

Southwestern Gulf Coast



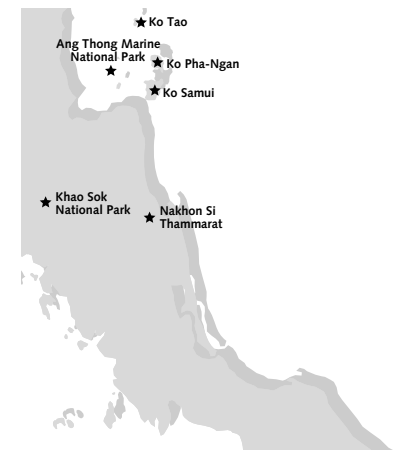
This stunning coast features a Thailand holiday trifecta: Ko Samui, Ko Pha-Ngan and Ko Tao. This family of spectacular islands lure millions of tourists every year with their powder-soft sands and emerald waters. Ko Samui is the oldest brother, with a business-minded attitude towards vacation. High-class resorts operate with Swiss efficiency as uniformed butlers cater to every whim. Ko Pha-Ngan is the slacker middle child with tangled dreadlocks and a penchant for hammock-lazing and all-night parties. Baby Ko Tao has plenty of spirit and spunk – offering high-adrenaline activities including world-class diving and snorkelling.

A thin archipelago of pin-sized islets creates a small barrier between these three busy destinations and the quieter beachside towns along the coast. Known as Ang Thong Marine National Park, this ethereal realm of greens and blues offers some of the most picture-perfect moments in the entire kingdom. As the rugged coastline swerves south, the ancient rainforest of Khao Sok rises up into the clouds as it dominates the inner terrain and drips with gushing waterfalls and exotic wildlife. Urban Nakhon Si Thammarat buzzes with booming trade and religious devotees.

Thailand's southwestern gulf coast also has the kingdom's most intriguing social and religious dynamic. The region is a fascinating crucible of Buddhist and Muslim cultures, where you're as likely to wake up to the Muzennin's call to prayer as you are to see a monk wandering in saffron robes. Unfortunately, at the time of research, tensions between Muslim separatists and Thai authorities meant that the far southernmost provinces were experiencing some civil unrest.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Cavorting with a school-bus-sized whale shark off the coast of **Ko Tao** (p230),
- Praying to the party gods while howling at the full moon on **Ko Pha-Ngan** (p211)
- Kayaking between jagged jungle islands in **Ang Thong Marine Park** (p240)
- Discovering all the perks of a world-class resort on **Ko Samui** (p198)
- Traipsing through the veritable Jurassic Park of **Khao Sok National Park** (p244)
- Stepping off the tourist trail and practicing your Thai in the temple town of **Nakhon Si Thammarat** (p246)



■ DRY SEASON: DECEMBER-APRIL

■ WET SEASON: MAY-NOVEMBER



Climate

The best time to visit islands around Samui is during the hot, dry season from February to April. From May to October, during the southwest monsoon, it can rain intermittently, and from October to January, during the northeast monsoon, there can be strong winds. However, many travellers have reported sunny weather (and fewer crowds) in September and October. November tends to get some of the rain that affects the east coast of Malaysia at this time.

The overall lack of tourism south of the Samui archipelago is mostly because the southwestern gulf's best season (climatically) runs from April to October – the exact opposite of Thailand's typical tourist season.

National Parks

There are many national parks in the region; three stand out as particularly stunning. Ang Thong Marine Park (p240), the setting for the perfect beach in the movie *The Beach* (although much of the movie was actually filmed on Ko Phi-Phi), is a breathtaking archipelago with 42 jagged islands. Khao Sok (p244) is a thick, virgin rainforest with surreal numbers of fauna and flora. Khao Luang National Park (p249) is known for its beautiful mountain trails, gushing waterfalls and indigenous wildlife.

KO SAMUI

เกาะสมุย

pop 45,800

The Gulf Coast's answer to the Andaman's Phuket (that's 'p-h' as in 'p'), Ko Samui is the ultimate pleasure island, boasting crystal waters and bleach-blond sands. Its undeniable appeal has captured the hearts of its visitors, and with each passing year there are newer resorts and higher price tags to keep up with the insatiable demand. This rampant development has transformed much of the coastline into a continuous string of bungalows, sending seclusion-seekers to quieter islands as they say 'phuket' to Samui (that's 'p-h' as in 'f').

Once upon a time, the upside-down 'Q'-shaped island was settled by Chinese merchants from Hainan Island, who earned their keep by cultivating the millions of indigenous coconut palms. These unique roots have encouraged an island-specific culture that remains hidden beneath the glossy holiday veneer. Although three million palm trees

remain, the island's number one industry is tourism. Today, there are thousands of different rooms and bungalows, from twig huts to rambling palaces. You can eat foie gras on fine china or grab a bag of roasted crickets at a local food stand. Try a cheap massage in a shaded shack along the beach, or pamper yourself silly in a lavish spa. Whatever your vacation type may be, Samui tries its best to satisfy.

Orientation

Ko Samui is quite large – the ring road around the island is almost 100km in total. The island has been blessed with picturesque beaches on all four sides. The most crowded are Hat Chaweng (Map p194) and Hat Lamai (Map p197), both on the eastern side of the island.

The beaches on the island's northern coast, which include Choeng Mon, Mae Nam, Bo Phut, Bang Po, and Big Buddha Beach (Bang Rak), are starting to become quite busy as well, but the prices are still acceptable and secluded nooks can still be found. For a quieter experience, try the secluded beaches along the southern coast, and western shore south of Na Thon.

The *Siam Map Company Samui Guide Map* is fantastic, free, and easily found throughout the island.

Information

BOOKSHOPS

There are several places around the island where you can snag a paperback to read in your hammock. Many hotels also have libraries or book trades.

Bookazine (Map p194; ☎ 0 7741 3616; Hat Chaweng; ☎ 10am-9pm) Chain outlet selling new books and magazines.

Saai Bookshop (Map p194; ☎ 0 7741 3847-9; Hat Chaweng; ☎ 10am-11pm) Friendly small bookstore selling new and used books, and magazines in several languages.

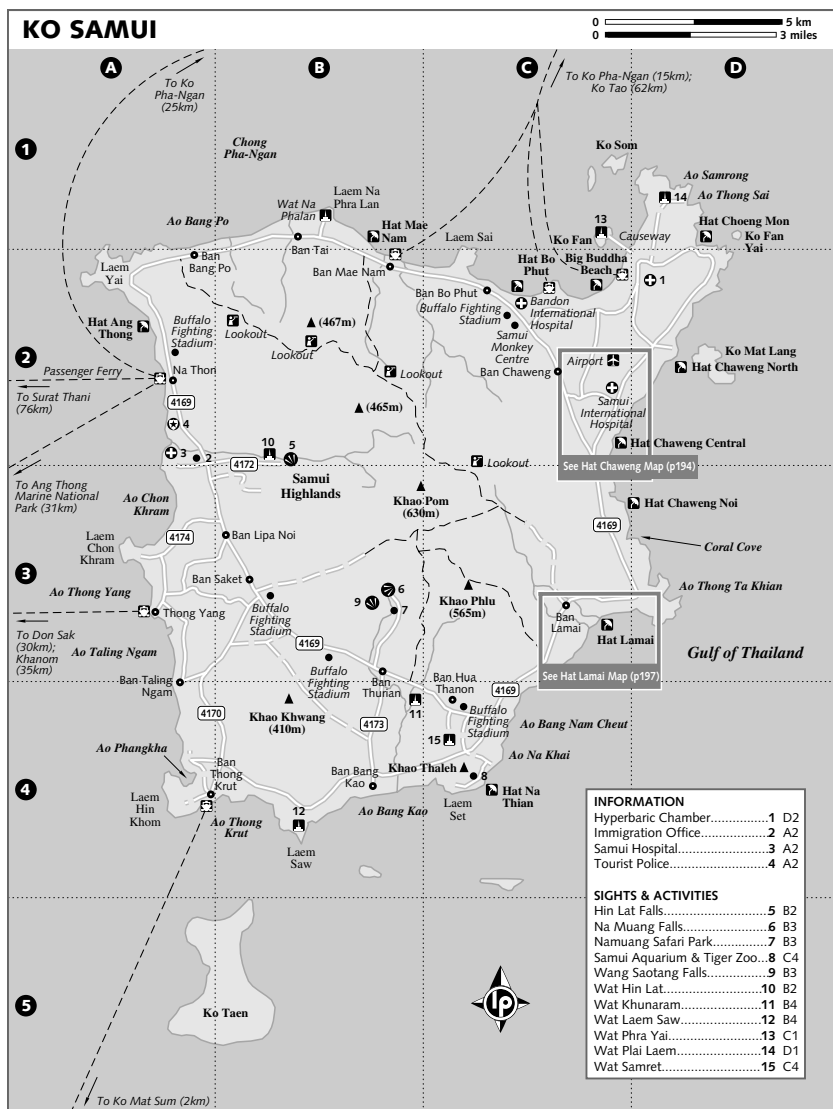
EMERGENCY

The Samui International Hospital (see p193) has a 24-hour ambulance service.

Tourist police (Map p192; ☎ 0 7742 1281, emergency 1155) Based at the south of Na Thon.

IMMIGRATION OFFICES

During high season, the Bangkok Samui Hospital (see p193) also has an immigration booth and can offer small extensions on tourist visas.



Immigration Office (Map p192; ☎ 0 7742 1069; ☎ 8.30am-noon & 1-4.30pm Mon-Fri) Offers 10-day tourist visa extensions. Located about 2km south of Na Thon.

INTERNET ACCESS

There are countless places all over the island for internet access, even at the less popu-

lar beaches. Prices range from 1B to 2B per minute. Keep an eye out for restaurants that offer complementary wi-fi service.

INTERNET RESOURCES

There are several useful internet sites that cover sleeping, transport and sights on Ko Samui.

Sawadee.com (www.samui.sawadee.com)

Tourism Association of Koh Samui (www.samui.tourism.com)

MEDICAL SERVICES

Ko Samui has four private hospitals, all near the Tesco-Lotus supermarket on the east coast where most of the tourists tend to gather. The government hospital near Na Thon (Map p192) has seen significant improvements in the last couple years but the service is still a bit grim since funding is based on the number of Samui's legal residents (which doesn't take into account a heap of illegal Burmese workers).

Bangkok Samui Hospital (Map p194; ☎ 0 7742 9500, emergency 0 7742 9555; Hat Chaweng) Your best bet for just about any medical problem.

Hyperbaric Chamber (Map p192; ☎ 0 7742 7427; Big Buddha Beach) The island's dive medicine specialists.

Samui International Hospital (Map p194; ☎ 0 7742 2272, fax 0 7723 0049; www.sih.co.th; Hat Chaweng) Emergency ambulance service available 24 hours and credit cards are accepted. Near the Amari Resort.

MONEY

Changing money isn't a problem on the east and north coasts, and in Na Thon. Multiple banks and foreign-exchange booths offer daily exchange services and there's an ATM every couple of hundred metres.

POST

In several parts of the island there are privately run post office branches charging a small commission. You can almost always leave your stamped mail with your accommodation.

Main post office (Na Thon) Near the TAT office; not always reliable.

TELEPHONE

Many private phone offices around the island charge an additional rate above the usual Communications Authority of Thailand (CAT) prices. Mobile-phone service works well throughout the island.

CAT Office (Na Thon; ☎ 7am-10pm) Provides economical international phone service at the main post office.

TOURIST INFORMATION

The Siam Map Company puts out quarterly booklets including a *Spa Guide*, *Dining Guide*, and an annual directory, which lists virtually thousands of companies and hotels on the island. *Essential* (www.essential-samui) is a

pocket-size pamphlet focused on promoting Samui's diverse activities. *Samui Guide* looks more like a magazine and features mostly restaurants and attractions. Another booklet, *Passport*, proffers insider information about each beach, and there are coupons and postcards stuffed at the back.

TAT office (☎ 0 7742 0504; Na Thon) At the northern end of Na Thon; is friendly, helpful and has handy brochures and maps.

TRAVEL AGENCIES

Basically every resort and bungalow operation has travel services that can book you tours and transport. Booking directly with a tour operator will usually save you a bit of baht.

Asia Travel (☎ 0 7723 6120; Th Thawi Ratchaphakdi, Na Thon; ☎ 8.30am-6pm Mon-Sat) Deals especially with airline tickets.

