimes larger) operations all over the island. However, many of these bungalows will be on very remote beaches, some may lack electricity or running water, and you could feel quite isolated. If you're looking for lots of other travellers, multiple eating options or the chance to party hard, head to Hat Rin.

### THONG SALA

There really is no reason to stay here unless you don't feel like having to worry about making an ultra early boat. If this is the case, we've listed our fave option below, although this pier town has many more places to rest your head.

**Bua Kao Inn** (☎ 0 7737 7226; buakao@samart.co.th; r 550-700B; 🏠) Fastidiously maintained by an expat, this is a guesthouse with awesome showers. The five rooms are clean and nicely decorated and there's a popular restaurant downstairs. The inn is on the right-hand side of the first main intersection in town, about 100m straight ahead of the pier.

### AO HIN KONG & AO WOK TUM

This long bay – sometimes divided in two by a stream that feeds into the sea (hence the two names) – is just a few kilometres north of Thong Sala and has relatively subdued tourist development. Bungalows are cheap; most don't have air-con. Săwngthăew here cost 30B, but you'll see them only at ferry departure and arrival times. A sign warns not to take seashells and corals from the bay, please respect this as it is not only illegal but bad for the ecosystem.

**Woktum Cabana** (☎ 0 7737 7430; bungalows 150-250B) The bit of sand at the front of this diverse collection of shacks and bungalows is one of the big draws. The friendly owner offers smaller, older concrete bungalows and newer, larger wooden ones.

**Sea Scene** (☎ 0 7737 7516; www.seascene.com; bungalows 400-1000B; 🏠) This place is beautiful with upscale, modern bungalows in a well-tended garden. The top rooms here are air-con family bungalows sleeping up to four people.

### HAT CHAOPHAO & AO SI THANU

One of the more tranquil beaches on this coast, Hat Chaophao is a rounded beach two headlands south of Hat Yao; Ao Si Thanu sits south of this beach. There's a charming lagoon at the southern end of Hat Chaophao as well as a few bars and minimarts scattered along

the road, so you're never far from essentials like water or beer.

**Laem Son I & II** (☎ 0 7734 9032; laemson1200@yahoo.com; Ao Si Thanu; bungalows 200-400B) On the rounded, pine-studded cape of Laem Son, at the northern end of Ao Si Thanu proper, these two places have small but passable bungalows, some with hammocks. Most are on the beach and there's a definite backpacker feel. The seaside restaurant has decent music and lots of pillows.

**Pha-Ngan Cabana** (☎ 0 1958 0182; Hat Chaophao; bungalows 300-1200B; 🏠) These sturdy, tidy villa-style bungalows are lined up inland from the beach. Outdoor bathrooms are cute. The restaurant is just OK, but it shows two movies a day and attracts people from around the beach – it's a real treat for rainy days.

### HAT YAO

The coral-fringed beaches here are getting more developed as the road from Thong Sala gets paved. Hat Yao is a very long, pretty beach with a reasonable drop-off that makes it one of the islands best swimming beaches. There are a few diving outfits and several ATMs along the beaches but, as yet, no 7-Eleven.

**Tantawan Bungalows** (☎ 0 1956 0700; yup\_pat@hotmail.com; bungalows 450-500B; 🏠) On a hillside, this place is fantastic but it's a bit of a trek down to the beach. It has a good French-Thai restaurant and beautiful views over the bay, as well as plenty of tree shade and soothing music.

**Long Bay Resort** (☎ 0 7734 9057; bungalows 700-2600B; 🏠) This is the fanciest place on the beach, with adequate fan bungalows and larger, beautiful air-con bungalows. It's good for families and the pool has a wading area. There's a five-person house that can be rented for 3500B. Laundry and massages are possible, and a minimart is within reach.

**Ibiza** (☎ 0 1968 4727; ibiza\_thailand@hotmail.com; bungalows 150-1200B; 🏠) Bungalows are cramped and basic, but its popular with backpackers, mostly because of the appealing garden and the chilled restaurant that plays movies nightly. The cheapie fan rooms are all the rage, but there are also pricier brick bungalows available with hot water and air-con.

### AO MAE HAT, KO MA & AO HAT THONG LANG

Ban Mae Hat is a small fishing village with a few bungalow resorts. The beach at Ao Mae Hat isn't fantastic, but there is a bit of

coral offshore and good snorkelling. Nam Tok Wang Sai, also known as Paradise Falls, is nearby. Ao Thong Lang is exceptionally quiet and devoid of development except for one midrange operation. Săwngthăew to/from Ban Chalok Lam cost 30B.

**Pha-Ngan Divers Ko Ma Resort** (☎ 0 1892 4835; bungalows 200-300B) This is the only place to stay on the small island of Ko Ma, opposite the beach. There are some bungalows of the standard Pha-Ngan variety here and not much else – it's perfect if you're into rustic isolation. During low tide you can walk to this little isle; at other times a small boat can ferry you across. There's excellent snorkelling here as well as a satellite dive-shop operation.

**Wang Sai Resort** (☎ 0 7737 4238; Ban Mae Hat; bungalows 200-1000B; 🏠) Decent bamboo huts along with more solid bungalows, some with air-con, are the trademarks here. There are boulders and a garden, and the beach is over the foot-bridge. All have views of the beach and bay. Rates depend on position on the slope. An open-air restaurant is situated well away from the huts, down on the beach, and a dive operation here offers instruction and guided trips.

**Pha-Ngan Utopia Resort** (☎ 0 7737 4093; www.phanganutopia.com; Hat Thong Lang; bungalows 1000-1500B; 🏠 🚿) Recently upgraded, this place has neat bungalows high atop a cliff overlooking Hat Thong Lang – the views from the rooms are excellent and some even have bathtubs next to windows with grand sea panoramas. All rooms come with DVD players, and there's good snorkelling below.

### AO CHALOK LAM

Ko Pha-Ngan's second-largest settlement is a laid-back little fishing village on the north coast. There are a couple of piers here and eager boatmen happy to take tourists to surrounding beaches, such as Hat Khuat. The beach is fairly shallow and not one of the island's best, but there's a couple of decent sleeping options, good restaurants and plenty of amenities, like grocery stores, laundry, internet cafés and motorbike-rental places. Săwngthăew ply the route from here to Thong Sala for 50B per person.

**Fanta** (☎ 0 7737 4132; fantaphangan@yahoo.com; bungalows 200-500B) The several rows of huts here take up a fair chunk of beach frontage, and there's a good travellers vibe.

**North Beach Bungalows** (☎ 0 7737 4258; bungalows 300-400B) These cute beachside cabanas have

two hammocks on each porch with perfect sea views, so you no longer have to take turns.

### HAT KHUAT & HAT KHOM

Hat Khuat (also known as Bottle Beach) is the more stunning of the two bays, although Hat Khom is still quite the beauty queen. Both are becoming more popular by the hour, attracting tourists for their gorgeous beaches, calm waters and low-key atmosphere. These bays are backed by lush, thick jungle and the relative isolation is exactly what many people look for in an island getaway. During the high season both fill fast. In fact, after Hat Rin they're probably the second most popular sleeping destination. The clientele is still mostly backpackers – the type that thinks Hat Rin is too built up, but still craves a little action. Both beaches offer decent snorkelling around the points, and some places only have electricity at night.

In Chalok Lam there are regular long-tail boats to Hat Khom and Hat Khuat (50B to 150B). You can also walk to Hat Khom in about 20 minutes or take a taxi. Motorcycles should be able to negotiate the hard, sandy road – though it can get a little tricky after heavy rains. You can also hike the 2.5km from Hat Khom to Hat Khuat (approximately one hour).

**Coral Bay Bungalows** (☎ 0 7737 4245, 0 815 970 421; Hat Khom; bungalows 200-450B) Up on the headland, this friendly place offers 30 comely abodes with great views. They range from basic huts with shared bathroom to large, ritzy and creatively decorated bungalows with balconies. The on-site restaurant has a splendid deck and serves vegetarian food. Call for free pick-up.

**Ocean View Resort** (☎ 0 7737 7231; Hat Khom; bungalows 200-450B) The best rooms are still basic but have enough room to swing two cats and then some. The beach garden setting looks like it's manicured daily and the staff are exceptionally amiable.

**Bottle Beach I** (☎ 0 7744 7572; Hat Khuat; bungalows 350-700B; 🏠) Midrange rooms here are the best value: although they don't have air-con, the floors are made from polished wood and they are roomier than the low-priced huts. The air-con bungalows are cheap if keeping cool is your main objective, but they are far from good-looking concrete affairs.

**Bottle Beach III** (☎ 0 7744 5127; Hat Khuat; bungalows 350-850B) Also known as BB3, the cheapie huts these guys offer aren't the best deal in town,

but their deluxe two-level wooden bungalows are lovely and come with windows galore. **Bottle Beach II** (☎ 0 7744 5156; Hat Khuat; bungalows 150-350B) is the most rustic of the three; its plain huts come in colour combinations of aqua/dark brown or natural nipa/dark brown. They're all lined up in neat rows either along the beach or along the small river that feeds into the bay.

### AO THONG NAI PAN YAI & NOI

This bay is really made up of two smaller bays, Ao Thong Nai Pan Yai (*yai* means 'big') and Ao Thong Nai Pan Noi (*noi* means 'little'). The latter is the best all-round swimming beach. Thong Nai Pan Yai has a relaxed vibe and a good set of rocks for advanced climbers. Many places have recently upgraded and offer some luxurious air-con choices – two of the swankiest places on the island are here. Otherwise, there's always the old, ramshackle fan-room variety for budgetarians.

Săwngthăew from Thong Sala to Thong Nai Pan cost 100B. Getting here by motorbike is easier than it once was since the dirt road has been resurfaced.

**AD View** (☎ 0 7744 5047; Ao Thong Nai Pan Yai; bungalows 150-400B) This place has a very relaxed restaurant on the beach and 12 bungalows ranging from small and rustic to larger and cute. All sit on lovely grounds.

**Star Hut** (☎ 0 7744 5085; Ao Thong Nai Pan Noi; bungalows 200-1800B; 🏠) Options here go from simple thatched huts with shared bathroom to more expensive, better versions with air-con. There's a reasonably priced, popular restaurant that offers some traveller services.

**Panvimam Resort** (☎ 0 7744 5101-9; www.panvimam.com; Ao Thong Nai Pan Noi; r & bungalows 2500-15,000B; 🏠 🚿 🚿) Sitting on top of the headland separating the two bays, this is Ko Pha-Ngan's other ultra fancy sleeping option with fine accommodation on hilly, lush grounds interlaced with brick paths and a spa on site. Rooms have balconies and elegant furniture, and there's a taxi service from Thong Sala.

**Santhiya Resort & Spa** (☎ 0 7723 8333; www.santhiya.com; Ao Thong Nai Pan Nai; bungalows r from 10,000B; 🏠 🚿 🚿) This sparkling new luxury resort is the most decadent place on Ko Pha-Ngan – even though the villas and bungalows blend into the lush environs and sit around a scenic cove – it's still kind of shocking to see something this posh on this shabby-chic island. All the plush and comfy small homes come

with sea views and direct access to the resort's private beach. Arrange for a speedboat to transfer you directly from the ferry pier to the resort.

### EAST COAST BEACHES

There are areas of the east coast of Ko Pha-Ngan that are still undeveloped, which is great if you're trying to avoid the big party scene. For the most part, you'll have to hire a boat to get to these places, but that's not difficult. The road from Thong Sala to Ban Nam Tok is partially paved and only partially traversable by motorcycle; it's best to take a boat. Another dirt track (traversable on foot but only partially by motorcycle) runs along the coast from Hat Rin before heading inland to Ban Nam Tok and Than Sadet Falls. Think about how much isolation you really want before heading out here; some people can't get enough of the remoteness, others go crazy when they realise there's nothing to do but sit in the hammock and read all day (and night) long.

### Hat Sadet

Hat Sadet sits past a rocky headland and is a large but relaxed beach cove that has some reasonable snorkelling. Here lies a string of modestly simple places – the remoteness of these places makes them perfect for a romantic getaway. All the bottom-rung options here share bathrooms.

**Grookoo** (bungalows 1500-500B) Has hillside bungalows sporting excellent views.

**Mai Pen Rai** (☎ 0 7744 5090; www.thansadet.com; bungalows 300-700B)

### Ao Thong Reng

The pretty coast of Ao Thong Reng has a striking, intimate beach that is touted as having been visited by many of Thailand's kings. Most travellers only come here to see the waterfalls, but basic accommodation can be found during the high season. Both of the places below offer basic bungalows with paper-thin walls, slightly off smells and mattresses on the floor. Dingy but cheap.

**Thong Reng Resort** (bungalows 100-300B)

**Than Sadet Resort** (bungalows 150-250B)

### Hat Thian

Around a headland, Hat Thian is a small, quiet beach with a couple of very good places to stay. Boats from Hat Rin cost 80B; by rough trail it's a 1½-hour hike.

**The Sanctuary & Wellness Centre** (☎ 0 1271 3614; www.thesanctuary-kpg.com; dm 70B, bungalows 350-3000B) There's a great community feeling here. The main office incorporates impressive massive boulders into its structure and has a small library nestled above one of them. There's also a creatively built restaurant that serves wonderful vegetarian dishes and seafood. On offer are daily yoga and full spa treatments, including fasting and colonic irrigation, as well as body cleansing programmes.

Also recommended:

**Haad Tien Resort** (☎ 0 7737 7231; bungalows 100-350B) Beautiful peaked wood and bamboo bungalows.

**Beam Restaurant & Bungalows** (☎ 0 7927 2854; bungalows 300-500B) Charming wooden huts with hammocks and big bay windows looking out over the ocean.

### Hat Yuan

This beach is rapidly becoming cool, which means crowds are increasing.

**Bamboo Hut** (☎ 0 7737 5139; bungalows 350-400B) High above the rocks at the beach's northern end, it has a scenic atmosphere surrounding its garden bungalows. Ideal for endless lounging is the huge, recently renovated restaurant and chill-space – it has awesome views of the bay.

### HAT RIN (NOK & NAI)

This is the place to see and be seen on Ko Pha-Ngan. The island's most popular area is made up of two beaches, separated by a small shopping and eating district jam-packed with travel agencies, internet cafés, funky bars, retro clothing shops and unique jewellery stores. It's an exciting little scene that's especially crowded on cloudy days.

Hat Rin Nok (Sunrise Beach), on the east side, is along a sandy bay lined with bungalows and coconut palms, and is busy with boat traffic. It's the better of the two beaches, and the snorkelling here is good, but between October and March the surf can be a little hairy. This is the Full Moon party beach, so forget about sleeping on party nights.

Hat Rin Nai (Sunset Beach), on the western side, has a less-enticing beach, and is where the pier is located. It's a straighter beach than Hat Rin Nok and pleasantly relaxed, with much less activity and a more isolated feeling, but the beach tends to collect rubbish when the wind blows. It also has a number of bungalow operations. It's only a five-minute

walk between the two beaches, so it doesn't really matter which side you stay on.

We've divided the following places into price categories; often the only difference between budget and midrange is air-con, and many places offer both cheaper and more expensive accommodation. Almost all operations have bars and restaurants, which show movies throughout the afternoon and evening.

### Budget

**Natural Home** (☎ 0 1326 1552; dm 100B, bungalows 250-350B) This place is unique in that it offers dorm rooms – perfect for solo travellers on a serious budget. It too is high on the same sparse and shady hill as Top Hill, and is a bit of a hike towards the lighthouse from the main beach. There are great views of the sunrise and main beach from the restaurant. It may be deserted in low season. Insect repellent is a must.

**Serenity Hill Bungalows** (Map p606; ☎ 0 9937 1066; bungalows 200-350B) The best part about this place on the rocks at the far northern end of Hat Rin is the restaurant-bar perched precariously on stilts. It offers awesome sea views and a chilled-out atmosphere. The bungalows themselves are rather ratty. It throws Full Moon parties.

**Mellow Mountain Bungalows** (Map p606; ☎ 0 7737 5347; bungalows 300-600B) Right next to Serenity Hill, Mellow Mountain has similar views, a hip vibe and also hosts Full Moon parties. The bungalows are decently maintained and sit on a grassy hill. The bar is pretty cool – loads of cushions, hammocks, delicious milkshakes and soothing tunes. Check it out at sunset.