Dangers & Annoyances

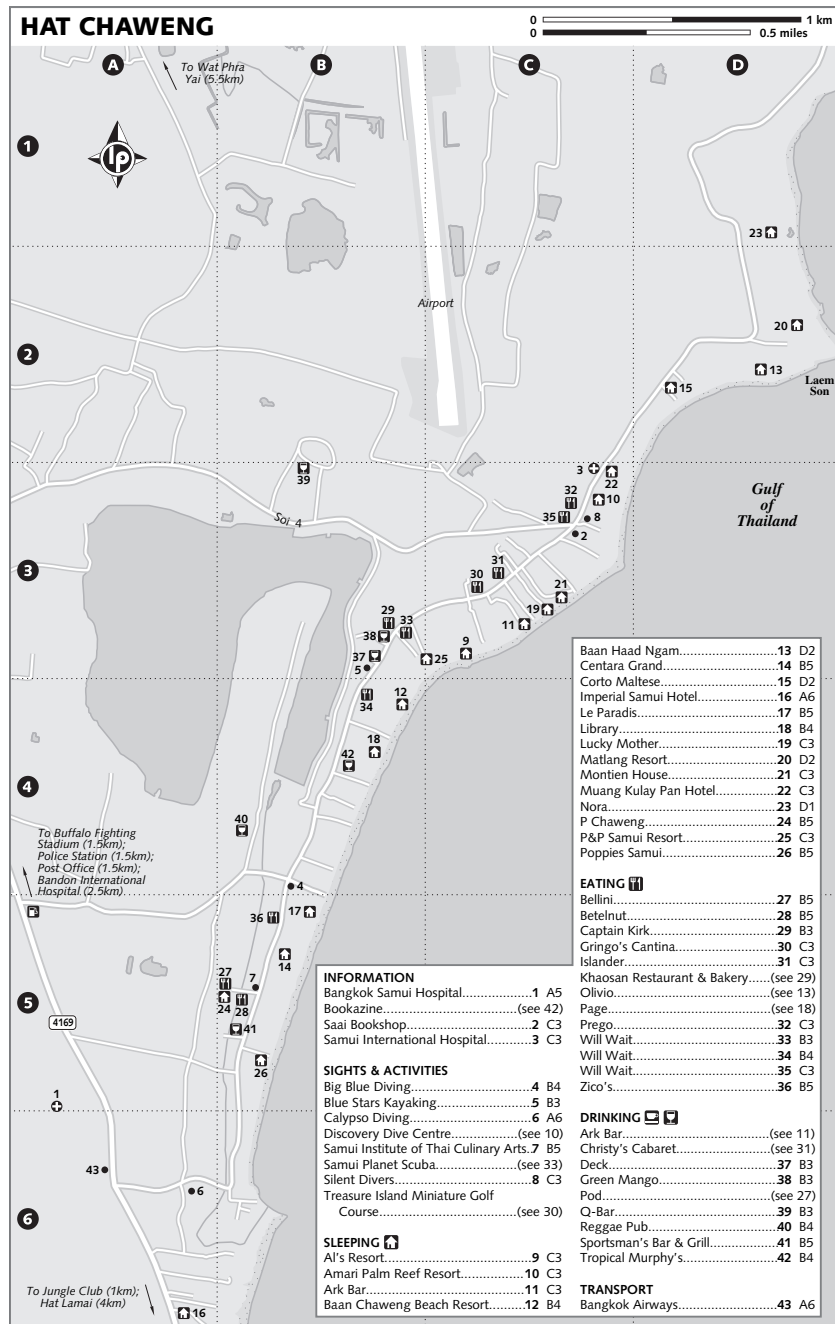
As on Phuket, the rate of road accident fatalities on Samui is quite high. This is mainly due to the large number of tourists who rent motorcycles only to find out that the winding roads, sudden tropical rains, and frenzied traffic can be lethal. If you decide to rent a motorcycle, protect yourself by wearing a helmet, and ask for one that has a plastic visor. Shoes and appropriate clothing are also a must when driving – jeans will save you from skinning your knees if you wipe out. Even if you escape unscathed from a riding experience, we've heard reports that some shops will claim that you damaged your rental and will try to extort you for some serious cash. Car rental is another option on the island – we suggest leasing a vehicle from a reputable and internationally recognized name brand.

Lately, jet-ski rentals are the newest avatar of the motorbike scam. Incidents of injury are high on these water scooters, and leasers will claim that you damaged their goods in order to collect some extra money.

Another scam that's rapidly gaining popularity involves timeshares. It's best to avoid anyone who approaches you offering a vacation deal that seems too good to be true.

Beach vendors are registered with the government and should all be wearing a numbered jacket. No peddler should cause an incessant disturbance – seek assistance if this occurs.

Theft is a continuing problem, particularly around the more populated parts of the island



such as Chaweng and Lamai. If you're staying in a beach bungalow, consider depositing your valuables with the management while on excursions around the island or while you're swimming at the beach. Consider asking for a receipt listing the items stored with the staff.

Lastly, never give your passport to anyone as collateral. If a company demands identification, give them your driver's license or any other form of ID. A fraudulent operation can try to extort money from you, or track you down when filing for a new passport.

TRANSPORT

There are over 400 registered taxis on Samui, which means that the competition for passengers is fierce. Unlike Bangkok, cabs will refuse to use their meters so you must *always* negotiate your price before stepping into a cab. A 35B taxi ride in Bangkok will probably set you back about 350B on Samui. It's a flagrant rip-off, but there's not much you can do other than taking a sörng-täa-ou (also spelt säwngthäew; pick-up truck) instead.

Take care when making train and bus reservations: bookings are sometimes not made at all, or the bus turns out to be far inferior to the one expected. In another scam involving air tickets, agents claim that the economy-class seating is fully booked and force tourists to book in business class – when the customer boards the plane, they find out that they've been allotted an economy seat but paid for a business-class ticket.

Sights

Even though the island has over 500 resorts, there are still some interesting things hidden among the island's three million coconut palms.

Ko Samui is one of Thailand's premiere beach destinations and there's a reason why **Hat Chaweng** is the most popular spot – it's the longest and most beautiful beach on the island. The sand is powder soft, and the water is surprisingly clear, considering the number of boats and bathers. Picture opps are best from the southern part of the beach, with stunning views of the hilly headland to the north.

At the south end of **Hat Lamai**, the second-largest beach, you'll find the infamous **Hin-Ta and Hin-Yai** (Map p197) stone formations (also known as Grandfather and Grandmother Rocks). These genitalia-shaped rocks provide endless mirth to giggling Thai tourists.

Hua Thanon, just beyond, is home to a vibrant Muslim community, and their anchorage of high-bowed fishing vessels is a veritable gallery of intricate designs.

Although the **northern beaches** have coarser sand and aren't as striking as the beaches in the east, they have a laid-back vibe and stellar views of Ko Pha-Ngan. **Bo Phut** stands out with its charming Fisherman's Village; a collection of narrow Chinese shophouses that have been transformed into trendy resorts and boutique hotels.

Many visitors spend the day on the wild, rugged beaches of **Ang Thong Marine National Park** (p240). This stunning archipelago might just have the most beautiful islands in all of Thailand.

WATERFALLS

At 30m, **Na Muang Falls** (Map p192) is the tallest waterfall on Samui and lies in the centre of the island about 12km southeast of Na Thon. The water cascades over ethereal purple rocks, and there's a great pool for swimming at the base. This is the most scenic – and somewhat less frequented – of Samui's falls. There are two other waterfalls in the vicinity; a smaller waterfall called **Na Muang 2**, and recently, improved road conditions have also made it possible to visit the high drop at **Wang Saotong Falls**. These chutes are just north of the ring road near Hua Thanon.

Hin Lat Falls (Map p192), near Na Thon, is worth visiting if you have an afternoon to kill before taking a boat back to the mainland. After a mildly strenuous hike over streams and boulders, reward yourself with a dip in the pool at the bottom of the falls. Keep an eye out for the Buddhist temple that posts signs with spiritual words of moral guidance and enlightenment. Sturdy shoes are recommended.

WAT

For temple enthusiasts, **Wat Laem Sor** (Map p192), at the southern end of Samui near Ban Phang Ka, has an interesting, highly venerated old Srivijaya-style stupa. At Samui's northern end, on a small rocky island linked by a causeway, is **Wat Phra Yai** (Temple of the Big Buddha; Map p192). Erected in 1972, the modern Buddha (sitting in the Mara posture) stands 15m high and makes an alluring silhouette against the tropical sky and sea. Nearby, a new temple,

DVDs with Thai cooking instruction are also available so you can practise at home.

The **Health Oasis Resort** (p205) offers one- to eight-day courses and certification in Thai and Swedish massage, aromatherapy, reiki, meditation and yoga for 5500B to 9000B. The length and tuition of all courses can be adjusted to suit the individual.

Samui for Children

If seawater and sand castles just aren't enough to keep the tykes entertained, there are plenty of family-friendly activities around the island.

At Choeng Mon, there's a new creation called **'football golf'** (☎ 08 9771 7498) where you 'putt' your football into a trash-bin-sized hole. It's great for the kids and each game (300B) comes with a complimentary soft drink. It's a par 66.

Namuang Safari Park (Map p192; ☎ 0 7742 4098), near Na Muang Falls, has safari options and packages galore. Adventure tours (from 900B) vary in length and can include elephant trekking, monkey shows, 4WD rides, and even a visit to a rubber plantation to drain the trees (now *that's* excitement). Prices include hotel transfer.

In the same vein, **Samui Aquarium & Tiger Zoo** (Map p192; ☎ 0 7742 4017; orchid@sawadee.com; admission 350B; ☎ 9am-6pm) has picture-worthy aquariums and tigers, as well as a large aviary. Nancy and Woody, two 'crazy' otters, hang out and frolic in a swimming pool. You can call for transport.

Sleeping

There is an overwhelming array of sleeping options on Ko Samui. We've compiled a lengthy list of our favourite choices on the island, but this by no means exhaustive. Also check out the advice on booking online (p382).

The breed of no-frills backpackers is an elusive species as prices continue to rise relentlessly. Another factor to consider is the island's ridiculously expensive taxis. Even if you score a slice of heaven for under 800B, you could pay well over 300B to get there.

Accommodation on Samui is sort of like riding an airplane – the person on your right probably paid more for the flight, and the person on your left paid less. There are people up in 1st class who definitely forked over a significant heap of dough, while others cashed in their frequent flyer points, or maybe they are

friends with the pilot. Prices on the island are at the whim of each establishment – unforeseen crowds can make tariffs skyrocket, advance bookings could be double the walk-in price, or vice versa. Do your research if you're trying to get the biggest bang for your baht (and it never hurts to bargain).

If you're looking to splurge, there is definitely no shortage of top-end resorts sporting extravagant bungalows, charming spas, private infinity pools, and first-class dining; see the boxed text, opposite for some of our picks. In the same boxed text we've also compiled a list of our favourite accommodations at prices that won't force you to mortgage your house. Bo Phut, in the north, has a fantastic assortment of inexpensive boutique-style lodging. Chaweng and Lamai, with pumping nightlife scenes, are worthy options if you're looking to save on transport.

Private villas have become quite popular in recent years. Rental companies often advertise in the various tourist booklets that circulate on the island.

This large section is organised as follows: we start on the popular east coast with Chaweng and Lamai, then move anti-clockwise around the island covering the smaller beaches.

HAT CHAWENG

Packed end-to-end with hotels and bungalows, this beach is the eye of the tourist storm. The main street in central Chaweng feels like a nondescript soi in the heart of Bangkok. Despite the chaos, there's a striking stretch of beach, and most resorts are well protected from street noise. High demand has meant inflated prices relative to the rest of the island. Budget options have almost completely disappeared, and mid-range stays are the next ones to go out the door. At the south end of the beach, a small headland separates a sliver of sand (called Chaweng Noi) from the rest of the hustle.

Budget

P Chaweng (Map p194; ☎ 0 7723 0684; r 500-800B; ☎) This cheapie doesn't even pretend to be close to the beach, but the pink-tiled rooms are spacious and squeaky clean (minus a couple of bumps and bruises on the wooden furniture). Pick a room facing away from the street – it seems a tad too easy for someone to slip through an open window and pilfer

SAMUI'S TOP RESORTS

Taking a Splurge

There's no shortage of places on Samui willing to help you live the rock-star lifestyle. If the five-digit hotel prices don't give your accountant a heart attack, then check out the following.

Anantara (p205; Bo Phut)

Centara Grand (p201, Chaweng)

Four Seasons (p205; Laem Yai)

Library (p201, Chaweng)

Rocky Resort (p202; Lamai)

Sila Evason Hideaway (p203; Choeng Mon)

Tongsai Bay (p203; Choeng Mon)

Villa Nalinnadda (p202; Lamai)

White House (p203; Choeng Mon)

Zazen (p204; Bo Phut)

The Best of the Rest

Okay, chances are you're not looking to spend a billion baht on one night's worth of accommodation. So we've put together a list of our favourite spots on Samui that won't require you to sell your children on e-Bay. These options have rooms for under 2000B per night.

Jungle Club (below; Chaweng)

L'Hacienda (p204; Bo Phut)

Red House (p204; Bo Phut)

Wiesenthal (p206; Taling Ngam)

your stuff. P Chaweng shouldn't be confused with the so-so rooms at Bann Chaweng, one street over, which sits betwixt several rowdy late-night gay clubs.

Matlang Resort (Map p194; ☎ 0 7723 0468; www.matlangresort.com; bungalow 400-2000B; ☎ ☎) Matlang is a camp of several dozen bungalows dotted along a red brick path that winds through a shrubby garden. Older bungalows are made from charming vertical slats of timber with a thin skin of thatching on the roof. This budget operation occupies one of the prettiest stretches of sand in Chaweng.

Lucky Mother (Map p194; ☎ 0 7723 0931; bungalows 500-1500B; ☎) First, let's take a moment to giggle at the resort's name. OK, now we can appreciate the old utilitarian huts – a dying breed in Chaweng. For those wanting hot showers and air-con, modern hotel rooms are also available, but most of them look out onto a parking lot.

Jungle Club (Map p194; ☎ 0 1894 2327; bungalows 600-2900B, villas 3500B; ☎ ☎ ☎) The perilous drive up the slithering dirt road is totally worthwhile once you get a load of the awesome views from the top. This isolated mountain getaway is a huge hit among locals and tourists alike. There's a relaxed back-to-nature vibe – guests chill around the stunning horizon pool or

tuck themselves away for a catnap under the canopied roofs of an open-air *sāh-lah* (often spelt *sala*; covered hall or resting place). You'll be talking about Jungle Club long after you've returned home from your trip. Call ahead for a pick-up – you don't want to spend your precious jungle holiday in a body cast.

Midrange

P&P Samui Resort (Map p194; ☎ 0 7742 2540; fax 0 7742 2324; r 1300-2000B; ☎) P&P is a pretty good choice for those doing a Chaweng beach holiday on a budget. More work has gone into sprucing up the exteriors, but the tiled rooms remain very clean and come with fridges. If you can, pop into a couple of different rooms before putting down your bags – some of the air-con units emit a faint unidentifiable smell.

Ark Bar (Map p194; ☎ 0 7742 2047; www.ark-bar.com; bungalows 1600-2500B; ☎ ☎) You'll find two of every creature at Ark Bar – hardcore partiers, chilled out hippies, teenagers, 40-somethings, even Canadians. Sky-blue motel units run along the thin verdant strip connecting the Bangkokian streets of Chaweng to the colourful restaurant on the beach. Despite our concerted effort not to use prison lingo when describing holiday destinations, we

suggest getting a room in the A- or C-block for less noise.

Corto Maltese (Map p194; ☎ 0 7723 0041; www.corto-samui.com; r 2000-4000B, tr 3000B; 🏠 🍷 🍷) Owned by a Frenchman, this place looks like it just fell out of a comic book – maybe *Tintin and the Mystery of Surprisingly Cheap Accommodation in Chaweng?* Actually, the resort draws its name from a comic by Hugo Pratt. Rooms have monikers such as ‘Pandora & Esmeralda’, or ‘Hugo & Flamingo’, and are outfitted with cheerful pastels, wooden moulding, and the occasional stone feature. ‘Corto’ has a loft and a honey-coloured adobe thing going’ on.

Montien House (Map p194; ☎ 0 7742 2169; www.montienhouse.com; bungalows incl breakfast 2200-6000B; 🏠 🍷 🍷) Semidetached bungalows permeate the thick jungle-garden strewn with orchids and lanterns, while motel rooms linger further afield. The pool area has tonnes of beach chairs making it a great place to ogle unfortunate tan lines on Chaweng beach.

Al’s Resort (Map p194; ☎ 0 7742 2154; www.alsresort.com; r 2750-6500B; 🏠 🍷 🍷) Go for a room that starts with a ‘2’ – they’re swathed in black and white, and are nothing short of chic. The resort is particularly sexy in the evening when golden moonlighting accents the sleek wooden walkways that cut symmetrical lines through the Zen-like austerity. The staff isn’t big on smiles, which is a shame since everything else is quite charming.

Top End

Baan Chaweng Beach Resort (Map p194; ☎ 0 7742 2403; www.baanchawengbeachresort.com; bungalows 3800-7000B; 🏠 🍷 🍷) A pleasant option for those who want top-end luxury without the hefty bill, Baan Chaweng is one of the new kids on the block and is keeping prices relatively low. The immaculate rooms are painted in various shades of peach and pear, with teak furnishings that feel both modern and traditional.

Muang Kulay Pan Hotel (Map p194; ☎ 0 7723 0849-51; www.kulaypan.com; r incl breakfast 4725-13,540B; 🏠 🍷 🍷) No, that’s not a rip in the wallpaper – it’s all part of the design concept. The architect cites a fusion between Zen and Thai conceits, but we think the décor is indefinable – some beds are upholstered with logs, others have batik duvets and lie close to the ground under an opened parasol. Dramatic black-and-white photographs and simple bamboo-inspired murals cover the walls. The

charming grounds have been purposefully neglected to lend an additional sense of chaos to this unique resort.

Imperial Samui Hotel (Map p194; ☎ 0 7742 0220-36; www.imperialhotels.com; bungalows 5300-15,000B; 🏠 🍷 🍷) Built on a slope in the middle of quieter Chaweng Noi, this place is white adobe galore with accents of baby-blue wood finishing (à la Mediterranean). The restaurant and lounge area overflow with giant cushions and the rambling gardens burst with colour. There’s a dash of rustic elegance here, but it might not be enough to warrant the hefty price tag.

Nora (Map p194; ☎ 0 7741 3999; www.norabeachresort.com; bungalows 6000-25,000B; 🏠 🍷 🍷) Nora is another large-scale resort resting along Chaweng’s beige sand. If you’re gonna drop the big bucks on a private pool villa, we suggest going with one of the more opulent resorts in Choeng Mon, but the lower-priced rooms are worth the baht – they’re charming and spacious, and you have access to the wide array of on-site amenities. Keep an eye out for discount deals.

Baan Haad Ngam (Map p194; ☎ 0 7723 1500; 0 7723 1520; www.baanhaadngam.com; bungalows 6400-14,000B; 🏠 🍷 🍷) Vibrant Baan Haad Ngam shuns the usual teak and tan – every exterior is painted in an interesting shade of green – like radioactive celery. It’s sassy, classy and a great choice if you’ve got the dime.

Le Paradis (Map p194; ☎ 0 7723 9041; fax 0 7723 9040; www.leparadisresort.com; bungalows 7000-10,100B; 🏠 🍷 🍷) Formerly the Princess Village, this silent sanctuary is still fit for royalty. Stunning Ayuthaya-period stilt homes crouch among lily ponds and lazy palms. For those with modern inclinations, there’s a new set of villas sporting never-ending bathrooms and cheerful interiors. Paradis, indeed.

Poppies Samui (Map p194; ☎ 0 7742 2419; www.poppiessamui.com; r 7000-11,000B; 🏠 🍷 🍷) After passing through the marble lobby, a small staircase suddenly opens onto a juicy tropical paradise that feels miles away from the commotion in Chaweng. A small collection of charming bungalows lies hidden in the brush – only the opulent arched roofs poke through from between the patchwork of climbing ferns. The splashes of the swimming pool echo the small waterfall and gurgling stream in the garden. Small presents, such as designer soaps, are placed on the beds during the nightly turndown service.

Centara Grand (Central Samui Beach Resort; Map p194; ☎ 0 7723 0500; www.centralhotelsresorts.com; r 8900-19,500B; 🏠 🍷 🍷) This resort has recently undergone a name change, making it even trickier for the Thai employees to pronounce. We suggest they try something like ‘Kid Heaven’ – they’ll avoid the trademark ‘r’ and ‘l’ switcheroo, and everyone will know that it’s Samui’s go-to resort for families. Centara is a massive, manicured compound in the heart of Chaweng, but the palm-filled property is so large that you can safely escape the streetside bustle. Rooms are found in a hotel-like building that is conspicuously Western in theme and décor. Parents can escape to the spa, or one of the four restaurants, and leave the children at the labyrinth of swimming pools under the watchful eye of an inhouse babysitter.

Library (Map p194; ☎ 0 7742 2407; www.thelibrary.name; bungalows 9000-12,000B; 🏠 🍷 🍷) This place is too cool for school, which is ironic since it’s called ‘the Library’. The entire resort is a sparkling white mirage accented with black trimming and slatted curtains. Besides the futuristic iMac computer in each page (rooms are called ‘pages’ here), our favourite feature is the large monochromatic wall art – it glows brightly in the evening and you can adjust the colour depending on your mood. Lifesize statues are engaged in the act of reading, and if you also feel inclined to pick up a book, the on-site library houses an impressive assortment of colourful art and design books. The large rectangular pool is not to be missed – it’s tiled in piercing shades of red, making the term ‘blood-bath’ suddenly seem appealing.

Amari Palm Reef Resort (Map p194; ☎ 0 7742 2015; reservations@palmreef.amari.com; www.amari.com; r & bungalows 9500-11,500B; 🏠 🍷 🍷) Most of the accommodation is housed in a beautiful white-washed hotel complex across the street from the beach. The pricier items are double-decker villas set in a gorgeous garden with plenty of trickling water features. Swimming pools and restaurants abound. Rooms are discounted 45% during low season.

HAT LAMAI

Whether you’re looking to spend 200B, 2000B or 20,000B, Lamai has accommodation to suit every wallet size. This ‘New Chaweng’ is almost as busy as its neighbour up the coast, and while prices are still slightly less expensive, the beach at Chaweng

is undoubtedly nicer. South of Lamai, Hua Thanon is a small, quieter beach with a couple standout resorts.

Budget

New Hut (Map p197; ☎ 0 7723 0437; newhut@hotmail.com; huts 200-500B) New Hut is a rare beachfront cheapie with tiny-but-charming A-frame huts. The wooden structures, including the welcoming restaurant, are covered with layers of thick black paint.

Beer’s House (Map p197; ☎ 0 7723 0467; bungalows 200-550B) These tiny shade-covered bungalows are lined up right along the sand. Some huts have a communal toilet, but all have plenty of room to sling a hammock and laze the day away. People with their own bathroom will be pleased to find freshly retiled surfaces. The lights take a little while to turn on after you flick the switch, so don’t be too hasty when summoning the management.

Sukasem (Map p197; ☎ 0 7742 4119; bungalows 400-800B; 🏠) Facing out on a sandy lot, Sukasem’s sparkling bungalows are great value. There isn’t much atmosphere, however, and some guests might find that there’s a little too much traffic – the main road is a bit close, and heaps of small boats park on the beach out back.

Amity (Map p197; ☎ 0 7742 4084; bungalows 350-1500B; 🏠) Amity offers alluring modern bungalows and a few ramshackle cheapies with shared bathroom – there’s no theme, just a mishmash of accommodation that changes style depending on the price range (we liked the 700B huts). The air-conditioned cottages are a welcome addition to the repertoire.

Sunrise Bungalow (Map p197; ☎ 0 7742 4433; www.sunrisebungalow.com; bungalows 400-1300B; 🏠) Steps away from the awkward giggles at Hin Ta Hin Yai (the island’s infamous genital-shaped rocks), Sunrise offers budget travellers a relaxing place to hang their backpack. The owner is a sixth-generation Samui native.

Midrange

Spa Resort (Map p197; ☎ 0 7723 0855; www.spasamui.com; bungalows 900-3500B; 🏠) This health spa has a bevy of therapeutic programs on offer, and no one seems to mind that the lodging is cheap by Lamai’s standards. Programs include colonics, massage, aqua detox, hypnotherapy and yoga, just to name a few. The bathrooms leave a bit to be desired, but who needs a toilet when you’re doing a week-long

cleansing fast? Accommodation tends to book up quickly, so it's best to reserve in advance (by email). Nonguests are welcome to partake in the programs.

Bill Resort (Map p197; ☎ 0 7741 8870; www.billresort.com; r & bungalows 1000-5500B; 🏠) A tornado of colourful materials and textures, Bill Resort is a jungly spot set on a slope at the south end of Lamai. Don't be shy about wanting to see several types of cottages; some rooms are a bargain, while others are a bit of a rip-off. Ask about the free tours to Bill's nearby 'mountain garden' retreat.