**Rin Bay View** (☎ 0 7737 5188; bungalows 300-700B; ☎) A great location means it's often full. The bungalows are simple but well maintained. They border a fertile garden strip and come in many price ranges.

**Same Same Lodge & Restaurant** (☎ 0 7737 5200; www.same-same.com; r 350-700B; ☎) This relative newcomer is often fully booked. It is a busy, friendly backpacker hang-out with a lounge full of comfy pillows, a book exchange and a TV on which to watch videos. A Thai-Danish couple run the peach-coloured, modern accommodation, and the restaurant serves everything from *phat thai* to Frikadeller (Swedish meatballs). A Thai cooking school (p608) is also run from here.

**Top Hill Resort** (☎ 0 7737 5327; bungalows 500B) The moniker fits here; this place is way off the beach on the top of a very long dirt road

(basically walk uphill from Hat Rin Nok until you feel you've gone too far, keep going for another 10 minutes and you'll find Top Hill). Those who make it are rewarded with the most wonderful views and peace and quiet. The large and rickety log-pole bungalows with unique stone baths sit high on stilts at the edge of a cliff and have hammocks on their sea-facing porches. Those afraid of heights should steer clear – at times it feels as if you are going to fall through the floor. Bring insect repellent; the mozzies are vicious.

### Midrange

**Sun Cliff Resort** (Map p606; ☎ 0 7737 5134; bungalows 250-1500B; ☎) Perched on a hillside, Sun Cliff overlooks the sea and catches sunset rays amid huge boulders and lots of vegetation. It offers a variety of nicely appointed bungalows, each of a different design and décor. To get here walk five minutes south of the pier.

**Paradise Bungalows** (Map p606; ☎ 0 7737 5244; bungalows 400-800B; ☎) This is where the Full Moon parties started, and the place remains popular (it's right on the beach at the centre of all the action). Maybe it's the nostalgia appeal, because past the fancy entrance sign are unattractive grounds and some seriously ramshackle bungalows (although the more expensive ones are nicer).

**Sea Breeze Bungalow** (Map p606; ☎ 0 7737 5162; bungalows 500-1000B; ☎) This place gets a good report card from other travellers, and is our choice in this price bracket. There's a romantic feel created by well-spaced, secluded bungalows, some built high on stilts. Strategically strewn about the thick jungle on the hill overlooking Hat Rin Nai, many of these huts have dramatic views of the sunset from their patios. The new swimming pool, complete with whirlpool, is another reason to stay.

**Bongo** (Map p606; ☎ 0 7737 5268; bongomoo@yahoo.com; bungalows 500-1200B; ☎) Rooms here are very simple and the cheaper ones have lumpy mattresses, but it's set in a peaceful, shady garden a few blocks from the beach. Check out a few rooms as some are much nicer than others.

**Pha-Ngan Bayshore Resort** (Map p606; ☎ 0 7737 5227; bungalows 500-3000B; ☎) Set on spacious grassy grounds, just seconds from the beach, the more expensive bungalows here are quite lovely and large – with hardwood floors and duvets on the beds (a rarity around these parts). Try for the bungalow closest to Sun-

rise Resort – it has two sides of floor-to-ceiling windows and a giant porch.

**Baan Talay** (Map p606; ☎ 0 7737 5083; www.phangan.info/baantalay; bungalows 800-1000B; ☎) A solid option if you just want an air-con place to crash, not too far from the pier but close to the action in town (it is not on the beach). Rooms in a motel block sport soft, but not lumpy, mattresses, clean sheets and blue-tiled floors, and are big enough to not feel in the least bit claustrophobic. Walls could use a new paint job and a few decorations. The air-con gets the room ice cold, and the place was relatively quiet. The lack of minifridge is a bummer.

**Palita Lodge** (Map p606; ☎ 0 7737 5172; www.palitalodge.com; bungalows with breakfast 800-3000B; ☎) A friendly place with a good range of well-maintained bungalows, some of which are newly renovated and very posh – these come with suave furnishings like giant TVs, skylights, floor-to-ceiling windows, modern art and trickling fountains to sooth you to sleep. The regular air-con and cheap fan bungalows are kind of dark, but clean with nice porches. The garden is sparse rather than lush, and the restaurant serves up tasty food and screens movies.

**Cocohut Village** (Map p606; ☎ 0 7737 5368; www.cocohut.com; r 600B, bungalows 1200-3500B; ☎) Located on a dazzling stretch of beach, this well-designed garden resort offers a range of accommodation diverse enough to accommodate everyone, from grandma and the family to the young couple on honeymoon. There are rooms in a hotel-style building as well as beachside bungalows with cheery interiors. The pool is a nice touch and employees are eager to please.

The following places are also recommended and all have similar facilities.

**Seaview Haadrin Resort** (Map p606; ☎ 0 7737 5160; bungalows 250-1500B; ☎)

**Sandy** (Map p606; ☎ 0 7737 5138; bungalows 300-1500B; ☎)

**Rin Beach Resort** (Map p606; ☎ 0 7737 5112; bungalows 500-2500B; ☎)

**Neptune's Villa** (Map p606; ☎ 0 7737 5251; bungalows 850-1500B; ☎)

### Top End

**Drop In Club Resort & Spa** (Map p606; ☎ 0 7737 5444; dropinclub@kohsamui.com; bungalows from 2500B; ☎) This newish place started the island's slow trend towards swankier accommodation. The resort is tastefully laid-out and features 46 luxury bungalows with teak furnishings and Thai décor throughout, as well as all the usual

upmarket amenities – satellite TV, safe, mini-bar. There's a restaurant, a lovely pool and spa facilities. The only drawback is it's not right on the beach.

### BAN TAI & BAN KHAH

Between the villages of Ban Tai and Ban Khai is a series of sandy beaches with quite a few well-spaced bungalow operations. From the main road, the signs to these places can be small and hard to see. A *sáwngtháew* from Thong Sala costs 30B per person to this area. These are not the best beaches on the island, and quite remote, so if you choose to stay here pick a place with amenities to keep you entertained.

**Milky Bay Resort** (☎ 0 7223 8566; www.milkybay.com; bungalows from 1500B; 📶 📺 📶) This newer South African–Thai venture can be a great deal, some of the bungalows are really beautiful with welcome touches, bamboo bed frames and mosquito nets, but others seem cramped and overpriced. Just check out a few before deciding to stay. It was popular when we visited, despite its remote location on a not so great beach. We liked the pool, jungle fitness centre, sauna and pool tables. It's very family friendly, and the on-site restaurant and bar keep you from having to stray.

### Eating

Many bungalow operators have restaurants attached, but there is a burgeoning eating scene scattered around the island. Make a beeline for Hat Rin for the biggest selection of eateries.

### THONG SALA

**A's Coffee Shop and Restaurant** (☎ 0 7373 7336; dishes 40-170B; 🍳 breakfast & lunch Mon-Sat) The perfect place to spend a few hours if you're stuck in town waiting for the ferry, it offers everything from homemade breads to big breakfasts, and throws in sandwiches, pasta and salads for good measure. Strong coffee and a long cocktail menu are an added bonus.

### HAT CHAOPHAO

**The Village Green** (☎ 0 7734 9217; dishes 60-200B; 🍳 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Run by the ludicrously informative Ben Green, this place serves excellent Thai and Western fare in a two-storey teak structure. Its 'build your own breakfast' menu is enough to satisfy anyone's morning munchies.

### HAT RIN (NOK & NAI)

There's no shortage of Thai, Western or seafood restaurants in the Hat Rin area.

**Nira's Bakery** (Map p606; ☎ 0 7737 5109; dishes 25-200B; 🍳 24hr) This bakery and restaurant combo is a very popular breakfast spot, brewing up fancy coffees such as iced mocha (70B) and double espresso (60B). The food is also good and includes sandwiches, quiches, donuts, pizza, Israeli dishes, salads and Thai dishes. The service could use some improvement, though.

**Palita Restaurant** (Map p606; ☎ 0 7737 5172; www.palitalodge.com; dishes 60-200B; 🍳 breakfast, lunch & dinner) On a prime spot on the beach, the restaurant at the resort by the same name has a giant TV playing all the latest pirated blockbusters. It is set back from the beach and catches a breeze. The grounds are a bit messy, but it has billiard and ping-pong tables. Its breakfasts range from American to Israeli dishes (100B to 200B), and it also serves loads of salads, soups and spaghetti.

**BT Restaurant** (Map p606; ☎ 0 1797 8815; Hat Rin; dishes 60-200B) The usual Thai and Western specialities as well as barbecues and set-price meals are served here. It was packed when we stopped by.

**Bamboozle** (Map p606; dishes 70-180B; 🍳 lunch & dinner) Take your pick of Mexican food such as chilli *relenos*, burritos and nachos served on a lofty platform.

**Shell** (Map p606; ☎ 0 7737 5149; dishes 90-130B, pizzas 140-220B; 🍳 lunch & dinner) Serves good Italian food such as gnocchi, ravioli and pizza, along with gelato, tiramisu and Italian coffees. It's in an open, peaceful area beyond the lily ponds.

**Outback Bar** (Map p606; ☎ 0 7737 5126; dishes 120-220B; 🍳 breakfast, lunch & dinner) This is an expat-run eatery, which in this case means the Western food is reasonably authentic – order Caesar salad, lamb chops, Swedish meatballs and shepherd's pie, followed by a good selection of beer. It plays movies and Full Moon party footage throughout the day and night. It's an ambient place, with modern art on the walls and fat cushions on the floor. Escape the sun for a few hours, and spend the afternoon watching a movie or footy on the big TVs. At night, however, it can get hot and cramped.

**Al Colosseo** (Map p606; ☎ 0 7883 8569; dishes 200-400B; 🍳 lunch & dinner) Sit in the air-con, indoor environs or out on the porch, while Al Colosseo prepares authentic Italian food. Order

### FULL MOONING

According to legend, Ko Pha-Ngan's first Full Moon party took place in either 1987 or 1988 – no one can quite remember – although it was meant to be a celebration of someone's birthday. It took place at the Paradise Bungalows. The party turned out so well the gang decided to meet up again for the next full moon, and thus began a tradition that has since turned into the world's largest monthly rave. Some 3000 to 8000 ravers – sometimes over 30,000 during the December-to-February peak season – turn up to dance, drink and smoke the night away. Although the moon parties used to be casual affairs, these days they are quite impressively planned extravaganzas, with more than 10 major sound systems on the beach playing everything from psy-trance to drum'n'bass – each represents a different genre. Popular venues include Paradise Bungalows, The Rock, Drop-In Bar (below), Vinyl, Zoom Bar and Cactus (below) – all are within stumbling distance of each other on the beach. Fire dancing and fireworks light up the night and the number of party goers peaks at around 2am to 3am (the last DJs don't shut down till around 11am). As you can guess, it's a pretty wild and hazy time for everyone.

And what would the world's biggest beach party be without drugs? Yes, they're still available these days, though the more hardcore partakers have moved on to other beaches due to a pumped-up police presence (both uniformed and undercover). More than a few deaths have been attributed to drug use at this party.

The whole event is well organised by Thai residents who run the bungalows and bars along Hat Rin. And these same proprietors, along with some of the more conscientious foreign travellers, come together to clean the beach of substantial morning-after litter when the party is finally over.

Theft has been a problem at Full Moon parties in recent years (the bungalows in Ko Pha-Ngan are simply too rickety in most cases to be fully secure), so much so that many folks are visiting the party via one of the all-night shuttles departing from various points in Ko Samui. Tickets cost 400B one way or 550B return. If you choose to stay on the island for the party, arrive a few days earlier – accommodation books out fully, especially during the peak months.

Check your lunar calendar for upcoming Full Moon party dates. The website, www.fullmoon.phangan.info/, is also a good resource.

Ko Pha-Ngan has done a good job of cashing in on its Full Moon fame and there are now moon parties for every phase. Ban Tai has **Half Moon Festival** (www.halfmoonfestival.com) twice a month, with lots of psychedelic tunes and quality trance.

pizza, pasta or fresh seafood – they are all equally delicious. There are daily specials.

### Drinking

For the most part, where there's bungalows, there's booze, although Hat Rin is the only place where there's really a bar scene.

**Drop-In Bar** (Map p606; Hat Rin) Claiming to be the island's original beach bar, Drop-In is the kind of place that uses any excuse for a party. The walls are colourful, the staff strangely eclectic and the drinks list includes piña coladas, kamikazes and Long Island iced teas. Tunes run from rock to hip hop, pop, house and trance – 'every night is different', says the Rasta dude. There are plenty of mats in the sand with cheap buckets of whisky to imbibe, someone is always throwing around a fire stick, and there are frequent parties with bonfires to celebrate any phase of the moon.

**Cactus** (Map p606; ☎ 0 7737 5308) Very similar to the Drop-In, this popular place serves a range of cocktails and beer, has nightly pounding DJ music for dancing and more mats in the sand for lounging.

**Lazy House** (Map p606; ☎ 0 7737 5432) This is a cool place to veg out and watch a movie on a giant projector screen. Run by a friendly English man, it serves food from around the globe and has loads of cushions for just chilling.

There are also a bunch of bars at Ao Thong Nai Pan Noi, including the Jungle Bar, Rasta Bar and Outlaw Bar.

**The Pirates Bar** (☎ 0 4728 6064) A popular and wacky drinkery at Hat Chaophao, it is a replica of a pirate ship built into the cliffs. When you're sitting on the deck and the tide is high you can almost believe you're out at sea – watch out for men overboard. These guys have an immense sound system and host moon-set parties.

## Getting There & Away

The exact number of boat departures is determined by the weather and season. Slower boats tend to be no frills and cheaper, while faster ones are more expensive and more comfortable.

There are almost 10 daily departures between Ko Pha-Ngan and Ko Samui (180B to 250B). These boats leave throughout the day from 7am to 4pm and take from 30 minutes to an hour. All leave from either Thong Sala or Hat Rin on Ko Pha-Ngan and arrive either in Na Thon, Mae Nam or the Bang Rak pier on Ko Samui. If the final location matters, state your preferences while buying your ticket.

There are over six daily departures between Ko Pha-Ngan and Surat Thani (250B to 380B, 2½ hours). These boats leave from Thong Sala throughout the day from 7am to 10pm.

You can also take a slow night ferry direct to Pha-Ngan from Th Ban Don in Surat at 11pm (200B, seven hours). The night ferry can be a rough ride – November is the worst month. As with the night ferry to Samui, don't leave your bags unattended on the boat and remember that you'll arrive *very* early in the morning, but this can be pleasant and you'll save the cost of a night's accommodation.

There are several daily departures between Ko Pha-Ngan's Thong Sala and Ko Tao (180B to 350B, one to 1½ hours). These boats leave throughout the day from 8.30am to 1pm.

## Getting Around

Roads on the island are being paved at a rapid rate, which will no doubt mean fewer low-speed accidents and more high-speed ones. The worst place for motorcycle riding is between Ban Khai and Hat Rin, which is a paved but very hilly road; don't attempt this unless you're very good on a motorcycle. Also, the unpaved midsection to Ao Thong Nai Pan can get pretty rough.

You can rent motorcycles all over the island for about 250B per day. Wear a helmet, especially if you're going to be taking on dirt or steep roads. Bicycles are sometimes available for rent for 100B a day. Car rentals are around 1300B a day.

Some places can be reached only by boat, such as Hat Khuat and some sections of the eastern coast. If you do find trails, bear in mind that they can be overgrown and are not recommended for walking if you're wearing a heavy pack.

To and from Thong Sala, *sǎwngthǎew* cost 50B per person to anywhere on the island except for Ao Thong Nai Pan (100B). Rates jump at sunset or if petrol happens to be particularly expensive that week. The best time to move around the island, whether by boat or *sǎwngthǎew*, is around midday. This is when the majority of the boats from Surat Thani and other islands arrive and *sǎwngthǎew* and boats swarm in to move people to their final destinations. At other times you may have to charter the whole *sǎwngthǎew* or boat if there are not enough people.

Long-tail boats from Ao Chalok Lam to Hat Khuat cost around 50B per person with at least six people; otherwise it's 350B to charter the whole thing. Boats between Thong Sala and Hat Yao or Hat Rin cost about 150B per person from January to September (in calm weather only), though there are rarely enough people to warrant these boats running. From Hat Rin to Ao Thong Nai Pan Yai by long-tail boat expect to pay around 250B. You can charter a boat ride from beach to beach for about 200B per 15 minutes of travel.