Star Bay Beach & Garden (Map p197; ☎ 0 7742 4546; www.starbay-beach.com; houses 1500-2500B; 🏠 🏠) If you're travelling in a small group, or looking to stay on the island for a while, Star Bay might be the right place for you. An on-site team manages these privately owned properties, and rents them out to tourists. Each villa has a living room, kitchen, and private gardens. You will be charged separately for electricity, so turn off your air-con during the day!

Lamai Wanta (Map p197; ☎ 0 7742 4550; 0 7742 4218; www.lamaiwanta.com; r & bungalows 1600-3400B; 🏠 🏠 🏠) The pool area feels a bit retro, with its swatchbook of beige- and blue-toned tiles, but there are modern motel rooms and bungalows in the back with fresh coats of white paint. On the inside, rooms tread a fine line between being 'minimal' and sparse.

Top End

Thai House Beach Resort (Map p197; ☎ 0 7723 2451; www.thaihousebeach-resort.com; bungalows 3500-5200B; 🏠 🏠) If there weren't bikini-clad guests at the pool, Thai House Beach could be mistaken for a stunning seaside temple with wooden pavilions that pierce the green canopy of palms. Spend the extra 800B and go for a villa; the cheaper rooms are surprisingly spartan.

Tamarind Retreat (Map p197; ☎ 0 7723 0571; www.tamarindretreat.com; villas 3500-11,600B; 🏠 🏠) Tucked away from the beach within a silent coconut palm plantation, Tamarind's small collection of villas are each elaborated with a different design schema. Some have granite boulders built into walls and floors; others offer private ponds or creative outdoor baths. There's a seven-night minimum stay (three nights in low season) and free pick-up at the airport is included. Advance reservations are a must.

Samui Jasmine Resort (Map p197; ☎ 0 7723 2446; www.samuijasminerest.com; r & bungalows 3800-5000B;

🏠 🏠) Pleasant Samui Jasmine is a great deal along Lamai's sun-bleached sands. Go for the lower-priced rooms – most have excellent views of the ocean and the crystal-coloured lap pool. The design scheme features plenty of varnished teak and frilly accessories such as lavender pillows.

Rocky Resort (Map p197; ☎ 0 7741 8367; www.rockyresort.com; Hua Thanon; r 4200-14,000B; 🏠 🏠) Our favourite spot in Lamai, Rocky finds the right balance between an upmarket ambience and an unpretentious, sociable atmosphere. During the quieter months the prices are a steal, since ocean views abound, and each room has been furnished with beautiful Thai-inspired furniture that seamlessly incorporates a modern twist. The pool has been carved in between a collection of boulders mimicking the rocky beach nearby (hence the name). The attention to detail permeates the restaurant as well – don't miss out on Rocky's delicious dishes served throughout the day.

Renaissance (Map p197; ☎ 0 7742 9300; www.renaissancekohsamui.com; bungalows 5900-12,600B; 🏠 🏠) Rambling Renaissance expands over the entire northern headland of Lamai. The hilly property features stunning villas in a manicured garden that feels wild and charmingly overgrown. The sugar candies in the lobby are delicious.

Villa Nalinnadda (Map p197; ☎ 0 7723 3131; www.nalinnadda.com; Hua Thanon; bungalows 6000-6500B; 🏠 🏠) Villa Nalinnadda's exterior walls are swathed in undulating waves of white adobe that mimic the bubbling water in the rectangular plunge pool. Seven suites of various shapes and sizes face out towards the swaying ocean, offering a blend of romantic solitude while also fostering a convivial atmosphere among guests. Our favourite thing about Nalinnadda is the service – genuine smiles abound and the exceptionally friendly staff do everything in their power to assure a pleasant stay – breakfast is even served on each room's private porch. They had us at hello, Renee Zellwegger would say.

Pavilion Resort (Map p197; ☎ 0 7742 4420; www.pavilionsamui.com; r & bungalows 10,000-28,000B; 🏠 🏠) Pavilion has a sophisticated contemporary design with great lighting effects that 'promise romance' according to the brochures. Everything is sleek and perfectly planned; from the dangle of each paper lantern to the vertical angle of the potted alfalfa sprouts. The 'hydro pool villas' have gargantuan Jacuzzis,

and water-spouting turtle statues surround the curling beachside pool. The room rates are astronomical, but 'special promotions' involving large discounts are often available.

NORTHERN BEACHES

Ko Samui's northern beaches have the largest range of accommodation. Choeng Mon has some of the most opulent resorts in the world, while Mae Nam and Bang Po cling to their backpacker roots. Bo Phut, in the middle, is the shining star.

Choeng Mon (Plai Lam)

While technically known as Plai Lam, this rugged outcropping is often called Choeng Mon after the largest beach in the area. If you happen to be the CEO of a *Fortune 500* company, Choeng Mon is where you'll stay. These resorts are locked in an unwavering battle to out-posh one another.

White House (☎ 0 7724 7921; 0 7724 5318; www.hotelthewhitehouse.com; r5000-6600B; 🏠 🏠) You can check Angkor Wat off your 'to do' list – the White House feels like the seat of an ancient empire hidden deep within the thickest jungle. Sandstone temples bleed luscious tropical ferns from every crevice, and the gazes of praying diety statues pierce the rambling foliage.

Imperial Boat House Hotel (☎ 0 7742 5041-52; www.imperialhotels.com; r 4000-5500B, boat ste 6000-6700B; 🏠 🏠) This sophisticated retreat has a three-storey hotel, and several free-standing bungalows made from imported teak rice barges whose bows have been transformed into stunning patios. Oxidized copper cannons blast streams of water into the boat-shaped swimming pool.

Sala Samui (☎ 0 7724 5888; www.salasamui.com; bungalows US\$360-1100; 🏠 🏠 🏠) Look out folks, these guys mean business – they quote their room rates in US dollars instead of baht. Is the hefty price tag worth it? Probably. The design scheme is undeniably exquisite – regal whites and lacquered teaks are generously lavished throughout, while subtle turquoise accents draw on the colour of each villa's private plunge pool.

Tongsai Bay (☎ 0 7724 5480-5500; www.tongsai bay.co.th; ste 11,000-30,000B; 🏠 🏠) For serious pampering, head to this secluded luxury gem. Expansive and impeccably maintained, the hilly grounds make the cluster of bungalows look more like a small village. Golf carts whiz around the vast landscape transporting guests

to various activities such as massages or dinner. All the extra-swanky split-level suites have day-bed rest areas, gorgeous romantic décor, stunning views, large terraces and creatively placed bathtubs (you'll see). Facilities include salt- and fresh-water pools, a tennis court, the requisite spa, a dessert shop, and several restaurants.

Sila Evason Hideaway (☎ 0 7724 5678; www.sixsenses.com/hideaway-samui/index.php; bungalows from 17,000B; 🏠 🏠 🏠) We're not saying that you should sell all your earthly possessions (because then you'll have nothing to pack), but this hidden bamboo paradise is worth the once-in-a-lifetime splurge. Set along a rugged promontory, Sila Evason strikes the perfect balance between opulence and rustic charm, and defines the term 'barefoot elegance'. Most of the villas have stunning concrete plunge pools and offer magnificent views of the silent bay below. The regal, semi-outdoor bathrooms give the phrase 'royal flush' a whole new meaning. Beige golf buggies move guests between their hidden cottages and the stunning amenities strewn throughout the property – including a world-class spa and two excellent restaurants.

Big Buddha Beach (Bang Rak)

This area gets its moniker from the huge golden Buddha that acts as overlord from the small nearby quasi-island of Ko Fan. Its proximity to the airport means lower prices at the resorts.

Chez Ban-Ban Resort (☎ 0 7724 5135; cottages 500-1000B; 🏠) A bit French, and a bit Thai (as the name would suggest), Chez Ban-Ban is a seaside jumble of burgundy brick cottages – each one named after a French herb. Green curries and petanque balls further contribute to the subdued East-meets-West motif.

Shambala (☎ 0 7742 5330; www.samui-shambala.com; bungalows 600-1000B; 🏠) While surrounding establishments answer the call of upmarket travellers, this laid-back, English-run place is a backpacking stalwart with a subtle hippy feel. There's plenty of communal cushion seating, a great wooden sundeck, and the bungalows are bright and roomy. Staff doles out travel tips and smiles in equal measure.

Samui Mermaid (☎ 0 7742 7547; www.samui-mermaid.info; r600-2500B; 🏠 🏠 🏠) Samui Mermaid is a great choice in the budget category because it feels like a full-fledged resort. There are two large swimming pools, copious beach

chairs, two lively restaurants and every room has cable TV. The landing strip at Samui's airport is only a couple of kilometres away, so sometimes there's noise, but free airport transfers sweeten the deal.

Maya Buri (☎ 0 7748 4656, 08 1539 4194; www.maya-buri.com; r incl breakfast 1200-1600B; 🏠 📺 📺) Maya Buri's inland location near the airport means that these boutique bungalows would be four times more expensive if they were situated along Chaweng. The modern resort has been designed with finesse – airy rooms, stocked with teak furniture, are focused around a cool-infinity pool.

Bo Phut

The beach isn't breathtaking, but Bo Phut has the most dynamic lodging in all of Samui. A string of vibrant boutique cottages starts deep within the clutter of Fisherman's Village and radiates outward along the sand.

Khuntai (☎ 0 7724 5118; 08 6686 2960; r 600-850B; 🏠) This clunky orange guesthouse is as cheap as decent rooms get on Samui. A block away from the beach, on the outskirts of Fisherman's Village, Khuntai's 2nd-floor rooms are drenched in afternoon sunshine and feature outdoor lounging spots.

Cactus (☎ 0 7724 5565; cactusbung@hotmail.com; bungalows 700-1590B; 🏠) Cactus does a good job of keeping up with Bo Phut's boutique crowd by offering cavellike concoctions that sizzle with burnt reds and oranges. The palpable backpacker buzz means that rooms err on the basic side, but they're still clean, comfy and sport loads of charm (the fan bathrooms could benefit from an air freshener though). Fan huts are half price in low season.

Lodge (☎ 0 7742 5337; www.apartmentsamui.com; r 1350-1900B; 🏠 📺) Another great choice in Bo Phut, the Lodge feels like a colonial hunting chalet with pale walls and dark wooden beams jutting across the ceiling. Every room has scores of wall hangings and a private balcony overlooking the beach. The 'pent huts' on the top floor are very spacious. Reservations are a must – this place always seems to be full.

L'Hacienda (☎ 0 7724 5943; www.samui-hacienda.com; r 1400-3000B; 🏠 📺) The entrance is one cross short of looking like a Spanish mission (if you ignore the statues of praying oriental deities) – floors are tiled with polished terracotta and the white façade bursts with rounded archways. A similar design motif permeates the

eight adorable rooms, which sport loads of personal touches such as pebbled bathroom walls and translucent bamboo lamps. There's a charming surprise waiting for you on the roof, and we're pretty sure you'll love it as much as we did.

Red House (☎ 0 7742 5686; www.design-visio.com; r 2000B; 🏠) To reach the small reception area at the back, guests must pass through a sleek shoe shop drenched in jet-black hues and set ablaze with flaming tints of red paint – think Carrie Bradshaw's closet if it were 2048 and she lived in a Chinese bordello. The four rooms upstairs are decorated with a similar spiciness. Intricate oriental patterns liven the walls and canopied beds are swathed in streamers of ruby and chartreuse. A cache of reclining beach chairs and potted plants is the perfect rooftop escape.

B1 Villa Spa (☎ 0 7742 7268; www.b1villa.com; ste 3500-5000B; 🏠 📺) There's a refreshing burst of character at this inn-style option along the beach in Fisherman's Village. The earth's vital energy forces have been factored into the Feng Shui-ed design of the eight vibrant suites. Each room displays a unique collection of wall art, and has been given a special moniker – the 2nd-storey spaces are named after the stars in Orion's belt. Oh, and it's B1 as in 'B1 with yourself', get it?

Zazen (☎ 0 7742 5085; www.samuizazen.com; r 5300-12,800B; 🏠 📺 📺) Zazen is the boutique-iest boutique resort on Samui – every inch of this charming getaway has been thoughtfully and creatively designed. It's 'Asian minimalism meets modern Rococo' with a scarlet accent wall, lots of pillows, a dash of Feng Shui and generous smattering of good taste. Terracotta deities meditate beside flat-screen TVs, but our favourite accoutrement is the shiny amorphous blob sculpture in each villa – it kind of looks like the infamous 'Asahi Golden Poo' in Tokyo (which is meant to represent a bead of the froth from a freshly poured beer). Guests relax poolside on comfy beach chairs gently shaded by canvas parasols. The walk-in prices are pretty scary, so it's best to book in advance.

Bandara (☎ 0 7742 5337; www.bandararesort.com; r 6050-9350B; 🏠 📺 📺) Bandara's is different from the top-end bungalows on Samui. The design philosophy has refocused the accommodation away from the beach, into several hotel structures that collectively form a U-shape pointing towards the ocean. A cen-

tral expanse of perfectly manicured grounds has a jungle theme, but incorporates order and symmetry by using thatched *sah-lahs*, wooden pilasters and stone figurines.

Anantara (☎ 0 7742 8300; www.anantara.com; r 7000-15,000B; 🏠 📺 📺) Anantara's stunning palanquin entrance satisfies every fantasy of a far-flung oriental kingdom. Low-slung torches spurt plumes of unwavering fire, and the residual smoke creates a light fog around the fanned palm fronds higher up. Clay and copper statues of grimacing jungle creatures abound on the property's wild acreage, while guests savour wild teas in an open-air pagoda, swim in the lagoon-like infinity-edged swimming pool, or indulge in a relaxing spa treatment. The 'deluxe' hotel-style rooms have moveable window-walls in the bathroom, but feel a tad small when considering the steep price tag.

Mae Nam

Mae Nam doesn't have the most beautiful tract of sand, but it offers cheap accommodation relative to the other beaches.

CocoPalm Resort (☎ 0 7742 5095; bungalows 450-1000B; 🏠) The bungalows at CocoPalm have been crafted with tonnes of rattan. A rectangular pool is the centrepiece along the beach – and the price is right for a resort-like atmosphere.

Maenam Resort (☎ 0 7742 5116; www.maenam-resort.com; bungalows 1200-2700B; 🏠 📺) Palm-bark cottages are set in several rows amid a private, jungle-like garden. The cottages are decked out in a mix of wicker and wooden furnishings, and vary in price according to their distance from the beach. Suites are a steal for families.

Harry's (☎ 0 7742 5447; www.harrys-samui.com; bungalows 1200-3000B; 🏠 📺) Arriving at Harry's feels like entering sacred temple grounds. Polished teak wood abounds in the lobby and the classic pitched roofing reaches skyward. The concrete bungalows, stashed in a verdant garden, do not retain the flamboyant architectural theme out front, but they're cute and comfortable nonetheless.

Bang Po & Laem Yai

The small enclave of Bang Po has a cache of budget bungalows, and further west, the mountainous cape of Laem Yai has one ridiculous resort.

Sunbeam (☎ 0 7742 0600; bungalows 500-1000B) Quiet Sunbeam has just over a dozen rustic cottages by the sea. They're spacious, comfy, and offer beach views from the porch. Brick paths wind through a lush garden, and cool breezes pass through the shanty-like bar.

Moon (☎ 0 7724 7740; bungalows 600-1800B) Moon is a throwback to an earlier time when Samui was rife with seaside shacks. Several modern concrete cottages have recently sprung up on the property – they're comfortable and clean, and they don't detract from the general laid-back jungle-on-the-beach atmosphere. The large wood-beamed restaurant is the heart of the action.

Health Oasis Resort (☎ 0 7742 0124; www.health-oasisresort.com; bungalows 800-4500B; 🏠) If you're looking to get 'cleansed' – whether it's your aura or your colon, then you've happened upon the right place. New Age is all the rage at the Health Oasis. Guests can choose from a variety of healing packages involving everything from meditation to fasting. Bungalows are modern and receive plenty of sunshine. There's also a vegetarian restaurant on site, of course.

Four Seasons (☎ 0 7724 3000; www.fourseasons.com/kohsamui; Laem Yai; villas 30,000B) Four Seasons Koh Samui feels more like a private village than a resort. The international company has purchased an entire peninsula on the island, and transformed it into a hilly enclave. A ridiculous amount of on-site amenities means that you'll probably never leave the grounds. Each villa has a large private plunge-pool and spacious sitting areas. Should you decide to be more social, there's a beautiful stretch of flaxen sand offering beach chairs and water sports. If you're into hotel provisions (ie soaps, slippers etc), each suite is loaded with designer fragrances, sandals, bathrobes – you name it, they have it – a klepto's dream place.

WEST COAST

Largely the domain of Thai tourists, Samui's west coast doesn't have the most picturesque beaches, but it's a welcome escape from the eastside bustle.

Na Thon

Na Thon is the island's main settlement – a large pier dominates the beach, and the town itself is far from picturesque.

Seaside Palace Hotel (☎ 0 7742 1079; r 400-500B; 🏠) If Seaside Palace were any closer to the

pier, it would be a boat. We found the rooms to be smokey, but you won't find air-con cheaper than this. It's doable if you must spend the night in Na Thon, but go for the 500B rooms – they're larger and some have ocean views.

Jinta Hotel (☎ 0 7742 0630, 0 7723 6369; www.jintasamui.com; r 500-650B; 🏠 📺 📺) Another option near the pier, Jinta's white walls and linoleum floors feel a bit institutional, but the place gets the job done. All rooms have satellite TV.

Grand Sea View Hotel (☎ 0 7742 0441; www.grandseaviewbeachhotel.com; r 1000-2000B; 🏠 📺 📺) Na Thon's pick of the litter, this five-floor hotel is popular with visiting businessmen. Spacious rooms have sparkling tile floors, light wooden framing, air-con and cable TV. The higher levels have great views over the town and sea.

Thong Yang & Taling Ngam

Thong Yang is close to the ferry piers heading to Don Sak, although still a quiet place to relax. Taling Ngam is a quiet and charming hideaway further south with a quaint local village nearby.

Wiesenthal (☎ 0 7723 5165; fax 0 7741 5480; Taling Ngam; bungalows incl breakfast 1500-2500B; 🏠 📺) The name sort of sounds like smokey German beer hall made from thick trunks of cedar, but this Thai-owned operation is a breezy beachside paradise. Cast modesty aside, spread your curtains wide, and welcome sunshine and sea views in through your floor-to-ceiling windows. Lounge-worthy porch furniture further contributes to the comfy, casual vibe established at the open-air restaurant and pool.

Big John (☎ 0 7742 3025; international@sawadee.com; Ao Chon Khram; r 2000B; bungalows 3000-5000B; 🏠 📺 📺) Big John is a casual place on a patch of beach not too far from Na Thon. Square, thatched-roof bungalows are dotted around a sandy lot. Inside, colourful sutra and *Veda* tapestries dangle throughout. The restaurant is quite popular.

Ban Sabai (☎ 0 7742 8200; Taling Ngam; www.bansabai.com; bungalows 6800-25,000B; 🏠 📺) Beautiful Baan Sabai has 20 rooms on a secluded stretch of sand and palms. Villas along the beach have multi-room bathrooms under a charming patchwork of thatching and starlight. Rooms have a private waterfall – the bathtubs receive water from a charming cascade-like faucet. The intimate common

spaces and semidetached cottages make this resort a great place to relax with friends.

Ao Phangkha

Around Laem Hin Khom on the southern end of Samui's west coast, this little bay is often known as Emerald Cove.

Phang Ka Paradise Resort (☎ 0 7733 4207, 08 4647 4632; www.samuixl.com/phangka-paradise; bungalows 2500-4500B; 🏠 📺 📺) A newbie on the Samui scene, Phang Ka's owner just returned to her native Samui after spending several decades working as a nurse in New York (so her English is pretty darn good). Each beachside bungalow is a facsimile of the next, but they're all immaculate, spacious and they still have that new-car smell. In-room internet, fridge and satellite TV are added perks.

Coconut Villa (☎ 0 7733 4069; bungalows 4000-6000B; 🏠 📺 📺) The perky huts that used to rest on this isolated bay have been recently replaced with an array of posh villas – now the price tags all have a newly added zero.

SOUTH COAST (HAT NA THIAN)

The southern end of Ko Samui is spotted with rocky headlands and smaller sandy coves. Accommodation is mostly midrange and top-end. These places are on Hat Na Thian.

Laem Set Inn (☎ 0 7723 3299; www.laemset.com; bungalows 1200-20,000B; 🏠 📺 📺) This secluded paradise offers accommodation to suit every budget. Cheaper huts have woven bamboo siding, and the midrange choices are gathered in blocks of units that have a homey vibe. The priciest options sport snazzy lacquered upholstery and are authentic southern Thai homes that were dismantled and reconstructed at the resort.

Centara Villas Samui (Central Samui Village; ☎ 0 7742 4020; www.centralhotelsresorts.com; bungalows 4500-5500B; 🏠 📺 📺) Driving through the remote dirt roads of the south coast feels like a trip through Jurassic Park. Centara Villas are set right where the wild thicket meets a deserted patch of boulder-strewn sand. Pavilions and terraced boardwalks, which climb over the rocky landscape, link the chic, wooden cottages.

Eating

If you thought it was hard to pick a place to sleep, Samui has even more options when it comes to dining. Lately, shmancy restaurants outnumber Thai food shacks, as opulent re-

sorts continue to lure world-class chefs. The 'scene' changes with the wind – currently Italian joints are popping up left and right, but next year is anyone's guess. Most hotels and bungalow operations also have their own restaurants, so you rarely need to go far to grab a bite.

HAT CHAWENG

Dozens of the restaurants on the 'strip' serve a mixed bag of local bites, international cuisine, and greasy fast food. 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.

Khaosan Restaurant & Bakery (Map p194; dishes from 60B; 🍳 breakfast, lunch & dinner) From *filet mignon* to flapjacks and everything in between, this chow house is popular with those looking for a cheap nosh. Hang around after your meal and catch a newly released movie on the big TV. It's everything you'd expect from a place called 'Khaosan'.

Islander (Map p194; ☎ 08 1788 6239; dishes 100-250B; 🍷 8am-2am) This is a popular, pub-style shanty with Western and Thai food, a kids' menu, outdoor tables, billiards and sports on TV – something for everyone. Breakfast is a sausage fest (literally) – the stacks of greasy meat are perfect cure-all remedy for your Singha-induced hangover.

Gringo's Cantina (Map p194; ☎ 0 7741 3267; dishes 140-280B; 🍷 2pm-midnight) Wash down a Tex-Mex classic with a jug of sangria or a frozen margarita. We liked the *chimichangas* (deep-fried burritos) mostly because we like saying 'chimichanga'. There are burgers, pizza and veggie options too, for those who don't want to go 'south of the border'.

Captain Kirk (Map p194; ☎ 08 1270 5376; dishes 140-480B; 🍷 dinner) Beam yourself up to this beautiful rooftop garden for a vast selection of international eats. Patrons often lounge on the cushioned bamboo furniture and indulge in a post-repasta cocktail.

Prego (Map p194; ☎ 0 7742 2015; mains 200-700B; 🍷 lunch & dinner) This swankified ministry of culinary style serves up fine Italian cuisine in an ultra-stylish pagoda.

Page (Map p194; ☎ 0 7742 2767; dishes 180-850B; 🍳 breakfast, lunch & dinner) If you can't afford to stay at the ultra-swank Library (p201), have a meal at their beachside restaurant. The food is overpriced (of course) but you'll receive

glances from the beach bums on Chaweng as they try to figure out if you're a jetsetter or movie star. Lunch is a bit more casual and affordable, but you'll miss the designer lighting effects in the evening.

Bellini (Map p194; ☎ 0 7741 3831; dishes from 200B; 🍷 dinner) A staple on Soi Colibri, Bellini sizzles under designer mood lighting. There's Italian on the menu, but not in a pizza-pasta kind of way – think veal, rock lobster and a dainty assortment of tapas.

Olivio (Map p194; ☎ 0 7723 1500; dishes 280-580B; 🍷 lunch & dinner) The charming seaside restaurant at Baan Haad Ngam Resort (p200), Olivio is an elegant outdoor dining experience with an assortment of Italian and Thai treats. The decadent 'hot chocolate cake' scores the most yum's. Call ahead to arrange a complimentary transfer (if you're staying in Chaweng or along the north coast).

Betelnut (Map p194; ☎ 0 7741 3370; mains 600-800B; 🍷 dinner) Betelnut's wooden benches and baby-blue flooring aren't much to look at – the focus here is the innovative Californian cuisine. Fusion favourites bait foodies, who come to savour a short menu of dishes with long names. Reservations recommended.