## KO TAO

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Scuba virgins from all over flock to Ko Tao to learn how to dive. Not only is this lush, pistachio-coloured island blessed with crystal clear water and trippy coral reefs shallow enough for beginners to explore; it's also one of the world's cheapest and most popular places to get your open-water dive certification – only Cairns in Australia issues more PADI diving certificates each year. Diving is definitely the island's mainstay, and on its busiest areas you can't walk 100m without tripping over a shop. Once you choose an outfitter, there are dozens of spectacular reefs with plentiful marine life to swim through. Experienced divers should note, however, that while Ko Tao may be advertised as Thailand's diving Mecca, when it comes to truly awesome dive sites, the island can't compete with the world-famous Similan Islands (p655) or even the fishy waters off of Ko Phi Phi (p705).

Once considered exclusively a dive destination, these days Ko Tao is nearly as popular with nondivers as it is with scuba enthusiasts. Small (it measures just 21 sq km) and laid-back, it's become a haven for those seeking the beauty found on big sisters Ko Samui and

## KEEPING IT CLEAN

Like in many closed ecosystems, Ko Tao's popularity is starting to strain resources; litter is a common problem and there is an ongoing water shortage. Here are a few ways that you can help:

- Follow the 'when its yellow let it mellow, when it's brown flush it down' rule of toilet flushing. Turn the water off while shampooing and conditioning and keep your showers just short enough to wash the salt off – you know you're just going back in the ocean anyway.
- Although bins are often hard to come by, make the effort to find one rather than depositing your cigarette butts and empty bottles on the beach – cigarette butts take years to break down and spoil the sand. And if you purchase a small item at the store, think about whether you need the plastic bag it's automatically placed in.

Ko Pha-Ngan without the chaos. Fast and frequent ferries make travel to Ko Tao easy, and once you arrive there's plenty of entertainment – from lounging on pristine beaches to mountain biking through the lush and rugged interior. All in all Ko Tao is a romantic place, where nights are casual affairs, usually involving a quiet drink by candlelight on a cushion near the edge of the sea.

Even though Ko Tao has become more hip with each season, it hasn't let this celebrity status go to its head. Although there are pockets of frenetic activity in the main tourist ghettos of Ban Hat Sai Ri and Ban Mae Hat, much of the island retains an easy-going pace. Infrastructure on Ko Tao is still pretty basic, with much of the east coast only accessible by 4WD or boat, and 24-hour electricity blanketing only about 75% of the island.

## Orientation & Information

Ko Tao is about 60km of the coast of Surat Thani and part of the Samui archipelago. As it is only 21 sq km, it's possible to walk to most parts, providing you get an early start.

Ban Mae Hat, a one-street town with a busy pier, is where the boats dock. It is on the island's western side and is the main commercial centre. Here you'll find travel agencies, dive shops, restaurants, internet cafés, shops, boutiques and motorcycle rentals. Boat tickets can be purchased at a booking office by the harbour as well as from travel agencies. Two second-hand bookshops are here as well.

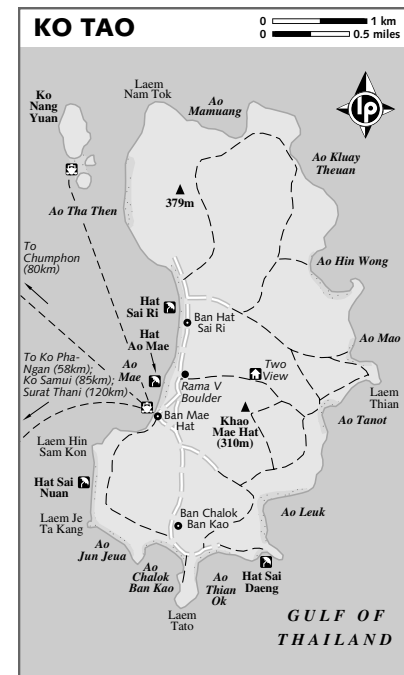
Both Krung Thai Bank and Siam Commercial Bank have a money exchange window near the pier, and several ATMs and money-changers can also be found around town.

The **police station** (☎ 07745 6631) is just north of Mae Hat. There's a post and telephone office in Ban Mae Hat. Watch out for private

phone offices, which charge exorbitant rates. **Badalveda** (☎ 0 7745 6664; www.badalveda.com), on the main road in Mae Hat, has a hyperbaric chamber. There are also clinics throughout the island to treat minor ailments.

Ban Hat Sai Ri, about midway up the western coast, is where most travellers choose to crash. It has the same selection of tourist services as Ban Mae Hat, plus countless bungalow operations and a lovely beach.

Ban Chalok Ban Kao to the south is the only other village on the island, but not



### KO TAO – THE BACK STORY IN FIVE LINES

Ko Tao's name means 'Turtle Island' and it is called this because of the swarms of turtles that used to nest here. Drifting further from land than either Ko Samui or Ko Pha-Ngan, Ko Tao lays claim to a chequered past and has been a favourite hideout for pirates, a lay-over point for weary fishermen and even a detention centre for political prisoners. The descendants of the original inmates still make up a large part of the local community.

nearly as appealing as Ban Hat Sai Ri. Ko Nang Yuan, just 1km off the northwestern side of Ko Tao, is really three islands joined by a sand bar. It has just one place to stay. The east and north coasts are fairly undeveloped, with only a few bungalow enterprises on each little bay offering a truly rugged retreat. The steep, rutted roads that connect these bays are best navigated by *sǎwngthǎew* or an off-road motorbike handled by an experienced rider.

The granite promontory of Laem Tato at the southern tip of Ko Tao makes an enjoyable hike from Ban Chalok Ban Kao. About the only thing of historic interest on the island is a large boulder that King Rama V had his initials carved into to commemorate a royal visit in 1900.

The *Ko Tao Info* booklet, available all over the island, is updated four times a year and is a great resource. It lists virtually every business here, and includes details about Ko Tao's history, culture and social issues.

### Activities

Ko Tao has little to offer in the area of cultural attractions. But if you're into being active, you won't get bored anytime soon.

### DIVING & SNORKELLING

Ko Tao is one of Thailand's main underwater playgrounds, which is no surprise considering its high visibility and clean waters. Some of the best sites here are offshore islands or pinnacles (see Top Five Dive Sites, opposite). Underwater wildlife includes grouper, moray eels, batfish, titan triggerfish, angelfish, blue-spotted stingrays, sea snakes, reef sharks and the occasional whale shark.

Courses are taught in many different languages other than English and the quality of your dive experience will ultimately depend on the experience and abilities of your dive shop's staff. It's a good idea to ask around for a recommendation. Some of the dive shops are small and just offer dive services, while others are 'dive resorts' that also have accommodation (sometimes only available to clients).

These days rates are standardised around the island – there's little need to spend your time hunting around for the best deal. Typical rates charged are from 900B to 1000B per dive or 7000B for a 10-dive package (including gear, boat, guide, food and beverages). If you bring all your own gear, it's 700B per dive. An all-inclusive introductory dive lesson will set you back 2000B, while a four-day, PADI Open Water certificate course costs 9000B – these rates include gear, boat, instructor, food and beverages, and sometimes a discount on accommodation.

Ask at your accommodation or one of the travel agencies (often doubling as internet cafés) in the villages about snorkelling trips; they usually run at about 450B to 700B per day including lunch and snorkelling gear. A snorkel, mask and fins are typically hired as a set for 100B per day and can be rented almost anywhere.

### OTHER WATER SPORTS

If hanging out underwater doesn't appeal to you, there are a few things you can do on the surface. Both **Black Tip Divers** (☎ 0 7745 6204; www.black-tip.com) and the friendly folks at **MV Sports** (☎ 0 7745 6065; www.mvsports.net) in Mae Hat can pull you behind a speedboat on all manner of things, including water skis, wakeboards or even an inflatable sumo suit. Two exhausting 10-minute sessions will cost you 1000B. Fishing enthusiasts can swing their tackle at sea by contacting the **Adventure Centre** (☎ 0 9019 1761; Mae Hat), which arranges all-day fishing *seafaris* for 1500B (minimum two people). A number of bungalow operations also rent out kayaks for around 350B per day.

### SPAS

There are half-a-dozen places on Ko Tao to get wonderful massages or spa treatments. Many bungalows offer more rustic, but sometimes equally good, Thai massages. A one-hour massage costs about 300B.

**Jamahkiri Resort & Spa** (☎ 0 7745 6400/1; www.jamahkiri.com), near Ao Tanot, does aloe-vera wraps (great for sunburn), massage and facials atop a huge island peak. The resort is large, peaceful and gorgeously designed. It's a truly luxurious experience that's very good value (450B for an aloe wrap). Call for free transport.

**Here & Now** (☎ 0 7745 6730; www.hereandnow.be), at CFT (p620), offers classes in two Chinese martial arts, *taijiquan* and *qi gong*, taught by a German expat. Nine-session early morning or evening courses cost 3100B. The owner's wife and his daughter also offer traditional Thai yoga massage for 680B for 2½ hours.

### OTHER ACTIVITIES

**Ko Tao Bowling** (☎ 0 5150 3485; per hr 240B; ☑ noon-midnight) is on the main road between Mae Hat and Chalok Ban. It offers island-style bowling on homemade lanes or you might like to test your putting skills on the miniature golf course.

### Sleeping

Now that Ko Tao has established itself as a full-scale diving resort destination, the island has gone construction crazy. The days of the thatched hut are over, especially along Hat Ao Mae and Hat Sai Ri, but so far there are still only a couple of true luxury options. Many operations are fronted by a dive shop.

There are several dazzling, lonely bays scattered around Ko Tao that still offer escapists

a true getaway experience. Getting to these places takes patience, however, due to the dismal road network that connects them. If you want to sleep in Ko Tao's more remote beaches, it is probably better to decide on a resort – at least for the first night – in advance. That way you can call ahead of time and usually arrange to be picked up from the pier – this may save you having to charter a whole taxi for 350B to 450B.

Unless stated, rates here are approximates for April to November; expect them to skyrocket from December to March and vacancies to disappear regardless. Many simple places have electricity only at night and not even all the fancy places have electricity 24 hours a day (at least not yet). Midrange operations here don't tend to offer air-con unless you fork out at least 1500B.

Practically all bungalows on the island have their own restaurant; some places can even get miffed if you don't take the majority of your meals at their restaurant.

### HAT AO MAE

As the home of Ko Tao's ferry pier, this is not the most appealing beach on Ko Tao (the pier generates a lot of rubbish). Home to numerous shops, restaurants, bars and internet cafés, Hat Ao Mae is noisy, but a fun place to party. It also has plenty of coral in its shallow bay, just stay away from the southern edge where most of the rubbish clusters. The village spreads to the north and south of the pier.

### TOP FIVE DIVE SITES

With so many excellent dive sites within easy reach, it's no wonder diving is *de rigueur* here. If you're lucky, you may spot some of the increasingly elusive whale sharks that have been known to frequent this region. The following are a sample of some of the better dives here (with their maximum depths in brackets).

- Sail Rock (45m) – The most famous site here is closer to Pha-Ngan than Ko Tao, and has a massive rock chimney with vertical swim-through, as well as barracuda, kingfish and the occasional manta ray.
- Chumphon Pinnacle (40m) – The base of these four pinnacles is covered in anemones and you will see bat fish, big groupers, barracuda and possibly whale sharks (in season).
- Shark Island (28m) – Made of massive boulders and rock formations, you can spot leopard and reef sharks at the lower depths and the occasional hawksbill turtle.
- White Rock (22m) – Lots of hard and soft corals are home to butterfly fish, clown fish, angel fish, morays and the territorial trigger fish.
- Southwest Pinnacles (33m) – A good advanced dive, the rocky pinnacles here are home to colourful tropical fish, leopard sharks, blue-spotted rays and occasional whale sharks.

### South of the Pier

To get to the following places, take a right as soon as you get off the main pier

**Save Bungalow** (☎ 0 7745 6180; bungalows 250-650B) As far as cheapies go, this is one of the better values close to the pier. Wooden and concrete bungalows line a green pathway leading away from the beach, and the better rooms have kitchenettes (although none are exceptional).

**Ko Tao Royal Resort** (☎ 0 7745 6156; fax 0 7745 6157; bungalows 950-3500B; 🏠) A great choice, this is a chic place with beautiful, contemporary bungalows (everything's teak) and 24-hour electricity. Each bungalow sits in a garden and has a hammock.

**Sensi Paradise Resort** (☎ 0 7745 6244; www.sensi-paradise.com; bungalows 1050-8820B; 🏠) The Thai-style bungalows at this artsy upmarket spot can be gorgeous, done up in masculine dark wood. The indoor/outdoor paths are a romantic plus, while covered decks (excellent for lounging) overlook the sea. The bigger villas are perfect for families. There are a few basic bungalows.

### North of the Pier

Take a left at Café del Sol to reach these establishments.

**Crystal Dive Resort** (☎ 0 7745 6107; www.crystal-dive.com; bungalows 250B-900B; 🏠 🏠) You must dive here to sleep at Crystal (hence the ultra cheap rates). Prices vary not on amenities, but on what sort of diving you do – a beginner's course garners the cheapest rate. The bungalows are lean, modern and lined in neat rows. The pool is a plus. During the off season nondivers may be accommodated, but expect rates to rise quite a bit.

**Tommy's Dive Resort** (☎ 0 7745 6039; bungalows 400-2500B) The deck restaurant has a fun vibe, but sadly the bungalows feel sterile. They are bright and quite modern, however, and terraced down to the water. Most have hammocks and balconies. The priciest options are probably not worth the baht, as none have air-con.

### HAT SAI RI

Look for our favourite stretch of sand on Ko Tao around the headland to the north of the pier. It is the longest and most developed beach on the island, with a string of dive operations, bungalows, travel agencies, minimarkets and internet cafés. The narrow, shady pathway

here is now paved with bricks the whole way; just watch out for motorcycles.

### Budget

**Here and Now (CFT) Resort** (☎ 0 7745 6730; www.hereandnow.be; bungalows 100-600B) This German-run place offers traditional Thai yoga massage (700B for 2½ hours) and *qi gong/tai chi* courses. CFT doesn't focus on creature comforts, but instead on spiritual enlightenment, and is best for those who don't mind roughing it a bit. All bungalows are basic and the cheapest share baths. The junglelike grounds are strewn with magnificent boulders. Look for CFT on the far northern end of the road a few hundred metres past Sun Lord.

**Big Blue Resort** (☎ 0 7745 6050; www.bigbluediving.com; r 200-500B; 🏠) A good variety of accommodation is offered at Big Blue, but it only takes nondivers during the low season and charges them higher rates. Even if you aren't staying, the deck bar is a good spot for happy hour (5pm to 8pm).

North of the beach, in a hilly area called Ao Ta Then, are several operations with very inexpensive and very basic bungalows – most high above the water. All charge about 200B to 400B and the majority have outstanding views. These places are very isolated, but could be your deal if you love the ultra rustic and aren't afraid of dust or a few bugs on your bed. Don't expect many amenities up here (like restaurants).

**Blue Wind** (☎ 0 7745 6116; bungalows 250-800B; 🏠) Offering basic fan bungalows, Blue Wind also has slightly nicer, air-con bungalows that stand out from the competition. They're still small, but are built out of higher quality wood that blends in with the environs. There's a great feeling of seclusion here, and yoga classes (300B) are held twice a day if you need even more peace of mind. Most of the huts aren't beachfront, however.

**Sai Ree Cottages** (☎ 0 7745 6126; bungalows 300-500B) These thatched-roof bungalows are excellent value and go pretty quickly – book ahead or get here early to score one of the huts facing out onto a grassy lot with palm trees. There's also a popular, tranquil restaurant.

Also recommended:

**Sun Lord** (☎ 0 7745 6139; bungalows 300B) Our pick of the bunch, look for Sun Lord below Sun Sea. Bungalows seem to be a bit sturdier than the other places.

**Silver Cliff** (☎ 0 9290 7546; bungalows 300B) Up a rough driveway.

**Sun Sea** (☎ 0 9037 4195; bungalows 300B) High on top of the rocks.

### Midrange

**AC Resort 1** (☎ 0 7745 6197; bungalows 350-1500B; 🏠 🏠) This place can't be missed – look for the massive sign with a waterfall spilling over it. It features small fan bungalows and air-con ones with huge beds, all located on pleasantly grassy, hilly and palm-tree laden grounds. If you dive with the resort's dive shop, you can get 30% to 40% off.

**Ban's Diving Resort** (☎ 0 7745 6061; www.amazing-kohtao.com; r & bungalows 400-1200B; 🏠 🏠) The best deal in its price range, Ban's has fabulously manicured grounds filled with pools, fountains and lush vegetation. The more expensive rooms are in sets of white colonial-style hotel buildings with balconies, while the cheaper options are decent no-frills bungalows. The most expensive rooms have TVs. If you want to stay in a fan room, you need to book a dive trip.

**Seashell Resort** (☎ 0 7745 6299; www.kohtaoseashell.com; bungalows 450-1550B) The pricier bungalows here come with lovely tiled floors and floor-to-ceiling windows looking out onto the ocean. On the downside they are a bit small and the sheets don't match. The porches are great, however, and the grounds beautiful.

Also recommended:

**Lotus Resort** (☎ 0 7745 6271; r 400-850B, bungalows 1200-1600B; 🏠)

**Silver Sand Beach Resort** (☎ 0 7745 6303-6; silver-sand\_kohtao@hotmail.com; bungalows 400-1500B; 🏠)

**Sunset Buri Resort** (☎ 0 7745 6266; bungalows 700-1800B; 🏠 🏠)

### Top End

**Thipwimarn** (☎ 0 7745 6409; thipwimarn@excite.com; bungalows 1750-3500B; 🏠) Probably the best deal on this beach, Thipwimarn lies 200m beyond the cheapies and is at the other end of the comfort spectrum. A circular restaurant with an outstanding view offers intimate, floor-level tables. Attractive bungalows spill down the hillside among boulders and greenery, with a myriad of stairs to keep you fit!

**Koh Tao Coral Grand Resort** (☎ 0 7745 6431-4; www.kohtaocoral.com; bungalows 2000-7200B; 🏠 🏠) A posh and newish resort, a bit beyond Hat Sai Ri proper, it has pastel-coloured, double-peaked bungalows in geometric shapes. The air-con abodes are really comfortable and boast wooden floors, huge sliding glass

doors and porches facing right out over the water. Linens are bright and there are wooden tubs.

**Koh Tao Cabana** (☎ 0 7745 6250; www.kohtaocabana.com; bungalows 2700-3500B; 🏠) This place can be a luxury winner as long as you score a room with air-con – make sure to ask before shelling out nearly 3000B for a fan. There's a lovely grassy bit leading up to the water with wooden sun beds to laze on. The bungalows are large and Flintstone-like with tropical décor and creative indoor/outdoor bathrooms. All are smooth and circular and overlook the sea from under shady palms.

### AO MAMUANG

An isolated rocky bay, Ao Mamuang offers great snorkelling and a dramatic setting of jungle and rocky hills.

**Mango Bay Grand Resort** (☎ 0 7745 6097; www.mangobaygrandresortkohtaotailand.com; bungalows 800-2500B; 🏠) Blending sublimely into its wild surroundings, this is a well-liked Italian-run little gem. The very neat, burnt-red bungalows are finished with smart wooden fixtures, have excellent views and are well spread out along the hill. They're reached by gently curving walks and mosaic-lined paths. There's a massive restaurant/deck here to laze away the time between snorkelling sessions.

### AO HIN WONG

On the eastern side of Ko Tao is serene Ao Hin Wong. There isn't much of a beach, but the water is crystal clear and the snorkelling is quite good. The road here is paved but still risky on a motorcycle. Several places rent out kayaks for around 150/350B for a half-/full-day; these provide a great way to explore the area.

**View Rock** (☎ 0 7745 6548/9; viewrock@hotmail.com; bungalows 300-500B) Located 600m up the dirt road from Green Tree, you climb the hill to get to the entrance, but climb back down (it's around a headland) to reach the seaside bungalows and restaurant. The place is a little rickety, with a mishmash of wooden bungalows on stilts snaking up a steep hill. It's not without its charm, though, and there's a feeling of complete seclusion.

**Hin Wong Bungalows** (☎ 0 7745 6006; bungalows 300-700B) There are some beautiful new wooden bungalows here with great big modern bathrooms; older bungalows are OK too, but obviously not as fancy. There's also an agreeable seaside restaurant.



**LAEM THIAN**

South of Ao Hin Wong, past Ao Mao, is the scenic cape of Laem Thian.

**Laem Thian** (☎ 0 7745 6477; r 350-1000B, bungalows 150-1500B; 🍷) The best part about this place is its grounds, which are strewn with huge boulders. Check out the ones on the edge of the hillside above the sea – they are perfect for ocean jumps if you're brave enough. Laem Thian is in an isolated location, so it's not the best choice if you want to go out at night. Rooms here tend to be better than the bungalows, as long as you don't judge them from the outside (which is rather depressing looking). Inside they feature contemporary furnishings and balconies. The best have sea views. The road here is very rough; you can call for a pick-up.

**AO TANOT**

Heading south from Laem Thian is Ao Tanot – one of the island's best spots for snorkelling. Two dive operators compete in this small, boulder-strewn cove, while several bungalow ventures line the beachfront. There are a few simple shops in the area.

**Bamboo Hut** (☎ 0 7745 6531; bungalows 150-500B) Surrounded by trees, there are 20 decked bungalows here, but the older they are, the smaller they are. The restaurant is very laid-back and the kitchen specialises in spicy southern Thai-style food.

**Diamond Beach** (☎ 0 7745 6591/2; bungalows 400-500B) These bungalows are relatively new, modern and comfortable. They have interesting designs with windows placed on the hut's corners. It's a good spot, with upbeat music playing and an appealing restaurant near the beach.

**Tanote Bay Resort** (☎ 0 7745 6757; tanotebay@hotmail.com; bungalows 400-3000B; 🍷) The most upmarket joint on this stretch of beach, bungalows here range from wood to concrete construction and sit at the northern end of the beach. It's a good choice, and the hillside rooms are modern and hygienic. Its rates stay the same year-round.

**Black Tip Dive Resort** (☎ 0 7745 6488; www.blacktip-kohtao.com; bungalows 800-1700B; 🍷) Part of a dive shop and water-sports centre, Black Tip has a handful of lovely bungalows. If you fun dive with them, you get 25% off the room rates; if you do a course, it's 50% off. The dive centre has a wacky, white adobe design with strange geometrical configurations.

**KHAO MAE HAT**

On the southern road to Ao Tanot from Ban Mae Hat, a path forks off the main track and leads up the slopes of 310m Khao Mae Hat, in the centre of the island. Even 4WD vehicles in the dry season hesitate to climb this road, but strong (unburdened) hikers can reach the top in about 30 minutes.

**Two View** (twoview@hotmail.com; bungalows 150B) It's a trek to get here – you'll have to hike for one hour uphill along the path from Ao Tanot – but if you're looking for a room with a view away from it all, Two View is worth the climb. It's a back to nature place affording sunrise and sunset views of both sides of the island. There are only six bungalows and no electricity or generator: kerosene lamps and candles provide light at night. Organically grown vegetarian food and herbal teas are available in the restaurant. Two View has three-day meditation retreats, as well as courses in massage, yoga, chakra-balancing, rebirthing, natural colon-cleansing and sessions to help you recall past lives. Consider reserving a spot during the high season.

**AO LEUK TO AO THIAN OK**

The dirt road to Ao Leuk gets steep, rough and rutty, especially towards the end; don't attempt it on a motorcycle unless you're an expert. This little bay has good snorkelling with amazing visibility on calm days. These beaches are isolated, so don't expect much nightlife outside your resort.

**Coral View Resort** (☎ 0 7745 6058; bungalows 500-700B) Run by a friendly Aussie-Thai couple, Coral View features well-built bungalows. It's best to get here by long-tail boat from Ban Mae Hat, as the road is rough and you may be required to hike a little.

**Jamahkiri Resort & Spa** (☎ 0 7745 6400-01; www.jamahkiri.com; bungalows 7900-10,900B) Halfway between Hat Sai Daeng and Ao Thian Ok, this spa has some of the most impressive bungalows on the island. Mushrooming out of the cliffs, these whitewashed, rounded abodes have curvy roofs and large balconies, and all come with their own Jacuzzis. There are some two-level options, and all are decorated with Thai art and lovely furniture and have sweeping views of the ocean. The spa here is highly recommended.

**AO CHALOK BAN KAO**

Ao Chalok, about 1.7km south of Ban Mae Hat by road, has the second largest concentra-

tion of accommodation on Ko Tao and can get quite crowded.

**Freedom Beach** (☎ 0 7745 6539; bungalows 100-250B) On its own secluded beach at the eastern end of Ao Chalok, these little huts are as basic as they come – wooden boxes with mattresses on the floor. However, if you crave solitude with great view for pennies, then Freedom might be for you. The bungalows are a 10-minute walk from the action on the main beach.

**Viewpoint Bungalows** (☎ 0 7756 6445; bungalows 200-1000B) A friendly, family-run place just past Taraporn Restaurant, it feels like it's almost at the end of civilisation on this beach. The cheap bungalows were supposedly designed by a hot-shot Bangkok architect and are spartan but airy and well maintained. Some have partial sea views; others are in a gorgeous hillside garden that thrums with cicadas at night. The restaurant has excellent views and a wonderful, mellow ambience, as well as attentive staff.

**Buddha View Dive Resort** (☎ 0 7745 6074; www.budhaviw-diving.com; r 300-1000B; 🍷) The positive vibe is the reason to stay at Buddha View, a very popular resort both for diving and for hanging out. The bungalows are just OK, but there's a fantastic barbecue here every night, weather permitting, and celebrations often spring up for people passing their PADI tests (virtually every night). Rooms are even cheaper if you do a dive course here.

**AO JUN JUEA TO HAT SAI NUAN**

A trail follows past Viewpoint Bungalows, going both along the beach and inland, eventually turning into a full-on, steep hiking trail. This remote part of the island is a small backpacker haven for those wishing to escape the dive-focused hubbub of the more accessible beaches. Long-tail boats are a good form of transport to this coastal area; with a decent number of people they cost 100B per person to these destinations. Or you can take a taxi to the Hat Sai Nuan area and find your way on the trail from there. The following are located on Jun Juea Beach.

**Orchid Cliff Bungalows** (☎ 0 1956 9332; bungalows 250B) The bungalows are well constructed and perched atop a steep cliff overlooking Hat Jun Juea. Check out the balconies, which have marvellous views and a sheer drop to the sea below.

**Sunset** (☎ 0 9202 4937; www.earth2marsh.com/sunset; bungalows 400B) With a perfect seaside location

and large, polished-wood bungalows sitting a little way up a grassy hill, Sunset probably has some of the choicest huts on this beach. There's a vegetarian restaurant, good swimming and snorkelling offshore, and yoga classes.

Closer to Ban Mae Hat, the following places are along the rocks and small beach of Sai Nuan:

**Tao Thong Villa** (☎ 0 7745 6078; bungalows 100-500B) Very popular with long-termers seeking peace and quiet, this place has funky, no-frills bungalows with views. Laem Je Ta Kang, the headland on which this place is located, straddles two tiny swimming beaches; it's a great spot if you can make it here. There's also an agreeable, lofty restaurant.

**Sai Thong Resort** (☎ 0 7745 6476; www.sai-thong.com; bungalows 150-1400B; 🍷) Ranging from basic hillside huts to creatively designed beachside abodes, Sai Thong is big on variety. It also features a relaxing restaurant complete with hammocks and sun deck, and sits on a small, private beach. The pool here is salt water and there is also a spa. The cheapest bungalows are a fabulous deal considering the deluxe amenities.

**KO NANG YUAN**

This private little tripartite island has one resort. Daily boats from Ban Mae Hat leave at 10.30am, 3pm and 5.30pm (100B return). Note that it's a private island that levies a 100B users' fee for anyone landing ashore.

**Ko Nangyuan Dive Resort** (☎ 0 7745 6088-93; www.nangyuan.com; bungalows 1200-3200B; 🍷) This dive resort monopolises the trio of islands, about 1km offshore to the northwest, connected by an idyllic sand bar. Bungalows are quite comfortable and well spaced. The emphasis here is on diving, with a four-day dive course for around 9000B (rates depend on the season). It's probably a little overpriced for what you get and the restaurant here isn't the best – but then again, it's the only one on the island.

**Eating**

Just five years ago eating in Ko Tao was still in its infancy, but today the restaurant scene is up and rocking with dining places offering choices from around the globe. If you're lazy, practically all bungalow operations have their own restaurants. Most of the following restaurants are in Ban Mae Hat or Hat Sai Ri.

**BAN MAE HAT**

Mae Hat has Ko Tao's largest selection of restaurants.

**Baan Yaay** (☎ 0 7745 6262; dishes 40-200B; 🍴 lunch & dinner) We liked the casual, airy deck overlooking the water at Baan Yaay – kick back with a cocktail from the long menu. The restaurant serves yummy salads, soups, and fried rice and noodle dishes.

**Café del Sol** (☎ 0 7745 6578; dishes 60-300B; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) This café serves delicious 'world' cuisines, with a focus on Italian. Every day there is a special set meal of a different cuisine. It gets consistently good reviews.

**Zest Coffee Lounge** (☎ 0 7745 6178; dishes 70-190B; 🍴 breakfast & lunch) This place corners Ko Tao's sandwich and breakfast market, which it follows up with the best lemon meringue pie in town. It's a great place to live the street-café lifestyle, while nibbling on fresh-baked whole-meal breads and sipping quality coffee. It's open until 6pm.

**Noori Indian** (☎ 0 7892 9970; dishes 80-250B; 🍴 lunch & dinner) This nearly new eatery is Ko Tao's first and only Indian restaurant. It serves up authentic curries, and there are plenty of options for those who spurn meat.

**La Matta** (☎ 0 7745 6517; dishes 90-235B; 🍴 lunch & dinner) On the uphill road, this Italian-run place serves freshly made pasta, sandwiches, salads and omelettes – all apparently prepared to ancient family recipes. Some locals prefer it to Faràngo Pizzeria next door. There's a second La Matta on Hat Sai Ri.

**HAT SAI RI**

This is just a sampling of the restaurants unattached to bungalows now open in Hat Sai Ri. If you don't like the choices listed below, don't fear, it seems something new is opening nearly every day.

**Simple Life** (☎ 0 7745 6742; dishes 50-200B; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Oozing good vibes, Simple Life has people hanging around for a drink long after the last *phát thai* has been tucked away. The most popular dish by far is the Barbecue Kebab (180B), and there are also killer pool competitions.

**Chopper's Bar & Grill** (☎ 0 7745 6641; Soi Sopaa; dishes 60-230B; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Plenty of local and imported draught beers and big-screen sports drag the punters into this multi-level pub. Hearty pub food, including big, greasy, English breakfasts, is what keeps them coming back.

**El Gringo Funky Mexican House** (☎ 0 7745 6323; dishes 80-250B; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) A big menu of Mexican dishes is served along with steak and pizza. The quality of the Mexican is questionable – some love it, others think it's crap. El Gringo is popular for live sports on the telly and daily happy hours (5.30pm to 8.30pm), and screens nightly movies on a giant screen. It stays open until midnight. There's a second location.

**Mango Pub & Steakhouse** (☎ 0 9727 2278; dishes 80-430B; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) It claims to have the best burger on the island – taste for yourself. Ostrich, crocodile and kangaroo meat are also on the menu here. If you're in the mood, New Zealand lamb is another popular item.

**Drinking**

Ko Tao has a surprisingly large number of hip bars. If you're looking to shake your money-maker, check out the ubiquitous party fliers posted on trees and walls; venues are always changing but there is usually some sort of dance party or rave happening every night – expect the usual whisky buckets and fire shows on the beach, although interesting sand sculptures and flame jugglers add an extra twist. The following bars are strung out between Ban Hat Sai Ri and Ban Mae Hat, mostly along the beachfront.

**Pure Beach Lounge** (☎ 0 6972 0494) Next to Orchid Spa, this place brings a touch of the smooth, New York bar scene to Thailand. Here you can lounge on the comfy red beanbags and cushions strewn about three levels of deck, while taking in some seriously smooth beats. Framed by boulders and right on the beach, it's great for watching gorgeous sunsets. Parties held several nights a week.