Zico's (Map p194; ☎ 0 7723 1560; menu 750B; 🍷 dinner) This palatial *churrascaria* puts the 'carne' in Carnival. Vegetarians beware – Zico's is an all-you-can-eat Brazilian meat-fest complete with saucy dancers sporting peacock-like outfits.

HAT LAMAI

As Samui's second-most populated beach, Lamai has a surprisingly limited assortment of decent eateries compared to Chaweng. Most visitors dine wherever they're staying.

Will Wait (Map p197; ☎ 0 7742 4263; dishes 60-200B; 🍳 breakfast, lunch & dinner) This joint's been around forever, and it never loses popularity, which says a lot in Samui's fickle eating market. The menu is stuffed with breakfast fare, Thai dishes, pizzas and cakes. There are several locations in Chaweng as well.

Mr Samui (Map p197; ☎ 0 7742 4630; dishes 100-180B; 🍷 lunch & dinner) Enter Baan Soi Gemstones (look for the 'illy' sign out front) and pass the veritable garage sale of oriental knick-knacks to find a tiny cluster of tables and cushions. Savour your nutty *massaman* curry amid flamboyant Chinese wall art, dripping chandeliers and gaudy geometric pillows (everything's for sale).

Rocky's Restaurant (Map p197; ☎ 0 7741 8367; dishes 300-800B; 🍴 lunch & dinner) Easily the top dining spot on Lamai, Rocky's gourmet dishes are actually a bargain when you convert the baht into your native currency. Try the signature beef tenderloin with bleu cheese – it's like sending your tastebuds on a Parisian vacation. On Tuesday evenings, diners enjoy a special Thai-themed evening with a prepared menu of local delicacies. Sunday night barbecues are quite popular too.

NORTHERN BEACHES

Some of Samui's finest establishments are located on the northern coast. Boho Bo Phut has several trendy eateries to match the string of yuppie boutique hotels.

Choeng Mon

our pick Dining On The Rocks (☎ 0 7724 5678; reservations-samui@sixsenses.com; menus from 1500B; 🍴 dinner) The Sila Evason's (p203) ultimate dining experience takes place on nine cantilevered verandas of weathered teak and bamboo that yawn over the gulf. After sunset, guests feel like they're dining on a wooden barge set adrift on a starlit sea. The 'chef's table', located right beside the kitchen, is an unforgettable 10-course fiesta for the senses. Each serving is the brainchild of the experimental cooks who regularly dabble with taste, texture and temperature. You'll have to book well in advance if you want to sit at 'table 99' – the honeymooners' table – positioned on a private terrace.

Big Buddha Beach (Bang Rak)

BBC (☎ 0 7742 5264; dishes 60-200B; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) No, this place has nothing to do with our parent company, or 'Dr Who' – BBC stands for Big Buddha Café. It's popular with local expats, and there's a large international menu and exquisite ocean views from the patio.

Elephant & Castle (☎ 0 7743 0394; dishes 80-250B; 🍴 lunch & dinner) The ultimate hangout for homesick Brits, the Elephant & Castle is the perfect replica of a London pub. There's beer by the pint and the steak and kidney pies will give you meat sweats for days.

Antica Locanda (☎ 0 7724 5163; dishes 170-280B; 🍴 2pm-midnight) This friendly *trattoria* has pressed white tablecloths and caskets of Italian wine. Try the *vongole alla marinara* (clams in white wine) and don't forget to check out the succulent specials of the day.

Bo Phut

Coffee Junction (☎ 08 9866 1085; snacks from 30B; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) This coffee shop will relieve you of your Starbucks craving without making you feel guilty for being an unadventurous tourist or a creature of habit.

Frog & Gecko Pub (☎ 0 7742 5248; dishes 60-200B; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Locals recommend this popular spot on the beach. Part sports bar, part restaurant, it serves full English breakfasts (along with the footy), as well as the usual assortment of Thai and English pub food. Quiz nights lure trivia buffs once a week.

Starfish & Coffee (☎ 0 7742 7201; mains from 120B; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) This adorable eatery was probably named after the Prince song, since we couldn't find any starfish on the menu (there's loads of coffee though). Evenings feature warm candlelit dinners and sunset views of rugged Ko Pha-Ngan.

Villa Bianca (☎ 0 7724 5041, 08 9873 5867; dishes from 200B; 🍴 lunch & dinner) Another fantastic Italian spot on Samui, Villa Bianca is a sea of crisp white tablecloths and woven lounge chairs. Who knew wicker could be so sexy?

Pier (☎ 0 7743 0681; dishes 200-390B; 🍴 lunch & dinner) This sleek black box sticks out among Bo Phut's narrow Chinese tenements. It's the hippest address in Fisherman's Village, sporting multilevel terraces, a lively bar, and plenty of wide furniture to lounge around and watch the rickety fishing vessels pull into the harbour.

Zazen (☎ 0 7742 5085; dishes 550-850B, set menu from 1300B; 🍴 lunch & dinner) The chef describes the food as 'organic and orgasmic', and the ambient 'yums' from elated diners definitely confirm the latter. This romantic dining experience comes complete with ocean views, dim candle lighting and soft music. Reservations recommended.

Mae Nam & Bang Po

Ko-Seng (☎ 0 7742 5365; Mae Nam; dishes 100-300B; 🍴 dinner) Hidden down a narrow side street near Mae Nam's Chinese temple, Ko Samui's best kept secret is a welcome escape from the island's restaurants that fuss over the décor instead of their food. It's a local haunt that dishes out top-notch soft-shell crab and plump, flash-fried prawns in a peppery sauce.

Bang Po Seafood (☎ 0 7742 0010; Bang Po; dishes from 100B; 🍴 dinner) A meal at Bang Po Seafood is a test for the tastebuds. It's one of the few restaurants that serve traditional Ko Samui fare (think of it as island roadkill, well, ac-

tually its more like local sea-kill): recipes call for ingredients such as raw sea urchin roe, baby octopus, sea water, coconut, and local tumeric.

WEST COAST

The quiet west coast features some of the best seafood on Samui. Na Thon has a giant **grocery** and a **day market** (Th Thawi Ratchaphakdi) – it's worth stopping by to grab some snacks before your ferry ride.

Wiesenthal (☎ 0 7723 5165; Taling Ngam; dishes 90-250B; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Wiesenthal is a casual open-air restaurant overlooking a quiet beach. Devour a scrumptious assortment of international cuisine in the shade of a bamboo umbrella.

Big John Seafood (☎ 0 7742 3025; Thong Yang; dishes 60-300B; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Big John's menu looks like an encyclopaedia of marine life. The seafood is freshly caught daily from various fishing hotspots off the coast. Dinnertime is particularly special – live entertainment kicks in around 6pm just as the sun plunges below the watery horizon.

our pick Five Islands (☎ 0 7741 5359, 08 1447 5371; Taling Ngam; dishes 150-500B, tours 5000-6500B; 🍴 lunch & dinner) Five Islands defines the term 'destination dining' and offers the most unique eating experience on the island. Before your meal, a traditional long-tail boat will take you out into the turquoise sea to visit the haunting Five Sister Islands where you'll learn about the ancient and little-known art of harvesting bird nests to make bird's-nest soup – a Chinese delicacy. This perilous task is rewarded with large sums of cash – a kilo of bird's nests is usually sold for 100,000B to restaurants in Hong Kong (yup, that's five zeros). Upon returning to the beachside restaurant, you'll indulge in a *kan-dòk* featuring an assortment of dishes such as fried crab with garlic and pepper, roast duck curry, and lobster with cashew nuts. The lunch tour departs at 10am, and the dinner program leaves at 3pm. Customers are also welcome to dine without going on the tour.

Drinking & Entertainment

Samui's biggest party spot is, without a doubt, noisy Chaweng. Lamai and Bo Phut come in second and third respectively, while the rest of the island is generally quiet, as the drinking is usually focused around self-contained resort bars.

HAT CHAWENG

Making merry in Chaweng is a piece of cake. Most places are open until 2am and there are a few places that go strong all night long. Soi Green Mango has loads of girly bars. Soi Colibri and Soi Reggae Pub are raucous as well.

Christy's Cabaret (Map p194; ☎ 0 1894 0356) This flashy joint offers free *gà-teu-i* (also spelt *kàthoey*; transgender males) cabaret nightly at 11pm and attracts a mixed clientele of both sexes. Other ladyboys loiter out front and try to drag customers in, so to speak.

Pod (Map p194; ☎ 08 3692 7911, 08 4744 9207) Bathed in cool Prada greens, Pod feels like a hidden metropolitan lounge whose address is known only by the poshest of jet-setters.

Ark Bar (Map p194; ☎ 0 7742 2047) The 'it' destination for a Wednesday-night romp on Samui. Drinks are dispensed from the multi-coloured bar draped in paper lanterns, and guests lounge on pyramidal pillows strewn down the beach. The party usually starts around 4pm.

Green Mango (Map p194; ☎ 0 7742 2661) This place is so popular it has an entire soi named after it. Another Samui power-drinking house, it is cavernous, very loud and very farang. Green Mango has blazing lights, soccer on TV, expensive drinks and masses of sweaty bodies swaying to dance music.

Reggae Pub (Map p194; ☎ 0 7742 2331) This fortress of fun sports an open-air dance floor with music spun by foreign DJs. It's a towering two-storey affair with long bars, pool tables, and a live-music stage. The whole place doubles as a shrine to Bob Marley.

Tropical Murphy's (Map p194; ☎ 0 7741 3614; dishes 50-300B) A popular farang joint, Tropical Murphy's dishes out steak and kidney pie, fish and chips, lamb chops, and Irish stew. Come night-time, the live music kicks on and this place turns into the most popular Irish bar on Samui (yes, there are a few).

Q-Bar (Map p194; ☎ 08 1956 2742) Up on a hill overlooking the fray, sleek Q-Bar (an offshoot of the like-named bar in Bangkok) features a regular rotation of international DJs.

Deck (Map p194; ☎ 0 7723 0897) An open-air, multiteraced bar with comfortable lounging platforms and good views of the street scene below.

Sportsman's Bar & Grill (Map p194; ☎ 08 1079 1618) Down a small road away from the noise, the Sportsman's Bar is a giant yellow venue open

all day long. Catch the latest sports match on the huge TVs, or grab a beer and check your email.

HAT LAMAI

In accordance with Lamai's reputation as a mini-Chaweng, this area has a smattering of girly bars and a couple of clubs, mostly along the road, rather than the beach.

Bauhaus (Map p197; ☎ 0 7741 8387/8) Lamai's long-running dance club, Bauhaus' DJ-ed beats are interspersed with short drag shows, Thai boxing demos and the occasional foam party.

NORTHERN BEACHES (BO PHUT)

Gecko (☎ 0 7724 5554) It's hard to believe that poured concrete could look so cool – these guys pull it off in slick, minimalist style. Fresh House music wafts through the air and guest DJs get things going on Sundays.

Billabong Surf Club (☎ 0 7743 0144) Billabong's all about Aussie rules – it's playing on the TV and the walls are smothered with memorabilia. This popular watering hole has great views of Ko Pha-Ngan and hearty portions of ribs and chops to go with your draught beer.

Frog & Gecko Pub (☎ 0 7742 5248) This tropical British watering hole and food stop is famous for its 'Wednesday Night Pub Quiz' competitions and its wide selection of music. Live sporting events are shown on the big screen.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Bangkok Airways has a flight every 30 minutes between Ko Samui and Bangkok (2000B to 4000B, one to 1½ hours). There is a **Bangkok Airways Office** (Map p194; ☎ 0 7742 0512-9) in Chaweng and another at the **airport** (Map p192; ☎ 0 7742 5011). The first and last flights of the day are always the cheapest.

Other destinations from Samui include Phuket (2000B to 3000B, 50 minutes, two daily) and Pattaya (3000B, one hour, three daily). There are flights to Krabi on Fridays and Sundays. During the high season, flights may be completely booked as much as six weeks in advance, so be sure to plan accordingly. If Samui flights are full, you can fly into Surat Thani and take a short ferry ride. Flights to Surat Thani are generally cheaper than a direct flight to the island.

At the time of research Thai Airways was announcing new flights connecting Ko Samui

to various domestic and international destinations, which will hopefully add some competition and reduce flight prices.

BOAT

The ferry situation is rather convoluted: schedules and prices are always in flux, and there are tons of entry and exit points on Samui and the mainland. Where you leave and arrive will probably depend on what's available when you arrive in Surat Thani (after all, you probably don't want to hang around town). The main piers on the mainland are Ao Ban Don in town (for the night ferry), and Tha Thong and Don Sak (reachable by a bus/boat package) to the east of town. On Samui, the three oft-used ports are Na Thon, Mae Nam and Big Buddha. Service quality can also vary greatly within the same ferry company – some boats are rusty and rundown, others are much more modern and are even outfitted with TVs.