**Whitening** (☎ 0 7745 6199) A groovy bar-restaurant right on the beach, the 'floors' are sandy, the music is moody and the lighting glitters romantically at night (think tiki torches). A variety of mixed drinks is served and house music usually wafts in the background. It has a definite upscale feel, but it's comfortable; there's a great deck over the water.

**Dry Bar** (☎ 0 6972 0494; btwn Lotus Resort & Big Blue Resort) Also on the beach, the Dry Bar has a friendly atmosphere and is a good place to hang out with both *faràng* and locals. There are sand-side cushions and lanterns, as well as a huge cocktail menu to help you unwind after a hard day's scuba action.

**Tattoo** (☎ 0 9728 4656) Just 30m south of Whitening (at the edge of town), Tattoo is a more casual and intimate bar, with some tables and a TV-watching lounge area. Breezes blow through the friendly, laid-back spaces and there are plans to build a barbecue patio alongside. If you're hungry, try massive burgers (120B) or homemade meat pies and sausages.

**Dragon Bar** (☎ 0 7745 6423) This bar caters to those seeking snazzy, cutting-edge surroundings in which to be seen. It's an exception to other places in Ban Mae Hat and may start an upmarket trend. There's retro styling throughout, a large, modernistic communal area, and everything's dimly lit, moody and relaxing (not a party atmosphere). There's a large variety of cocktails and plans to add tapas to the food menu.

**Getting There & Away**

As always, the cost and departure times are in flux.

**BANGKOK**

Bus/boat combination tickets from Bangkok cost 800B to 1000B and are available from travel agencies on Th Khao San. Promotional bus/boat combination tickets in the opposite direction are sometimes offered for as little as 650B.

Beware of travel agencies on Ko Tao selling boat/train combinations, like a 'voucher' that you are supposed to be able to exchange for a train ticket in Surat Thani or Chumphon – more than a few travellers have found the vouchers worthless. If you book a train a few days (or more) in advance, legitimate agencies on Ko Tao should be able to deliver the train tickets themselves.

**CHUMPHON**

There are three departures a day from Chumphon to Ko Tao (see also p573). From Ko Tao, a high-speed catamaran departs for Chumphon at 10am and 3pm (550B, 1½ hours) and a Songserm fast boat makes the same journey at 2.30pm (400B, three hours). There may be fewer departures if the swells are high.

There's also a midnight boat from Chumphon (200B) arriving early in the morning. It returns from Ko Tao at 11pm. Don't take this boat if there's a good chance of rain; some boats leak and you'll be wet, cold and miserable. Otherwise, sleeping on a slow boat (on mats on the floor) is excellent.

**SURAT THANI**

A Songserm Express Boat departs from Surat Thani (500B, 6½ hours) at 8am daily and returns from Ko Tao at 10am. Every night, depending on the weather, a boat runs between Surat Thani (Tha Thong) and Ko Tao (500B one way, nine hours). From Surat, these night boats depart at 11pm. From Ban Mae Hat the departure time is 8.30pm.

**KO PHA-NGAN**

There are several express boats to Ko Phangan (180B to 300B, two hours), departing Ko Tao at around 10am and 2pm. There's also a high-speed catamaran (250B to 350B, one hour), which departs at 9.30am and at 3pm.

**KO SAMUI**

Two express boats (345B) leave Ko Tao at 10.30am and 2pm and arrive in Samui 2½ hours later. Speedboats (580B) leave at 9.30am and 3pm, include hotel pick-ups, and arrive in Ko Samui 1½ hours later.

**Getting Around**

Assuming you have at least three to four people, the following are approximate prices (per person) for *sǎwngthǎew* from Mae Hat: Sai Ri (50B), Chalok Ban Kao (50B), Tanot (100B), Hin Wong (100B), Ao Leuk (100B) and Thian Ok (100B). You will be asked to pay for the whole taxi if there is only one or two of you (350B to 450B to most destinations). Many guesthouses will send representatives to the pier, or alternatively you can call for a pick-up if you know where you intend to stay. *Sǎwngthǎew* from Sai Ri cost approximately 80B to Chalok Ban Kao and 120B to Ao Leuk.

There are boat taxis from Mae Hat to Chalok Ban Kao (200B per person), Nang Yuan (150B) and Tanot (400B). Long-tail boats can be chartered for around 1500B a day, depending on the number of passengers carried.

Walking is an easy way to get around the island, but some remote trails aren't clearly marked and can be difficult to follow. You can walk around the whole island in a day, although the hilly paths make it a challenge. Consider renting a mountain bike if you're in good shape.

Many tourists rent motorcycles on Ko Tao (150B per day). If you're confident on two wheels then this is a good way to get around,

though there aren't a lot of roads on the island. The main ones are paved, but the more remote ones are rutty, sometimes steep, dirt paths. These shouldn't be attempted by novices.

## NAKHON SI THAMMARAT PROVINCE

If you're searching for less-trodden paths and fewer *faràng*, then this relatively non-touristy province might be the gem you're looking for. Much of it is covered with rugged mountains and forests, its verdant jungles teem with lush vegetation and it was once the last refuge of Thailand's communist insurgents. Its eastern border is formed by the Gulf of Thailand, and much of the provincial economy is dependent on fishing and prawn farming. Along the north coast there are picturesque beaches and pristine waterfalls where solitude and serenity rule the day and Western tourists are few and far between. The province also boasts Khao Luang National Park; known for its beautiful mountain and forest walks, cool streams, waterfalls and orchards. Besides fishing, Nakhon residents earn a living by growing coffee, rice, rubber and fruit (especially *mangkhút*, or mangosteen).

### AO KHANOM

อำเภอขนอม

Four almost deserted white-sand beaches – Hat Nai Praet, Hat Nai Phlao, Hat Na Dand and Hat Pak Nam – are along the bay of Ao Khanom, about 70km from Surat Thani and close to the town of Khanom. Tourism along this beautiful coastline is minimal, with just a few places to stay. In some areas prawn farms are starting to develop and, while these threaten to damage the environment and local tourism, so far the farms haven't multiplied too dramatically.

If you're searching for Ko Samui's beauty without its crowds, head to Nai Phlao, the best beach, about 8km south of Khanom. Here, the mountains meet the aquamarine waters of the Gulf of Thailand and the sand is pristine white. Coconut palms blow gently in the wind, and you'll be left with the impression that a chunk of Ko Samui somehow cut loose and drifted ashore. Two kilometres south of Nai Phlao is scenic Nam Tok Hin Lat – another Samui echo.

There's a stunning, 8km stretch of beach along the southern half of Hat Nai Phlao, where most of the sleeping options are located.

**Supar Villa** (☎ 0 7552 8552; fax 0 7552 8553; bungalows 850-1500B; 🚗 🚲) is on prime beachfront real estate and offers great brick bungalows and very friendly staff. On weekends Thai conferences are often held here, as well as shows and entertainment that are usually free to watch if you sleep at the hotel.

Another good option is **Khanom Hill Resort** (☎ 0 7552 9403; bungalows 1500B). The red-roofed bungalows on stilts overlook the sea, with large areas of decking for sitting outside and enjoying the view.

You can catch a share taxi from Nakhon Si Thammarat's share-taxi terminal to Khanom for 100B. If you're driving, pedalling or riding, get off Rte 401 at the junction marked for Rte 4014 and follow the latter to Rte 4232, which runs parallel to the coast all along Ao Khanom (as far south as Sichon).

### HAT SICHON & HAT HIN NGAM

หาดสิชล/หาดหินงาม

Few foreigners turn up at these mellow side-by-side beaches along a small curving bay about 65km north of Nakhon Si Thammarat in Amphoe Sichon. Anyone looking for a low-key local scene, eye-catching rocks strewn along the sand or the chance to peruse the market in a picturesque fishing village won't be disappointed.

Hat Sichon ends at a pier in the small hamlet of Sichon. Coconut is a major local product, so there are plenty of palms to set the tone. The beach is quiet and you can easily walk into town. Head to the harbour and check out the large, colourful fishing boats lined up along spindly wooden piers, and the old one-storey weathered shophouses made from the same rough wood.

Hin Ngam is found south of Hat Sichon. Marked by a cluster of unique-looking boulders at its northern end, perfect for those who enjoy isolation – there are few services here. If you journey further south, you'll come to the lesser-known beaches of Hat Piti and Hat Saophao. Hat Piti is a pretty stretch of white sand with one midrange resort. Hat Saophao stretches for 5km and could be the most beautiful beach in the area if it weren't for the prawn farms just inland, which use the most environmentally unfriendly techniques for raising the pink crustaceans.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Prasarnsuk Villa** (☎ 0 7553 6299; bungalows 350-1200B; 🚗 🚲) Swaying palms and lovely green lawns grace this solid find. The 30 bungalows are well constructed, and the simple open-air seafood restaurant out front is pleasant for a beer and meal. Look for it at the end of the sandy part of Hat Sichon, with easy access to the rocky headland (with fair snorkelling) that starts at Hat Hin Ngam.

**Hat Piti Beach Resort** (☎ 0 7533 5301-4; bungalows 1500-3000B; 🚗 🚲) An upmarket resort set on sprawling grounds, it not only looks pretty (think whitewashed walls, and large fully equipped bungalows), but it's all well run. It sits on the lengthy, unspoiled Hat Piti and has a good open-air restaurant. Discounts of up to 50% can be found when the place is empty.

There are a number of small restaurants scattered about these beaches, although quality often changes with the year. Ask your host to recommend this year's best eats.

### Getting There & Away

Get a bus for Sichon from the Nakhon Si Thammarat bus terminal for 20B to 50B or take a share taxi for 50B to 80B. From Sichon, you can take a motorcycle taxi to Hat Sichon, Hat Hin Ngam or Hat Piti for around 30B to 60B per person.

### NAKHON SI THAMMARAT

นครศรีธรรมราช

pop 121,059

The area around Nakhon Si Thammarat is a breathtaking collage of mountainous scenery and thriving rainforest, yet the city itself is a dreary mix of modern Thai buildings and Muslim, Buddhist and Hindu temples. It is steeped in history, however, and was the centre of Buddhist study during the Sivichaya period nearly 1700 years ago. If you're in need of cultural immersion after fun and frivolity on the islands, this is a good place to soak up fascinating wat architecture or glimpse the rare handmade shadow puppets the region is famed for.

Hundreds of years ago, an overland route between the western port of Trang and eastern port of Nakhon Si Thammarat functioned as a major trade link between Thailand and the rest of the world. At that time, Nakhon Si Thammarat became an important centre of religion and culture: the Thai *nàng tálung* (shadow play) and *lákhn* (pronounced

'lagor'; classical dance-drama) art forms were developed here.

Today the city is a mix of dreary modern Thai buildings and Buddhist, Muslim and Hindu temples, remnants of the international influences that created this city.

### Orientation & Information

Nakhon Si Thammarat can be divided into two sections: the historic section south of the clock tower, and the new city centre north of the clock tower and Khlong Na Meuang. The newer part of the city has all the hotels and most of the restaurants, as well as more movie theatres per square kilometre than any other city in Thailand. There are several interesting handicraft stores near the City Park.

There are several banks at the northern end of town. Check the **Bovorn Bazaar** (Th Ratchadamnoen) for internet cafés.

**Main post office** (Th Ratchadamnoen; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri)

**TAT** (☎ 0 7534 6515; tatnakon@nrt.cscoms.com; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm) Housed in a 1960s building near the police station. The friendly staff can help with transport information.

### Sights & Activities

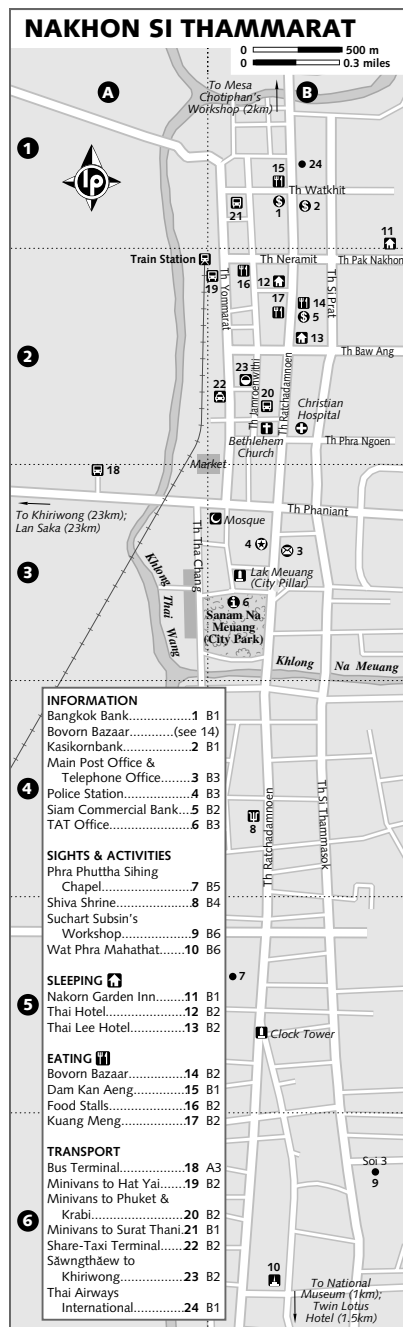
Most foreign travellers, and even Thai visitors, come to Nakhon Si for the shadow puppets (see the boxed text, p629), but the national museum here is surprisingly well done, and there is also a trip-worthy wat in town. Those interested in mosques, temples, churches or wats should take a look at the map for more places of worship, the most important being Phra Phutta Sihing Chapel and Shiva Shrine.

### NAKHON SI THAMMARAT NATIONAL MUSEUM

พิพิธภัณฑสถานแห่งชาตินครศรีธรรมราช

When the Tampilang (or Tambralinga) kingdom traded with Indian, Arabic, Dvaravati and Champa states, much art from these places found its way to the Nakhon Si Thammarat area, and some is now on display in the **national museum** (Th Ratchadamnoen; admission 30B; ☎ 9am-4pm Wed-Sun). Notable are Dong-Son bronze drums, Dvaravati Buddha images and Pallava (south Indian) Hindu sculptures. Locally produced art is also on display.

The museum is well south of the principal wat on Th Ratchadamnoen, and is located across from Wat Thao Khot and Wat Phet Jarik (it's 5B by sawngthàew).



## WAT PHRA MAHATHAT

วัดพระมหาธาตุ

In a land of endless wats, Wat Phra Mahathat stands out with the distinction of being the largest wat in southern Thailand – it's comparable to Wat Pho and other grand Bangkok wats. If visiting wats is a pastime for you, this one should be on your temple itinerary. As the city's most historic site, it was supposedly founded by Queen Hem Chala more than 1000 years ago. Bronze statues representing the queen and her brother stand in front of the east wall facing Th Ratchadamnoen, and her spirit is said to be associated with the large standing Buddha in the southeastern cloister. Locals make daily offerings of flower garlands to this Buddha image and the statue of the queen, believing her spirit watches over the city and its residents. It's both majestic and beautiful at the same time.

Reconstructed in the mid-13th century, the huge complex features a 78m *chedi*, crowned by a solid-gold spire weighing several hundred kilograms. Numerous smaller grey-black *chedi* surround the main one. A *mondop*, the fortress-looking structure towards the northern end of the temple grounds, holds a Buddha footprint – one of the better designs in Thailand.

It's approximately 2km south of the new town centre – hop on any bus or *sawngthæw* going down Th Ratchadamnoen (10B).

## Festivals & Events

Every year during mid-October there is a southern-Thai festival called **Chak Phra Pak Tai** held in Nakhon Si Thammarat (as well as Songkhla and Surat Thani). In Nakhon Si the festival is focused around Wat Phra Mahathat and includes performances of *nang tálung* and *lakhon*, as well as the parading of Buddha images around the city to collect donations for local temples.

In the third lunar month (February to March) the city holds the colourful **Hae Phaa Khun That**, in which a lengthy cloth *jataka* painting is wrapped around the main *chedi* at Wat Phra Mahathat.

## Sleeping

Most of Nakhon Si Thammarat's hotels are within walking distance of the train station and easy to locate.

**Thai Lee Hotel** (☎ 0 7535 6948; 1130 Th Ratchadamnoen; r 120-200B) This hotel has friendly staff and

residents, but its rooms are a bit of a trade-off – you either get bright but noisy, or really dark but quiet (good for folks wanting to sleep day and night we suppose). The location is secure, however, and you can't beat the price, especially if cleanliness is part of your criteria.

**Nakorn Garden Inn** (☎ 0 7531 3333; fax 0 7534 2926; 1/4 Th Pak Nakhon; r 445B; ☎ P) Rooms have brick walls, TV, fridge, and furniture that's less scratched than usual. It's tidy, homey and quite fair in value. Accommodation is set around a gentle, sparse garden, and there's plenty of parking.

**Twin Lotus Hotel** (☎ 0 7532 3777; fax 0 7532 3821; 97/8 Th Phattananak Khukhwang; r from 1000B; ☎) A 16-storey, 413-room hotel offers all the top amenities in its class and gets good reviews from previous guests. The décor pays a little too much homage to the glittering '80s, but it's a very comfortable option. Twin Lotus is a few kilometres southeast of town.

**Thai Hotel** (☎ 0 7534 1509; fax 0 7534 4858; 1375 Th Ratchadamnoen; r 220-450B; ☎) Rooms here come with TVs and just a few scratches. The more expensive ones with air-con are larger, better furnished and have a fridge. There's a small lobby café and the place is central.

## SHADOW-PUPPET WORKSHOPS

Performances of Thai shadow theatre are rare nowadays and usually seen only during festivals, but there are two places in Nakhon Si Thammarat where you can see the puppets being made.

Traditionally, there are two styles of the shadow puppets: *nang tálung* and *nang yài*. The former are similar in size to the Malay- and Indonesian-style puppets and feature movable appendages and parts (including genitalia), while the latter are unique to Thailand, nearly life size and lacking moving parts. Both are intricately carved from buffalo hide. The puppet masters use light against the puppets to create silhouettes (hence the name 'shadow puppets'), and also employ their own voices in dialogue and song to tell the story, while musicians play instruments, including gongs, drums and cymbals.

The acknowledged master of shadow-puppet manufacture and performance is Suchart Subsin, a Nakhon resident with a **workshop** (☎ 0 7534 6394; Soi 3, 110/18 Th Si Thammasok; ☎ 9am-4pm) not far from Wat Phra Mahathat. He has received several awards for his mastery and preservation of the craft, and has performed for the king. His workshop is open to the public; if enough people are assembled he may even be talked into providing a performance at his small outdoor studio. Puppets can also be purchased at reasonable prices – and here only, as he refuses to sell them through distributors. On some puppets the fur is left on the hide for additional effect – these cost a bit more as special care must be taken when tanning them. Bring your camera; you may be able to see a puppet being carved by hand.

Another craftsman, Mesa Chotphan, has a **workshop** (☎ 0 7534 3979; 558/4 Soi Rong Jeh, Th Ratchadamnoen; ☎ 9am-4pm) in the northern part of town; visitors are also welcome. Call if you would like to be picked up from anywhere in Nakhon Si. To get there on your own, go north from the city centre on Th Ratchadamnoen and, 500m north of the sports field, take the *soi* opposite the Chinese cemetery (before reaching the golf course and military base).

## Eating

At night the entire block running south from Th Neramit is lined with cheap food stalls – Muslim stands sell delicious *khào mòk* (chicken briyani), *mátàbà* (pancakes stuffed with chicken or vegetables) and Nakhon's famous *rotii* in the evening, and by day there are plenty of rice and noodle shops.

**Dam Kan Aeng** (☎ 0 7534 4343; 1979 Th Ratchadamnoen; dishes 30-90B; ☎ lunch & dinner) The Thai and Chinese food here is authentic and simple. This explains the packed crowds of hungry diners on a nightly basis. Look for it on the northwestern corner of Th Ratchadamnoen and Th Watkhit.

**Kuang Meng** (no roman-script sign; 343/12 Th Ratchadamnoen; dishes 20-70B; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Opposite the Siam Commercial Bank, this is a very small Hokkien coffee shop with marble tabletops and tasty pastries.

Bovorn Bazaar on Th Ratchadamnoen is a *faràng* hang-out that hosts several other culinary delights:

**Hao Coffee** (☎ 0 7534 6563; Bovorn Bazaar; dishes 30-60B; ☎ breakfast & lunch) Excellent Nakhon coffee and breakfasts served in an antique Hokkien-style coffee shop.

**Khrua Nakhon** (☎ 0 7531 7197; Bovorn Bazaar; ☎ breakfast & lunch) Large cafeteria-style place serving

Nakhon cuisine; order *khào yam* (southern-style rice salad) or *kaeng tai pla* (spicy fish curry).

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

**Thai Airways International** (☎ 0 7534 2491; 1612 Th Ratchadamnoen) has flights between Nakhon Si and Bangkok (3520B, one hour, twice daily).

### BUS & MINIVAN

There are buses to/from Bangkok (from 325B, 13 hours, twice daily). One VIP departure leaves nightly (705B). Ordinary buses to Bangkok leave from the bus terminal, but a couple of private bus companies on Th Jamroenwithi sell air-con bus tickets to Bangkok and these buses leave from here. Look for Saphan Tour or Moung Tai Tours, which are both easy to find.

Other destinations from the bus terminal include Hat Yai (102B, three hours, daily), Phuket (125B to 200B, seven hours, daily), Krabi (67B to 94B, three hours, daily), Songkhla (70B to 98B, three hours, daily), Surat Thani (45B to 90B, one hour, daily) and Trang (72B, 1½ hours, daily).

There are frequent minivans to Krabi (120B, 2½ hours) and Phuket (200B, five hours) that leave from Th Jamroenwithi. Minivans to Surat Thani (95B, one hour) depart from Th Watkhit. Minivans to Hat Yai (90B, three hours) leave from Th Yommarat. Look for small desks set near the footpath (minivans and waiting passengers may or may not be present nearby).

### TRAIN

Most southbound trains from Bangkok stop at Thung Song, about 40km west of Nakhon, from where you must take a bus or taxi to the coast. However, two trains (2nd class 468B to 688B) go all the way to Nakhon Si Thammarat: the rapid 173, which leaves Bangkok's Hualamphong train station at 5.35pm, arriving in Nakhon Si at 8.50am; and the express 85, which leaves Bangkok at 7.15pm and arrives in Nakhon at 10.50am. There are two daily trains (air-con 2nd-class sleepers 643B) to Bangkok, departing at 1pm and 2pm.

There are two trains each day to/from Hat Yai and one each to Yala and Sungai Kolok.

## Getting Around

Sǎwngthǎew run north-south along Th Ratchadamnoen and Th Si Thammasok for 6B (a bit more at night). Motorcycle-taxi rides cost between 20B and 50B.

## AROUND NAKHON SI THAMMARAT Khao Luang National Park

อุทยานแห่งชาติเขาลูนาง

Known for its beautiful mountain and forest walks, cool streams, waterfalls and fruit orchards, this 570-sq-km **park** (☎ 0 1228 2051; admission 200B) surrounds **Khao Luang** (1835m), the highest peak in peninsular Thailand. Along with other forested igneous peaks to the west, Khao Luang provides a watershed that feeds Mae Nam Rapi. Local Thais practise a unique form of agriculture called *sǎan rôm* (shade garden, or shade farm). Instead of clear-cutting the forest, they leave many indigenous trees intact, randomly interspersing them with betel, mangosteen, rambutan, langsat, papaya, durian and banana trees. Cleverly placed bamboo and PVC pipes irrigate the mixed orchards without the use of pumps.

Wildlife includes clouded leopard, tiger, elephant, banteng, gaur, tapir, serow, musk deer, macaque, civet, binturong and Javan mongoose, plus more than 200 bird species. An excess of 300 orchid varieties (including several indigenous species) find roots in the humid environments here, along with begonias and a wide variety of ferns.

The best time to visit Khao Luang is January to April, when it's cooler and drier. If you're coming from Nakhon Si Thammarat, visit the **TAT office** (p627) and pick up a small informative English booklet to the park.

### ACTIVITIES

Hiking is the park's biggest attraction. You can hike 2.5km through dense tropical forest to the top of **Nam Tok Karom** from the national park headquarters near Lan Saka (25km from Nakhon Si Thammarat), off Rte 4015. Every 500m or so there are shelters and seats. To reach seven-tiered **Nam Tok Krung Ching**, a half-day walk, you'll have to take the Krung Ching nature trail from Nopphitam at the northeastern border of the park, off Rte 4140.

Along the way you'll pass the world's largest tree ferns, an old communist insurgent camp, **Tham Pratuchai** (a cave also used by the communists) and a mangosteen forest. This trail, too, is lined with seats and shelters. The falls are most impressive after the rainy season has ended in November and December.

A more challenging trail leads from a car park near Khiriwong to the summit of **Khao Luang**, a 14-hour walk best divided into two or more days. Night temperatures at the sum-

mit can drop to 5°C, so come prepared with plenty of warm clothing. At 600m, Kratom Suan Sainai offers a simple-roofed shelter and also marks the upper limit of the fruit plantations. In the dry season you can camp next to a riverbed at Lan Sai, about a six-hour walk from the car park. Five hours further on, along a section of very steep trail, you'll enter a cloud forest full of rattan, orchids, rhododendrons, ferns and stunted oaks. From here it's another three hours to the summit, where, if the weather is clear, you'll be rewarded with stunning views of layer after layer of mountains rolling into the distance.

The best and safest way to appreciate the Khao Luang trek is to go with a guide from the **Khiriwong Village Ecotourism Club** (☎ 0 7530 9010, 0 9501 2706; trek 1500B) in Khiriwong. For this price the villagers will arrange a three-day, two-night trek that includes all meals and guide services. The guides can point out local flora and fauna that you might otherwise miss. The only time you can complete this hike is between January and June, when the trails are dry and the leeches are not too bad. During heavy rains the trail can be impassable for days.

### SLEEPING

There are **park bungalows** (☎ reservations 0 7530 9664; 6-12 people 600-1200B) available, and camping is permitted on the trail to the summit of Khao Luang. There are a few private bungalows and restaurants on the road to the park offices that offer accommodation and food.

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

To reach the park take a sǎwngthǎew (20B) from Nakhon Si Thammarat (on Th Jamroenwithi) to the village of Khiriwong at the base of Khao Luang. The entrance to the park and the offices of the Royal Forest Department are 33km from the centre of Nakhon on Rte 4015, an asphalt road that climbs almost 400m.

## SONGKHLA PROVINCE

### SONGKHLA & AROUND

สงขลา

pop 87,822

Despite a delightful location buttressed by Thale Sap Songkhla (Lake Songkhla) on one side and the Gulf of Thailand on the other, Songkhla isn't seeing much tourist traffic these

days. Although 'the great city on two seas' hasn't experienced any of the Muslim separatist violence plaguing nearby Hat Yai, it's still catching the same bad press. Which is a bit of a shame, as Songkhla is the last safe (at least for the moment – always check the situation before travelling around here) city where you can experience the unique flavour of Thailand's predominately Muslim Deep South.

Even though Songkhla is the capital of the region, it feels like a backwards country town. The city is surrounded by beaches on all sides, has several green parks dotted around and has a pretty historical centre – it's a pleasant place to pass a few days and partake in the beachside city life. The seafood served along Hat Samila is exceptional. Though the white beach is not that great for swimming, the sand and casuarina trees along Hat Samila can be visually striking. The population is a mix of Thais, Chinese and Malays, and the local architecture and cuisine reflect this fusion at every turn.

Big-name international petroleum companies and their exploration interests offshore bring an influx of multinational (particularly British and American) oil-company employees. The result is a strong Western presence in Songkhla that has helped create a relatively wealthy and prosperous town.

### Orientation

The city has a split personality, with the charming older section west of Th Ramwithi towards the waterfront, and a modern mix of business and suburbia to the east. Towards the north is a scenic promontory, Laem Songkhla; the eastern side of the jutting piece of land is Hat Son Awn, along which there is a lovely path for strolling. Further north is Hat Samila, which is attractive and peaceful, too. If you enter town from the north or leave town heading north, you'll go through Ko Yo (see the boxed text, p633) and cross the Tinsulanonda Bridges – the longest concrete bridges in Thailand.

There's a large golf course in town, along the coast next to the BP Samila Hotel.

### Information

Banks can be found all over town.

**Corner Bookshop** (☎ 0 7431 2577; cr Th Saiburi & Th Phetchakhiri; ☎ 7am-7.30pm) English-language novels, maps, newspapers, magazines and Lonely Planet guides.

**Dotcom Internet** (☎ 0 7432 5049; 28/20 Th Ramwithi; per hr 40B; ☎ 8am-10pm)

**Immigration office** (☎ 0 7431 3480; Th Laneg Phra Ram; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri) Visa extensions can be filed here.

**Indonesian Consulate** (☎ 0 7431 1544; Th Sadao) **Malaysia Consulate** (☎ 0 7431 1062; 4 Th Sukhum) **Police Station** (☎ 0 7431 2133) Corner of Hat Samila.

**Post office** (Th Wichianchom) Opposite the market; international calls can be made upstairs.

## Sights & Activities

Songkhla's top site is the excellent **national museum** (☎ 0 7431 1728; Th Wichianchom; admission 30B; ☎ 9am-4pm Wed-Sun, closed public holidays), which was constructed in 1878 using a Thai-Chinese architectural style that's as delightful as the art inside. Design highlights include curved rooflines and thick walls. The grounds are quiet and shady with a tranquil garden at the front – sit under a tree and write in your journal. Inside there are exhibits from all national art-style periods. The most intriguing is on Srivijaya, a 7th- to 9th-century Shivalingam found in Pattani.

If museums aren't your style, head to the beach. The residents have begun taking better care of the strip of white sand along **Hat Samila**, and it is now quite pleasant for strolling or early morning reads on one of the benches sitting in the shade of casuarina trees. A **bronze mermaid**, depicted squeezing water from her long hair in tribute to Mae Thorani (the Hindu-Buddhist earth goddess), sits atop some rocks at the northern end of the beach. Locals treat the figure like a shrine, tying the waist with coloured cloth and rubbing the breasts for good luck. Next to that are the **cat and rat sculptures**, named for the Cat and Rat Islands (Ko Yo and Ko Losin). The rustic seafood restaurants at the back of the beach supply food and cold beverages.

Th Nang Ngam is another attraction. It has a large Chinese community and is lined with quaint, rickety old Thai houses and several multicoloured Chinese temples.

## Sleeping

The following listings are only a start, there are many more. Songkhla's hotels tend to be lower priced than other areas in the gulf, which makes going up a budget level a relatively cheap splurge.

**Amsterdam Guest House** (☎ 0 7431 4890; 15/3 Th Rong Meuang; r 150-200B) This homey, quirky Dutch-run place is popular and clean, with plenty of cushions, wandering pet dogs and

cats, and a caged macaque that is said to bite the unwary. All rooms share bathrooms.

**Guest House Romantic** (☎ 0 7430 7170; 10/1-3 Th Platha; r 250-390B; ☎) Substantial, airy abodes smell fresh and all come with TVs. Even the air-con rooms are cheap, and the bamboo wood beds are impressive for this price range. Overall a good budget choice if you're willing to pay more than 200B.

**Green World Palace Hotel** (☎ 0 7443 7900-8; 99 Th Samakisukson; r 750-900B; ☎) Green World Palace is not only the best value in town, it's also classy, boasting chandeliers, a spiralling staircase in the lobby and a 5th-floor swimming pool with views. Rooms are immaculate and filled with enough amenities to keep you comfortable and entertained. The hotel is immensely popular, so book ahead. Look for it a few hundred metres south of town.

**Rajamangala Pavilion Beach Resort** (☎ 0 7448 7222; www.pavilionhotels.com; 1 Th Rajdamnoen Nok; r 1400B; ☎) This miniresort is actually owned by the local university and looks over the road to Songkhla's eastern beach. The enormous lobby is filled with water features and Thai artefacts, and the rooms are elementary but stylish. This place is often fully booked, so you may want to call ahead.

**BP Samila Hotel** (☎ 0 7444 0222; www.bphotelsgroup.com; 8 Th Ratchadamnoen; r 2500B; ☎) Songkhla's most posh hotel is actually a really good deal – you'd pay nearly double for the same amenities on the islands. The beachfront establishment offers large rooms with IDD phone, fridge, satellite TV, and a choice of sea or mountain views. Internet access costs 60B per hour. BP can arrange a caddie for the neighbouring golf course.