There are frequent daily boat departures between Samui and Surat Thani. The hourly Seatran ferry is a common option. Ferries cost 110B to 190B and take one to three hours, depending on the boat. A couple of these departures can connect with the train station in Phun Phin (for an extra 100B to 140B). The slow night boat to Samui (150B) leaves from central Surat Thani each night at 11pm, reaching Na Thon around 5am. It returns from Na Thon at 9pm, arriving at around 3am. Watch your bags on this boat.

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

There are almost a dozen daily departures between Samui and Ko Pha-Ngan. These leave either from the Na Thong, Mae Nam or Big Buddha 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). The boats departing from Big Buddha service Hat Rin, and the other boats alight at 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 350B to 600B. There are no car ferries from Samui to Ko Pha-Ngan.

BUS/TRAIN

A bus/ferry combo is more convenient than a train/ferry package because you don't have to switch transport in Phun Phin (a tiny town near Surat Thani). However, the trains

are much more comfortable and spacious – especially at night. If you prefer the train, you can get off at Chumphon and catch the *Lomprayah Express* catamaran service the rest of the way to Samui.

The government-bus fares from Bangkok's Southern bus terminal include the cost of the ferry. These are 500B for 2nd-class passengers. 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 350B, but service is substandard and theft is very common. 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.

Getting Around

See p193 for the dangers and annoyances concerning transport around the island, including motorcycle safety. You can rent motorcycles (and bicycles) from almost every resort on the island. The going rate is 200B to 300B per day, but for longer periods try to negotiate a better rate.

Sörng-täa-ou drivers love to try to overcharge you, so it's always best to ask a third party for current rates, as they can change with the season. These vehicles run regularly during daylight hours only. It's about 30B to travel along one coast, and no more than 75B to travel halfway across the island. Figure about 20B for a five-minute ride on a motorcycle taxi.

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

Taxi service on Samui is quite chaotic and prices can vary greatly depending on your driver's mood. Ask your resort about complimentary airport transfers or try the **Samui Shuttle** (www.samuishuttle.com).

KO PHA-NGAN

เกาะพังงา

pop 12,100

While big Samui wheels and deals the big bucks, and little Tao revels in its status as the hyperactive brainchild of the diving industry, Ko Pha-Ngan quietly idles in between like a laid-back beach bum. For two decades (and still going strong) this steaming jungle island has been the go-to spot for party pilgrims. Thousands flock to Hat Rin every month for the eponymous full moon parties. These rau-

cus events can be a 24-hour gig for those fuelled by adrenaline (and perhaps a couple other substances as well). This monthly influx of big baht has encouraged rapid growth, and now Ko Pha-Ngan is leaving its *raison d'être* behind in search of a new reputation.

Hat Rin sees an exorbitant amount of visitors relative to the rest of the island. Party pilgrims flock to this peninsula for the legendary festivities on Sunrise Beach, and although most of them sleep through the daylight hours, the setting remains quite stunning despite the errant beer bottle in the sand.

Despite the prevalent backpacker vibe, the island is slowly creeping upmarket and becoming a choice destination for families. Each year, tired old shacks are replaced by crisp modern abodes. Soon, the phrase 'private infinity pool' and 'personal butler' will find a permanent place in the island's lexicon, replacing 'pass the dutch' and 'another whiskey bucket please'. But don't fret yet – the vast inland jungle continues to feel undiscovered, and there are still plenty of secluded bays on the northern and eastern coasts to string up a hammock and watch the tide roll in.

Orientation

Ko Pha-Ngan is the fifth-largest island in Thailand, measuring 193-sq-km. The town of Thong Sala is its administrative capital, Hat Rin is party central and little Chalok Lam, in the north, is starting to come into its own as another commercial centre.

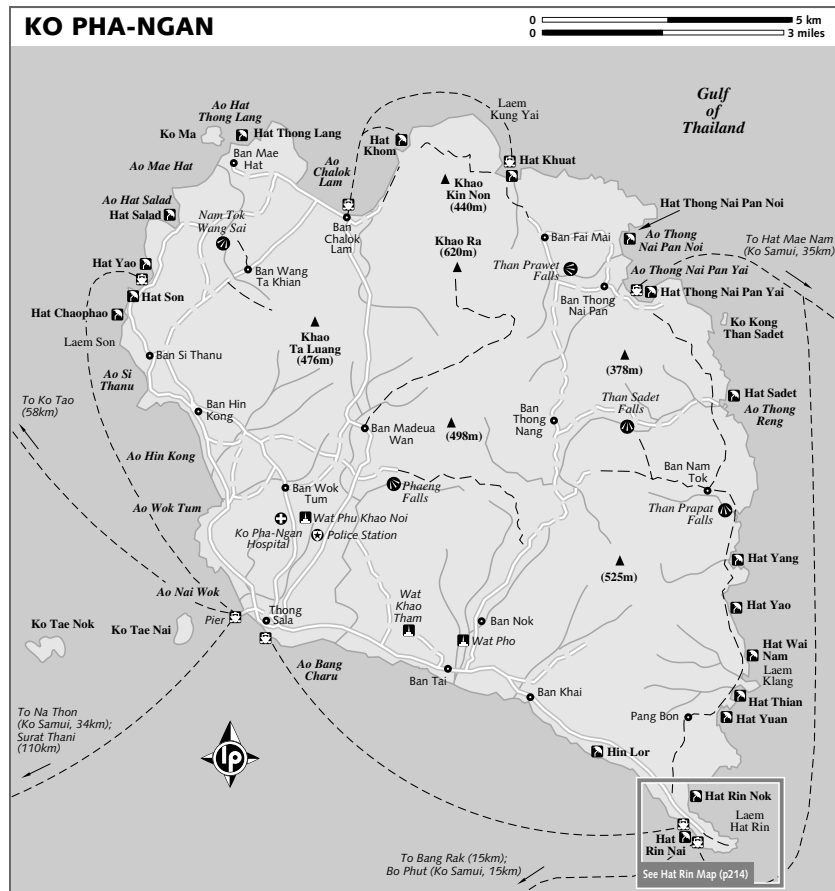
Most of the island's visitors stay on the thin peninsula known as Hat Rin. This mountainous cape is flanked with beaches on either size, and is home to the infamous full moon parties held every month (p215). The rest of the island is noticeably quieter, although gradual development has meant an increase in population on the west and south coasts. The northern coast has a few good beaches that have modern amenities but feel relaxed and remote. The quiet eastern shore is virtually deserted.

About half of Ko Pha-Ngan's population lives in and around the small port of Thong Sala, where the ferries to and from Ko Tao, Surat Thani and Ko Samui dock.

Information

EMERGENCY

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



INTERNET ACCESS

Hat Rin and Thong Sala are the main centres of internet activity, but every beach with development now offers access. Rates are generally 2B per minute, with a 10B to 20B minimum and discounts if you stay on for one hour. Places that offer a rate of 1B per minute usually have slower internet connections.

LAUNDRY

If you got neon body paint on your clothes during your full moon romp, don't bother sending them to the cleaners – the paint will never come out. Trust us, we tried. For your other washing needs, there are heaps of places that will gladly wash your clothes.

Prices hover around 40B per kilo, and express cleanings shouldn't be more than 60B per kilo.

MEDICAL SERVICES

Medical services can be a little dodgy in Ko Pha-Ngan – expect unstable prices and underqualified doctors. Serious medical issues and dental problems should be dealt with on nearby Ko Samui.

Ko Pha-Ngan Hospital (☎ 0 7737 7034; Thong Sala; ☹ 24hr) About 2.5km north of Thong Sala, offers 24-hour emergency services.

Sang's Clinic (☎ 0 1896 2195; Hat Rin; ☹ 5-10pm Mon-Fri, 10am-10pm Sat & Sun) Near the pier, Sang's is a trustworthy choice for fixing your 'Ko Pha-Ngan tattoo' (motorcycle muffler burn-mark) or other minor injuries.

MONEY

Thong Sala, Ko Pha-Ngan's financial 'capital', has plenty of banks, currency converters and several Western Union offices. Hat Rin has numerous ATMs and a couple of banks at the pier. There are a few ATMs dotted along the western and northern beaches.

POST

The main office is in Thong Sala and there's a smaller office right by the pier in Hat Rin.

TELEPHONE

There are many places offering long-distance phone services in the major tourist areas. Most internet cafés have calling services.

TOURIST INFORMATION & TRAVEL AGENCIES

There's no TAT office on Ko Pha-Ngan; we repeat: there is no TAT office on the island. Several travel agencies display signage claiming to be the official TAT outpost – these are bogus claims. That said, not everyone on the island is out to take advantage of you. There are a few agents on the island that have attained an official sanctioned status by the TAT; these shops will be more than happy to show you their license, and give you tourist information. Hat Rin has an ungodly amount of travel agencies, and there's also a cluster within eyeshot of Thong Sala pier terminus.

Several mini-magazines also offer comprehensive information about the island's accommodation, restaurants, activities and full moon parties. Our favourite option is *Phangan Info* (www.phangan.info).

Backpacker's Information Centre

(Map p214;

☎ 0 7737 5535; www.backpackersthailand.com; Hat Rin) A must for travellers looking for info and tours, this

standout operation is run by a gregarious Harley-riding expat. The UK-born owner has hung up his backpack in Ko Pha-Ngan and now helps others discover the island (and the rest of Thailand). He can hook you up with an assortment of quality activities such as scuba diving and live-aboard boat trips, and works hard to ensure that his customers are satisfied.

Dangers & Annoyances

Some of your fondest vacation memories may be forged on Ko Pha-Ngan; just be mindful of the following situations that can seriously tarnish your experience on this hot-blooded jungle island.

MOTORCYCLES

Ko Pha-Ngan has more motorcycle accidents than injuries incurred from full moon tomfoolery. Nowadays there's a system of paved roads, but much of it is a labyrinth of ratty dirt-and-mud paths. The island is also very hilly, and even if the road is paved, it can be very tricky for most to take on. The very steep road to Hat Rin is a perfect case in point. Too many injuries (and outrageous motorcycle damage fees) result from drivers being too proud to turn around and hail a *sörng-tää-ou* instead.

DRUGS

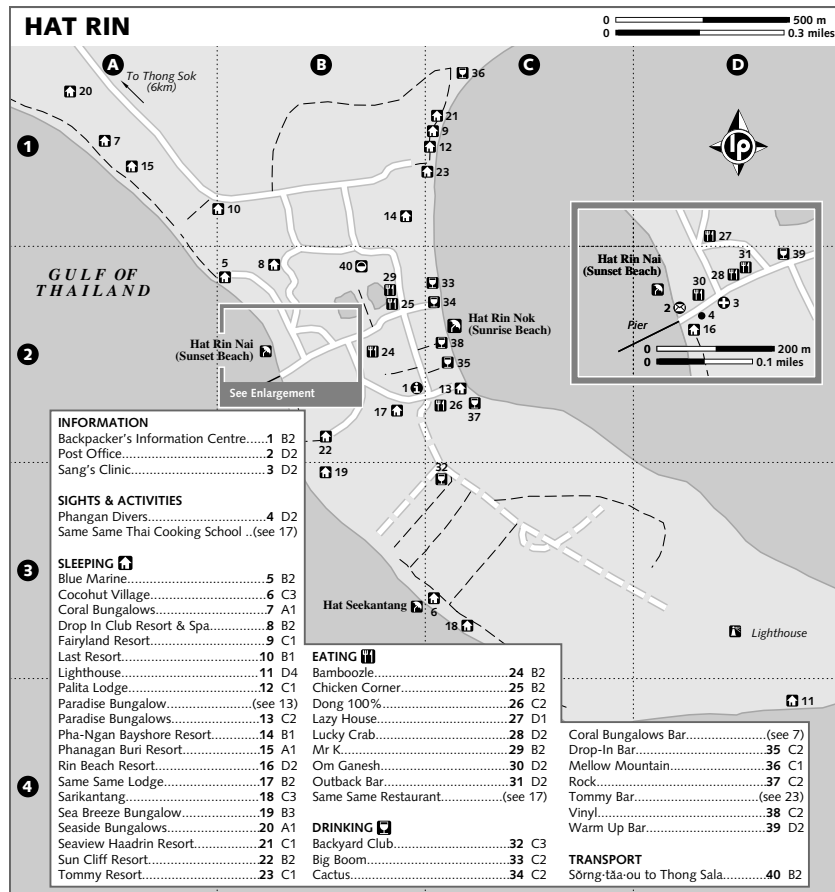
If you're thinking about sampling some local herb, know this: Ko Pha-Ngan does not have tourist police. In other words, a force of locally appointed officers runs the island. Here's another important thing to remember: your travel insurance does not cover drug-related injury or treatment. There are always reports of travellers being offered and sold 'natural' drugs by locals, and promptly being busted by police who somehow know exactly who, when and where to check. The anti-drug laws in Thailand are taken extremely seriously and it's best to resist the call of the ganja.