## Eating

The seafood in Ko Yo (see opposite) has a reputation for being some of the best in the area. The seafood restaurants on Hat Samila are pretty good and well priced – try the curried crab claws or spicy fried squid. There's a string of cheap, excellent seafood restaurants around the beach close to where Th Ratchadamnoen and Th Son Awm intersect. And at the southern end of Th Sisuda is a night market called Rot Fai Night Plaza – on Sunday, a morning market pops up here.

**Nai Wan Restaurant** (☎ 0 7431 1295; Th Ratchadamnoen; dishes 40-220B; ☎ lunch & dinner) Popular for its crab dishes (bring moist wipes!), the menu also offers Thai salads, soups and other

seafood offerings, as well as a few veggie entrees. The large, casual space is near the little mermaid sculpture.

**Sea Sport Restaurant** (☎ 0 7432 7244; Th Ratchadamnoen; dishes 50-200B; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) The ambience here is great, at least when it's not raining: outside wooden benches (some shaped like boats) are set on a grassy, bricked terrace while a cloth tarp blows overhead. At night everything's lit up romantically. Highly recommended by locals for its seafood.

**Dokkeaw** (☎ 0 7431 6226; Th Rajadamnoen; dishes 60-220B; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This busy Thai eatery is over the road from the mermaid statue and has plenty of outdoor terrace seating where you can enjoy the sea breeze. The seafood here is splendid and you can enjoy your meal while being serenaded by nightly live singers.

## Drinking

A string of bars just east of the Indonesian consulate is jokingly referred to among local expats as 'The Dark Side'. Not as ominous as it sounds, this strip caters mainly to oil company employees and other Westerners living

in Songkhla. The Office, the bar nearest Soi 5, is run by an Englishman and not too seedy.

A few other casual bars, interspersed with restaurants, are worth checking out on nearby happening Th Sisuda: Corner Bier is where Songkhla's Canadian community hangs out; and the Parlang Restaurant and Bar is another popular expat place. To see how the locals party, head to Dr Cool Radio, which has great sea views and is filled most nights by Thai students listening to local DJs spinning pop hits.

## Getting There & Around

From Songkhla you'll have to go to Hat Yai to reach most long-distance destinations in the south. There are a few destinations with transport originating in Songkhla, though.

The government bus station is a few hundred metres south of the Viva Hotel. Four 2nd-class buses go daily to Bangkok (550B), stopping in Chumphon (320B), Nakhon Si Thammarat (150B) and Surat Thani (210B), among other places. One VIP bus to Bangkok leaves at 4.45pm (1050B), while three 1st-class buses (572B) leave late afternoon and evening.

## DETOUR: KO YO

เกาะยอ

An island on the inland sea, Ko Yo (kaw yaw) is worth visiting just to see the cotton-weaving cottage industry there. The good-quality, distinctive *phāa kâw yaw* is hand woven on rustic looms and is available on the spot at 'wholesale' prices – meaning you still have to bargain but have a chance of undercutting the usual city price.

Cotton weaving is a major household activity around this forested, sultry island, and there is a central market off the highway so you don't have to go from place to place comparing prices and fabric quality. At the market, prices for cloth and ready-made clothes are excellent if you bargain and especially if you speak Thai. If you're more interested in observing the weaving process, take a walk down the road behind the market where virtually every other house has a hand-operated loom or two – listen for the clacking sound.

At the northern end of the island, about 2km past Ban Ao Sai, the must-see **Folklore Museum** (☎ 0 7433 1185; admission 60B; ☎ 8.30am-5.30pm) aims to promote and preserve the culture of the region. Be ready to hike – the museum ripples down a hillside, each display room connected by stairs, stairs and more stairs. Displays include pottery, beads, shadow puppets, basketry, textiles, musical instruments, jewellery, boats, religious art, weapons, and various agricultural and fishing implements.

If you'd rather just meander around the island, you can hire a motorcycle in Songkhla (make sure you know how to operate one first) and tour the quiet back roads of Ko Yo: tiny villages, scenic coastline, forested hills, spiritual wats – it's a very local treat and way off the beaten track. If you've made it to the island, don't leave without trying Ko Yo's famous seafood; look for shorefront restaurants along the island's main road.

Frequent *sāwngthāew* to Ko Yo depart from Th Platha in Songkhla (15B, 30 minutes). To stop at the market ask for *nāa tǎlāat*, 'in front of the market'. To get off at the museum, about 2km past the market, ask for *phīphitháphan*. Buses to Ranot pass through Ko Yo for the same fare.

To Hat Yai, buses (18B), minivans (25B) and share taxis (30B) take around 40 minutes and leave from Th Ramwithi. Minivans to Pattani (90B) and Yala (90B) leave from the southern part of Th Ramwithi, while ordinary buses to Nakhon Si Thammarat (86B) leave from a different bus terminal in the southern part of town.

Share taxis to the Hat Yai airport cost 250B to 300B per taxi. Private taxis charge up to 500B.

Sǎwnghǎew circulate around town and to Ko Yo for 12B. Motorcycle taxis cost around 20B; rates double at night. There are numerous places along the streets to rent bicycles or motorcycles. Bikes go for about 100B per day, while motorcycles cost 200B to 250B.

## HAT YAI

หาดใหญ่  
pop 193,732

Songkhla's liveliest town is a fun, if slightly dodgy, place with a bit of a buzz to it. The main pastime here seems to be eating critters from the sea. There are literally hundreds of restaurants serving great seafood, prepared either in Chinese, Muslim or Thai style, and every street seems to be packed with shops and street stalls. Markets are also plentiful and several large, air-con shopping malls offer a chilly respite from the heat. The nightlife scene buzzes nightly and you can hang out in some cosy pubs or dance the night away before heading off to the surrounding region.

Most travellers only visit Hat Yai while in transit to Malaysia, but since terrorists started targeting it for bombings within the last few years its seeing fewer and fewer folks passing through; many people are choosing to fly straight on to Kuala Lumpur or Singapore rather than do the traditional overland route through Thailand's Deep South. Violence comes in spurts, however, so it might very well be quiet again before this book is retired. If you do visit, just be vigilant about your surroundings and stay away from large demonstrations or crowded spaces, which are more likely to be targets, but don't worry too much.

### Information

**Bangkok Hatyai Hospital** (☎ 0 7436 5780-9; bhhimc@bgh.co.th; 75 Soi, 15 Th Pechkasam) One of the best health-care providers in southern Thailand, it offers full medical care and has English-speaking staff.

**Cathay Tour** (☎ 0 7423 5044; 93/1 Th Niphat Uthit 2) One of many travel agencies in town, it stands out for its friendly staff and full range of services, from tickets to tours to visa runs.

**Immigration office** (☎ 0 7425 7079; Th Phetkasem) Near the railway bridge; handles visa extensions.

**TAT** (☎ 0 7424 3747; tatsgkhla@tat.or.th; 1/1 Soi 2, Th Niphat Uthit 3) Very helpful staff here speak excellent English and have loads of info on the area.

**Tourist Police** (☎ 0 7424 6733; Th Niphat Uthit 3; ☎ 24hr)

### Sights

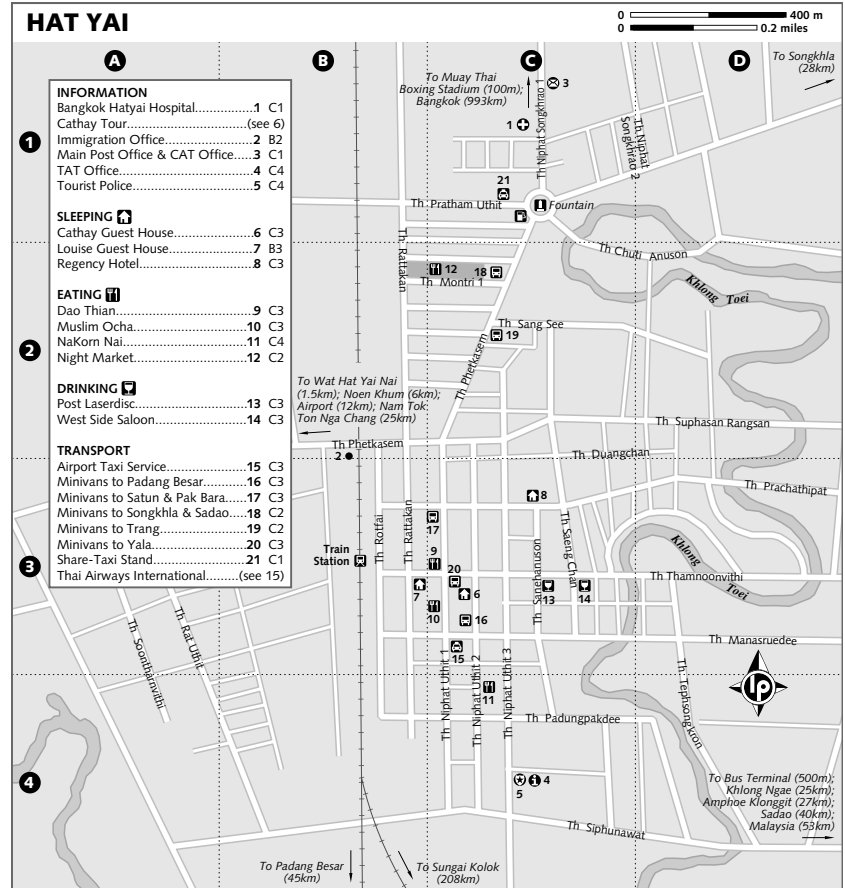
Hat Yai is rather short in the attraction department. During festivals and special events **Muay Thai boxing matches** (admission 200B) are held in the boxing stadium just north of Hat Yai's sports stadium. Times vary, so check with the TAT office to confirm the schedule. If you're interested in boxing, you'll be thrilled with the low admission price – seats at matches in other cities can go for as much as 1500B.

If you're bored, you could hop on a sǎwnghǎew and head about 1.5km out of town to **Wat Hat Yai Nai** (พระมหาเจดีย์พุทธนิมิตพันมหาธาตุยพินทรธรรมา); it features a 35m reclining Buddha (Phra Phut Mahatamongkon). Inside the image's gigantic base is a curious little museum and mausoleum with a souvenir shop. To get here, grab the sǎwnghǎew that passes near the intersection of Th Niphat Uthit 1 and Th Phetkasem and get off after crossing Saphan U Taphao – it costs about 12B.

### Sleeping

For some reason hotels in Hat Yai take a disproportionate leap upward in quality once you pay another 100B to 200B a night. There are endless Chinese-run midrange hotels offering pretty much exactly the same thing – it's often easiest to go with the first one you come across. If you're at the tail end of a long trail ride and just want to crash cheap, there are dozens of budget hotels within walking distance of the train station.

**Cathay Guest House** (☎ 0 7424 3815; 93/1 Th Niphat Uthit 2; dm/r 100/250B) Even though it has seen better days, this has become the travellers headquarters in Hat Yai because of its good location, helpful staff and plentiful information about onward travel. It's a great place to meet other travellers, leaf through mountains of brochures and catch up on overdue laundry. Inexpensive breakfasts and lunches are served in an on-site café and there's a reliable travel agency downstairs.



**Louise Guest House** (☎ 0 7422 0966; 21-23 Th Thamnornvithi; r 300-400B; ☎) This place is conveniently located and has more appealing rooms than the Cathay Guest House – but lacks its buzz. With more of an apartment-style layout, the rooms here aren't very big but are well maintained and you have the option of air-con.

**Regency Hotel** (☎ 0 7435 3333-47; www.regency-hatyai.com; 23 Th Prachathipat; r from 900B; ☎) This beautiful hotel has that grand old-world charm that's so rare nowadays. There's a softly lit lounge dotted with artefacts and all that's missing are the retired colonels from the queen's navy, talking about their days in Batavia over gin and tonics. The rooms are stuffed with modern amenities, and there's a coffee shop, dim sum restaurant, huge swim-

ming pool with bar, and a gym on site. It's extremely well priced.

### Eating & Drinking

Hat Yai is southern Thailand's gourmet Mecca, offering Muslim *rotii* and curries, Chinese noodles and dim sum, and fresh seafood from both the Gulf of Thailand and the Andaman Sea. Lots of good, cheap restaurants can be found along the three Niphat Uthit roads, in the markets off side streets, between them and near the train station.

The extensive **night market** (Th Montri 1) specialises in fresh seafood, where you can dine on two seafood dishes and one vegetable dish for around 200B. There's an excellent gathering of veggie focused food stalls at the

bend in Th Phetkasem, and another group north of town by the mosque, off Th Niphath Songkhrao.

Many Hat Yai restaurants, particularly the Chinese ones, close in the afternoon between 2pm and 6pm – unusual for Thailand. Many of the upscale hotels have fancier Chinese restaurants.

**NaKorn Nai** (☎ 0 7423 2550; 16-17 Th Niphath Uthit 2; dishes 30-60B; 🕒 Thu-Tue) A trendy joint, NaKorn serves a large menu of Thai and Western specialties at lunch and dinner, while the breakfast menu has eggs cooked a variety of ways.

**Dao Thian** (car Th Niphath Uthit 3 & Th Thamnoonvithi; dishes 40-80B; 🕒 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Plenty of veggie food features on the menu, as well as traditional Thai dishes and breakfasts. This place is continuously kept in an immaculate state and the service is great.

**Muslim Ocha** (Th Niphath Uthit 1; dishes 40-210B; 🕒 6am-7pm) This small, tidy place does *rotii kaeng (rotii chanai in Malay)* in the mornings and curries all day. This is one of the few Mus-

lim cafés in town where women – even non-Muslim or foreign women – seem welcome.

**Post Laserdisc** (☎ 0 7423 2027; 82/83 Th Thamnoonvithi; 🕒 9am-1am) With an excellent sound system and well-placed monitors, this is a great place to watch the latest pirated blockbuster after dark. Music videos are shown as fillers between films. Rockers replace movies on some nights, and the bands tend to be relatively good. Drink prices are only a little higher than at the average bar. Quash the booze with cheap pub grub from the East and West.

**West Side Saloon** (☎ 0 7435 4833; 135/5 Th Thamnoonvithi) This 'saloon' attracts Thais, Malays and *farang* to its dim, rustic, pub-like space. Tables are set in front of a stage, where live music rocks nightly from 8.30pm.

### Getting There & Away

**Thai Airways International** (THAI; ☎ 0 7423 3433; 182 Th Niphath Uthit 1) operates flights between Hat Yai and Bangkok (3395B, 90 minutes, four daily).

### TRAVEL WARNING: VIOLENCE IN THE DEEP SOUTH

At the time of writing, the far south of Thailand was experiencing almost daily violent incidents, making travel around the Deep South (as Pattani, Narathiwat and Yara are collectively known) a risky enterprise.

Ever since this Malay region, originally part of the semi-autonomous Islamic Kingdom of Pattani, was appropriated by Thailand at the beginning of the 20th century, the inhabitants have felt marginalised and discriminated against by their distant rulers. Over the past few years these feelings have bubbled into violence, extending into Hat Yai in Songkhla Province. Since 2004, dozens of bombings and attacks have been carried out in and around the Deep South, with Yala being particularly hard hit. The bombings have usually resulted in a heavy-handed response from Thai authorities. More than 1000 people have been killed and targets have included military checkpoints, schools and restaurants, and the Hat Yai airport (two tourists were injured in this attack). The violence increased markedly in the month leading up to the 19 September coup (see p40). On 31 August 2006, 22 bombs exploded inside commercial banks in Yala Province, injuring 28 people. A second series of bombs were detonated in a commercial district of Hat Yai on 17 September 2006. The region has been under martial law since 2005, and more than 1815 people have been killed and another 2729 wounded between January 2004 and October 2006 – most have been innocent bystanders, Buddhists and, ironically, Muslims. The increased violence forced the government to shut all schools in Yala, Pattani and Narathiwat Provinces indefinitely from 27 November 2006.

On 22 November Wan Kadir Che Wan, leader of the umbrella organisation for southern separatist groups, told the Arab TV network Al Jazeera that the Al-Qaeda-linked Jemaah Islamiyah terrorist network was helping local insurgents stage the attacks. However, as yet no group has been identified by the Thai government.

To date tourists have not been directly targeted (although at least one American and one Canadian have been killed in the violence), and it is difficult to predict which way the situation will turn; by the time you read this, things could be back to normal. If you are planning to travel in this region, be sure to check the latest security situation with your embassy and local authorities before you head out.

### MAKING A (VISA) RUN FOR THE BORDER FROM HAT YAI

The Malaysian border is about 50km south of Hat Yai, and many travellers come through town just to extend their Thai visas.

To get an in-and-out stamp, head to Padang Besar, the nearest Malaysian border town. Private taxis cost 600B return (one hour), share taxis are 150B (one hour, leave when full), minivans 80B (1½ hours, hourly) and buses 40B (1½ hours, every 25 minutes). It's also possible to take the train, but this option is not very fast or frequent.

If you need a longer Thai visa, you'll have to see the Thai consulate in Georgetown, on Penang Island (accessible through the mainland town of Butterworth). Buses from Hat Yai to Butterworth cost 250B (four hours). Again, trains from Hat Yai to Butterworth are slower and less frequent.

There is also a daily THAI flight to/from Phuket (6400B) and Singapore (15,100B).

The bus terminal is 2km southeast of the town centre, though many buses make stops in town. Destinations from Hat Yai include Bangkok (550B, 14 hours), Krabi (200B, five hours), Ko Samui (combined bus/boat 300B, seven hours), Kuala Lumpur (350B to 450B, nine hours), Phuket (250B to 450B, 16 hours) and Singapore (450B to 600B, 16 hours). The above quotes are for air-con buses. There are multiple buses each day to all the destinations.

**Cathay Tour** (☎ 0 7423 5044; 93/1 Th Niphath Uthit) runs express minivans to Krabi (180B), Ko Samui (400B), Phuket (350B), Surat Thani (230B), Sungai Kolok (190B) and Trang (140B). There's also a direct night bus to Bangkok (680B).

There are five daily overnight trains to/from Bangkok. Sample fares include: 3rd-class seat with fan/air-con 269/339B, 2nd-class seat 465/575B, 2nd-class sleeper (lower berth) 665/845B, and a 1st-class sleeper 1394B. There are also daily trains to Sungai Kolok (42B to 184B, seven daily), Butterworth (322B, two daily) and Padang Besar (57B, two daily).

There is an advance-booking office and left-luggage office at the train station; both are open 6am to 6pm daily.

### Getting Around

An **Airport Taxi Service** (☎ 0 7423 8452) makes the run to/from the airport (60B, seven daily). The service leaves for the airport from the THAI office on Th Niphath Uthit 1; coming into Hat Yai, the service offers hotel drop-off. A private taxi for this run costs about 200B.

Sāwngthāew run along Th Phetkasem and charge 5B per person. A tūk-tūk around town should cost 10B per person, though they like to charge foreigners 20B instead.

## YALA PROVINCE

Yala is the most prosperous of the four predominantly Muslim provinces in southern Thailand, mainly due to income from rubber production. It is also the prime business and education centre for the region. See the travel warning on opposite before visiting.

### YALA

ยะลา

pop 99,954

Unless you are a wat fanatic there is absolutely no reason to visit this province's capital city. It may be known for its cleanliness, but otherwise it is not an exciting place, not to mention the fact that it is slightly dangerous these days.

That said if you are a wat fanatic, then you'll probably love **Wat Khuhaphimuk** (also called Wat Na Tham or Cave-Front Temple), 8km west of town on the Yala-Hat Yai road. This Srivijaya-period cave temple dates to AD 750. Inside the cave you'll find a long, reclining Buddha image known as Phra Phutthasaiyat. For Thais, this is one of the three most venerated Buddhist pilgrimage points in southern Thailand (the other two are Wat Boromathat in Nakhon Si Thammarat and Wat Phra Boromathat Chaiya in Surat Thani). To get to the temple, take a sāwngthāew (7B) going west towards Yala via Rte 4065 and ask to get off at the road to Wat Na Tham. It's about a 1km walk to the wat from the highway.

If you happen to be in the area in March, then it might also be worth popping into Yala for the **Asean Barred Ground Dove Competition**. This is the World Cup for songbirds, and attracts dove lovers from across Southeast Asia. Over 1000 feathered competitors are literally 'pitched' against each other, judged on stamina, melody, volume and pitch.



## ISLAM IN SOUTHERN THAILAND

Whether it is the beautiful, haunting echo of the muezzin's call to prayer curling into your room at dawn, or the smile of a woman in a softly coloured headscarf as she deftly kneads and winds a traditional *rotii* – during a trip to Thailand's southern islands and beaches you are very likely to encounter the presence and influence of Islam.

At approximately 4% of the population, Muslims make up Thailand's largest religious minority, living side by side with the majority who are Theravadin Buddhists. There are some 3000 mosques in Thailand – over 200 in Bangkok alone. Of these mosques 99% are associated with the Sunni branch of Islam (in which Islamic leadership is vested in the consensus of the Ummah, or Muslim community), and 1% with the Shi'ite branch (in which religious and political authority is given to certain descendants of the Prophet Mohammed).

Islam was introduced to the area that comprises modern Thailand between AD 1200 and AD 1500 in the south, through the influence of Indian and Arab traders and scholars. To this day, most of Thailand's Muslims reside in the south, concentrated in the regions of Pattani, Narathiwat, Satun and Yala, where the population is up to 85% Muslim. These southerners trace their heritage to the former Kingdom of Pattani, an Islamic kingdom whose territory straddled the present-day border between Thailand and Malaysia. Accordingly, the south shares both a border and a cultural heritage with its predominantly Muslim neighbour. Most of Thailand's southern Muslims are ethnically Malay and speak Malay or Yawi (a dialect of Malay written in the Arabic script) in addition to Thai.

These cultural differences, inflamed by a history of perceived religious and linguistic discrimination, have led to a feeling of disconnection with the Buddhist mainland among a radical few of the southern Muslims. Some have called for secession, and fewer still have, in the past, taken up armed insurgency.

The most notable of these insurgent groups was known as the Pattani United Liberation Organisation (PULO), active in the 1970s and 1980s, whose goal was the formation of an independent Muslim state. In 1998 joint efforts by the Thai and Malaysian governments effectively crippled PULO and the separatist movement as a whole, but economic and cultural factors continue to feed the sort of residual feelings of dissatisfaction that have led to more-recent spurts of violence (see boxed text, p636).

Proper etiquette in Thai Muslim communities is simple and predictable. Islam forbids the consumption of pork and alcohol – obvious public intoxication is frowned upon (and thus asking for a beer and *muu* – pork – in an obviously Muslim restaurant will not be productive or polite). In very conservative communities, multigender groups will be split off into separate rooms upon arrival. Men and women will be reunited as they depart.

Just as is the case when visiting wat, mosques will not permit entry to those in shorts or shoes. Women should not wear short skirts, sleeveless tops or any particularly revealing clothing; simply think conservative. Unless invited to do so, avoid entering the mosque's main prayer hall as this is a sacred space intended for Muslims. Do not bring cameras and remember to turn off mobile phones.

Friday is the day of the Sabbath, with religious activities culminating between 11am and 2pm. Locals may be too busy on Friday for visitors and most restaurants close down during this time.

You'll find Yala's best beds at rock-bottom prices at the **Chang Lee Hotel** (☎ 0 7324 4597; fax 0 7324 4599; 318 Th Siriros; r from 300B; ♿ ♿). The rooms here are plush and come with carpets and TV, while facilities include a business centre, karaoke nightclub and coffee shop. The downer is it's not central (a 15-minute walk from the train station). If it's empty, ask about promotions and bargain. Rooms

can go for as low as 300B, which is a damn good deal.

Yala is hardly a culinary destination, though there are a couple of decent eateries in town. Chinese restaurants proliferate along Th Ratakit and Th Ranong. The Muslim day market, in the northern part of town, sells fresh fruit and vegetables; try to wear modest clothing around here to avoid

offending and to help blend in. Look for delicious seafood restaurants, where your meal is cooked right on the sidewalk in front of your table, around Th Pitipakdee and Th Sribumrung. Ratchapat night market, south of town about 1km (turn left at the clock tower), is the place to head to for cheap eats (a *túk-túk* there costs 25B).

Daily buses between Bangkok and Yala (500B to 900B, 15 hours) leave from Th Phumachip in Yala, a side road off Th Siriros, about 250m south of Th Kotchaseni 1. Buses to Hat Yai (100B, 2½ hours) stop several times a day on Th Siriros, outside the Prudential TS Life office. Across the street is the stop for other short- to medium-distance buses north.

Daily train destinations from Yala include Bangkok (1st class 1500B, 2nd class 500B to 800B) and Sungai Kolok (3rd class 50B).

## PATTANI PROVINCE

### PATTANI

ปัตตานี

pop 44,800

Pattani is a sprawling, casual town and, while it conceals an interesting past, there's little of interest here for the traveller except its access to nearby beaches.

With a history of independence, Pattani has never quite adjusted to being a part of the Kingdom of Thailand. Pattani was the centre of an independent principality that included Yala and Narathiwat. Today Pattani is a predominantly Muslim town that has traditionally had more in common with its Malaysian neighbours in the south than the central government in Bangkok. The Portuguese established a trading post here in 1516, the Japanese in 1605, the Dutch in 1609 and the British in 1612. During these times Pattani's allegiances shifted several times and rebellions were not uncommon. This fierce independence continues and is a driving force behind some of the problems that are currently plaguing Thailand's southern region (see the travel warning on p636).

Several banks are found along the south-eastern end of Th Pipit, near the intersection of Th Naklua Yarang. For medical services try the **Pattani Hospital** (☎ 0 7332 3411-14; Th Nong Jik). The **police station** (☎ 0 7334 9018; Th Pattani Phirom) is central.

### Sights

Pattani has some of the prettiest beaches in southern Thailand – space constraints have allowed us to list only our favourites here, but there are plenty more. Ask around in town or buy a local map at any convenience store. Out of respect for the local Muslim culture, women should wear T-shirts over their swimsuits when at the beach or swimming.

The only beach near town is at **Laem Tachi**. Although it has 11km of white sand, it is far from the best beach in the area (if you want to visit anyway, take a boat taxi from the Pattani pier or Yaring Amphoe). Instead we'd suggest heading out along Rte 4136 for 53km. **Hat Wasukri** (Chaihat Ban Patatimaw) is a beautiful white-sandy spot with plenty of shade. You'll find more of the same along stretches of deserted beach further down Rte 4136, just a few kilometres before you reach the Narathiwat provincial border.

### Sleeping & Eating

A night market with plenty of food vendors convenes on Th Charoenpradit nightly; another one lies along Soi Thepiwat 2.

**Sakom Bay Resort** (☎ 0 1277 1202; Hat Thepha; r 300-700B; ♿) This resort, which often has English speakers on the staff, might be the best choice in Pattani for budget travellers. Rooms in a hotel-style building are cheapest and there are comfortable air-con bungalows. An open-air restaurant that does seafood completes the offerings here.

**CS Pattani Hotel** (☎ 0 7333 5093/4; cspattani@cscoms.com; 299 Muu 4 Th Nong Jik; r from 1100B; ♿ ♿) If you are spending the night in Pattani, you might as well enjoy it. The CS Pattani features a gorgeous colonial lobby, two pools, an excellent restaurant, a sauna and steam room...the list goes on. Breakfast is included. Ask about discounts.

### Getting There & Around

Sáwngtháew go anywhere in town for 15B per person. Daily buses to Bangkok depart from the small lot beside a petrol station near the CS Pattani Hotel – call ☎ 0 7334 8816 for ticket purchase and reservations. The trip is 15 to 16 hours and costs between 600B and 1500B, depending on the fanciness of the bus – if amenities like bathrooms and reclining seats matter, ask what kind of bus you're paying for, otherwise you'll likely be thrown on the first to depart.

## NARATHIWAT PROVINCE

### NARATHIWAT

นราธิวาส

pop 44,200

Sitting on the banks of the Bang Nara River, the provincial capital is a friendly town that exudes the sort of charisma that many modern Thai cities are leaving behind in the name of modernisation.

Some of the Sino-Portuguese buildings lining the riverfront are over a century old and you are as likely to hear Yawi, a local dialect, as Malay and Thai spoken around town. If you are making a visa run for the Malaysian border 1½ hours south, this town is a more favourable place to stay overnight than the rough and tumble border town of Sungai Kolok.

The security situation in this part of the country (see the travel warning on p636) has suffocated the little tourism that this region used to see. Be sure to check the latest situation before travelling here and take necessary precautions.

Narathiwat is right on the sea, and some of the prettiest beaches on southern Thailand's eastern coast stretch between it and Pattani – see p639 for more information. Just north of town is a small Thai-Muslim fishing village at the mouth of the Bang Nara river, lined with the large, painted fishing boats called *reua kaw-lae*, which are peculiar to Narathiwat and Pattani. Near the fishing village is **Hat Narathat**, a 5km-long sandy beach, which serves as a kind of public park for locals, with outdoor seafood restaurants, tables and umbrellas.

It's not very fancy, but **Ao Manao Resort** (☎ 0 7351 3640; bungalows 250-400B), located 7km south of town, features large, super-clean cement cottages in a small compound. It's only about 400m from the beach. Consider calling ahead, as it might be hard to find staff, especially in the low season. Nearby is a large batik shop selling painted fabric wall hangings that are this region's speciality.

At the other end of the scale, the **Imperial Narathiwat** (☎ 0 7351 5041; www.imperialhotels.com/narathiwat; 228 Th Pichitbamrung; r 1200-3000B; 🚗 🚶) is the town's new posh option and includes all the goodies you'd expect from a top-end hotel, including overly attentive staff and very comfy finishings.

Chow down at the night market off Th Chamroonnara behind the Bang Nara Hotel. There's also a cluster of food stalls on Th Saphaphisai at Th Puphapugdee serving inexpensive noodle dishes.

At **Ang Mo** (cnr Th Puphapugdee & Th Chamroonnara; dishes 30-80B; 🍴 lunch & dinner), you know the food must be good, because it's packed every night. The Thai food is cheap but tasty, and you can point to the displayed dishes.

**Kopiitiam** (dishes 30-100B; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) serves breakfast, snacks and light meals – try the refreshing fruit frappes or the good selection of coffee and teas. It's a tiny place, with just four small tables.

Air-con buses to Bangkok and Phuket leave from two separate small shop terminals on Th Suriyapradit, south of town a few hundred metres past the police station. The buses to Phuket (475B, 12 hours) originate in Sungai Kolok, pass Narathiwat three times daily (7am, 9am and 6.30pm) and continue via Pattani, Hat Yai, Songkhla, Trang, Krabi and Pha-Ngan. Buses to Bangkok (from 650B) run four times a day. You can buy tickets at the terminal or on the bus.

Narathiwat is easy to navigate on foot. If you don't feel like walking, motorcycle taxis will take you around for 15B to 30B, depending on the distance.

### SUNGAI KOLOK

ลำห้วยโคลก

pop 40,500

Thailand's Wild West border town is a dusty spot that's more than a little rough around the edges. As the main southern coastal gateway between Malaysia and Thailand, Sungai Kolok oozes seediness and the main industries here revolve around catering to a weekend crowd of Malaysian men looking for sex.

Most of the hotels here cater to the 'by the hour' market. If you must stay the night in town, it's well worth shelling out a few extra baht to get away from the short-time trade scene. Some places in Sungai Kolok will take Malaysian ringgit as well as Thai baht for food or accommodation.

The best middle-of-the-road option in Sungai Kolok is probably the **Grand Garden Hotel** (☎ 0 7361 3600; gghotel@cscoms.com; 66 Soi, 3 Th Pratchatiwat; r from 585-1020B; 🍴 🚶). It features fine, clean, modern rooms that are well maintained and quite comfortable. There's a small pool outside and karaoke inside.

Three daily air-con buses make the 18-hour run to Bangkok (from 750B). The first bus leaves around 11.30am.

To Phuket (520B), buses head off at 6am, 8am and 5.30pm, and stop in Krabi (410B). These buses leave from Th Wongwiwat, west of the town centre. Buses to Krabi or Surat Thani go through Hat Yai first.

The border is about 1km from the centre of Sungai Kolok or the train station. Transport around town is by motorcycle taxi – it's 20B for a ride to the border. Coming from Malaysia, just follow the old train tracks to your right or, if looking for the town, turn left at the first junction and head for the high-rises.

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