When full moon fun is in full swing, the local police often set up inspection points on the road between Thong Sala and Hat Rin. All vehicles are stopped and the penalties for drugs on board are huge: five-digit fines and/or jail sentences.

Drug-related freak-outs *do* happen – we've heard first-hand accounts of partiers slipping into extended periods of delirium. Suan Saranrom (Garden of Joys) Psychiatric Hospital in Surat Thani has to take on extra staff during full-moon periods to handle the *faràng* who freak out on magic mushrooms, acid or other abundantly available hallucinogens.

SCAMS

As previously stated, there are no tourist police on Ko Pha-Ngan, which means that a greater percentage of tourists fall victim to various gimmicks. A common scam involves booking '1st-class' bus or boat tickets only to find that the transport is rickety at best, and you paid much more than anyone else. Many tourists have reported problems with the bus between Bangkok and Ko Pha-Ngan – operators often rifle through luggage placed underneath the bus.



WOMEN'S SAFETY

Female travellers should be extra careful when partying on the island. We've received many reports about drug- and alcohol-related rape (and these situations are not limited to full moon parties). Another disturbing problem is the unscrupulous behaviour of some of the local motorcycle-taxi drivers. Several complaints have been filed about drivers groping female passengers; there are even reports of severe sexual assault.

Sights

For those who tire of beach-bumming, this large jungle island has many natural features to explore including mountains, waterfalls and spectacular beaches.

BEACHES & WATERFALLS

There are many **waterfalls** throughout the island's interior, four of which gush throughout the year. Near the east coast, **Than Sadet** features boulders carved with the royal insignia of Rama V, Rama VII and Rama IX. King Rama V enjoyed this hidden spot so much that he returned over a dozen times between 1888 and 1909. The river waters of Khlong Than Sadet are now considered sacred and used in royal ceremonies. To the north, **Than Prawet** is a series of chutes that snake inland for about 2km.

Near the centre of the island, **Phaeng Falls** is protected by a national park and is a pleasant reward after a short-but-rough hike. Continue the adventure and head north to

FULL MOONING

The full moon party is sort of like smoking a cigarette – its obviously not healthy, it'll leave you looking older than you actually are, but for some unknown reason you kinda just have to try it.

No one knows exactly when and how these crazy parties got started – many believe it began in 1987 or 1988 as someone's 'going away party' – but none of that is relevant now. Today, thousands of bodies converge monthly on the powdery sand of Hat Rin Nok to bump, grind, sweat and drink their way through a lunar-lit night filled with thumping DJ-generated beats. Crowds can reach an outrageous 30,000 partiers in high season, while low season still sees 10,000 pilgrims.

If you can't make your trip coincide with a full moon but still want to cover yourself in fluorescent paint, fear not – enterprising locals organise a black moon party (at Ban Khai), a half moon party (at Ban Tai) and moon-set parties (held a couple of days before the full moon party) at Hat Chaophao on the west coast. There's something going on no matter what the moon is doing, though these parties tend to be more subdued.

Full Moon Party Dates

Religious protests have forced some of Hat Rin's full moon parties to take place either before or after the actual full moon date; these are related to Buddhist holidays that occur around the full moon about four times yearly. During periods of royal mourning, the parties are usually cancelled. Double-check if any changes are in store when you plan to attend the party. Dates are posted on www.fullmoon.phangan.info.

Accommodation

If you arrive on the day of the full moon party or even the day before, you can forget about finding a vacant room or bungalow anywhere near Hat Rin – many ravers nail down a room four or more days in advance.

Transport

Taxis to/from Hat Rin run throughout the night – try your best to locate transport that's nearly full or you'll have to wait until it brims with partiers before it hits the road. If you're coming over from Ko Samui, hop on a ferry from Big Buddha Beach. There are several Samui companies that organise full moon packages (400B to 600B), taking passengers over in the evening and picking everyone up around 6am. These operators use speedboats, which gets the job done much faster, especially in the morning when you're craving a pillow.

Safety

With a little bit of planning and forethought about personal safety, these parties can be a blast. At the risk of sounding like your mother, here's some helpful advice:

- Wear protective shoes – broken beer bottles always hobble several beach dancers.
- Try not to bring any bags, and carry what money you have in several secure pockets.
- Don't keep valuables in your bungalow – it's a big night for break-ins, especially at the cheaper huts.
- Don't swim under the influence of drugs or alcohol.
- If you're going pass out, try to do it in one of the designated 'passing out areas'. Yes, it sounds silly, but you'll shield yourself from the inebriated revelry going on.
- Don't accept consumables from strangers.
- Be sure to regularly check in with friends, and try not to walk home alone – especially if you're staying on another island.
- Oh, and remember to eat your vegetables.

Khao Ra, the highest mountain on the island at 625m. Those with eagle-eyes will spot wild crocodiles, monkeys, snakes, deer and boar along the way, and the **viewpoint** from the top is spectacular – on a clear day you can see Ko Tao. Although the trek isn't arduous, it is very easy to lose one's way, and we *highly* recommend hiring an escort in Ban Madeua Wan (near the falls). The local guides have crude signs posted in front of their homes, and, if they're around, they'll take you up to the top for 500B. Most of them only speak Thai.

Pha-Ngan's stunning **beaches** are definitely worth visiting; however caution should also be exercised for those travelling on foot. The 'Green Dot' trail from Hat Rin to Hat Yuan is completely overgrown, as is most of the route between Chalok Lam and Hat Khuat (Bottle Beach). Save yourself the strife and charter a water taxi.

Hat Khuat is a classic fave. Visitors flock to this shore for a relaxing day of swimming and snorkelling – some opt to stay the night at one of the several bungalow operations along the beach. For additional seclusion, try the isolated beaches on the east coast, which include: **Hat Yuan**, **Hat Thian** and **Hat Sadet**, and the teeny **Ao Thong Reng**. For more enchanting beaches, consider doing a day-trip to the stunning **Ang Thong Marine National Park** (p240).

WÁT

Remember to change out of your beach clothes when visiting one of the 20 **wát** on Ko Pha-Ngan. Most temples are open during daylight hours.

The oldest temple on the island is **Wat Phu Khao Noi**, near the hospital in Thong Sala. While the site is open to visitors throughout the day, the monks are only around in the morning. **Wat Pho**, near Ban Tai, has a free herbal sauna accented with natural lemon-grass. The steam bath is open from 3pm to 6pm. The **Chinese Temple** is known to give visitors good luck. It was constructed about 20 years ago after a visiting woman had a vision of the Chinese Buddha who instructed her to build a fire-light for the island. **Wat Khao Tham**, also near Ban Tai, sits high on a hill and has resident female monks. At the temple there is a bulletin board detailing a meditation retreat taught by an American-Australian couple. For additional information, write to Wat Khao Tham, PO Box 8, Ko Pha-Ngan, Surat Thani 84280.

Activities

DIVING & SNORKELLING

With Ko Tao, the high-energy diving behemoth, just a few kilometres away, Ko Pha-Ngan enjoys a much quieter, more laid-back diving scene. Prices are about 2000B to 2500B cheaper on Ko Tao (for an Open Water certification), but group sizes can be smaller on Ko Pha-Ngan since there are usually fewer divers. Like the other islands in the Samui Archipelago, Pha-Ngan has several small reefs dispersed around the island. The clear favourite snorkelling spot is **Ko Ma**, a small island in the northwest connected to Ko Pha-Ngan by a charming sandbar. There are also some rock reefs of interest on the eastern side of the island. Several tour operators take snorkellers to **Ko Nang Yuan** off the coast of Ko Tao, and trips to **Ang Thong Marine National Park** are quickly gaining popularity.

A major perk of diving from Ko Pha-Ngan is the proximity to **Sail Rock** (Hin Bai), perhaps the best dive site in the Gulf of Thailand. This large pinnacle lies about 14km north of the island. An abundance of corals and large tropical fish can be seen at depths of 10m to 30m and there's a rocky vertical swim-through called 'The Chimney'. Your author was lucky enough to spend 45 minutes diving with an elusive whale shark the size of a school bus.

Dive shops on Ko Tao visit Sail Rock as well, although the focus tends to swing more towards the shark-infested waters at Chumphon Pinnacle. The other major sites in the region (including Chumphon Pinnacle) are closer to Ko Tao, but are still frequented by the companies on Ko Pha-Ngan.

Lotus Diving (☎ 0 7737 4142; www.lotusdiving.com) This terrific dive centre has world-class instructors, and owns two beautiful boats (that's two more vessels than most of the other operations on Ko Pha-Ngan). Two- and three-dive adventures run between 2300B to 3500B. The Open Water course will set you back 11,000B, but includes huge lunches between dives and a DVD of your experience (or a 20-minute wake-boarding session should you not want a DVD). Trips can be booked at their base in the northwestern part of the island, or at the Backpacker Information Centre (p213).

Phangan Divers (Map p214; ☎ 0 7737 5117; www.phangandivers.com), with their main office near the pier at Hat Rin (and a smaller office in Thong Sala), charges between 2500B and 2800B for two 'fun dives' including lunch. Three-dive daytrips cost 3600B, and stop at Chumphon Pinnacle, Southwest Pinnacle and Sail Rock. Open Water certification runs for 12,500B. A snorkelling set can be rented for 150B to 200B.

YOGA & MASSAGE

The yoga retreat on Hat Chaophao, **Agama Yoga** (☎ 08 1397 6280, 08 9233 0217; www.agamayoga.com; Hin Wong, r 500B, bungalows 1200B, 4-night minimum stay), gets rave reviews from our readers for its holistic approach to the study of tantric yoga. The centre is often closed from September to December while its instructors travel to India to work on their craft. On the east coast, the **Sanctuary & Wellness Centre** (p223) is another popular retreat for yoga enthusiasts.

If you're dropping the big bucks for lodging, then you probably have access to an on-site spa. Inexpensive massage parlours are aplenty in Hat Rin and Thong Sala. Others can be scouted along the main road connecting the two towns (although be wary of the shadier joints offering 'happy endings').

OTHER ACTIVITIES

Hiking day-trips to **Ang Thong Marine National Park** generally depart from Ko Samui, but recently tour operators are starting to shuttle tourists from Ko Pha-Ngan as well. Check out p240 for more info. **Pha-Ngan Safari Eco-Nature Tours** (☎ 0 7737 4159, 08 1895 3783) offers a variety of treks and trips including 30-minute or one-hour **elephant trekking**.

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 4WDs or quad-bikes. The friendly staff at the Backpacker's Information Centre (p213) can help you arrange any of these, and Coral Bungalows (p218) in Hat Rin has loads of sports equipment from snorkel masks to jet skis.

Courses

Same Same Lodge runs a **Thai Cooking School** (Map p214; ☎ 0 7737 5200; www.same-same.com) and has one-/three-/five-day courses for 900/2500/4200B.

Sleeping

Ko Pha-Ngan's lengthy history of laid-back revelry has solidified its reputation as *the* stomping ground for the gritty backpacker lifestyle. Recently, however, the island is starting to see a shift towards a more upmarket clientele. Many local mainstays have collapsed their bamboo huts and constructed newer, sleeker accommodation aimed at the ever-growing legion of 'flashpackers'. On other

parts of the island, new tracts of land are being cleared for Samui-esque five-star resorts. But backpackers fear not; it'll still be many years before the castaway lifestyle goes the way of the dodo. For now, Ko Pha-Ngan can revel in its three distinct classes of lodging: pinch-a-penny shacks, trendy midrange hangouts, and blow-the-bank luxury.

The following sleeping options are organised into five sections: we start in Hat Rin, move along the southern coast, head up the west side, across the northern beaches and down the quiet eastern shore.

HAT RIN

The thin peninsula of Hat Rin is unofficially divided into four sections. Hat Rin Nok (Sunrise Beach) is the epicentre of full moon tomfoolery. Hat Rin Nai (Sunset Beach) is the less impressive stretch of sand on the far side of the tiny promontory, while Hat Seekantang (also known as Hat Leela), just south of Hat Rin Nai, is a smaller, more private beach. The three beaches are linked by Ban Hat Rin (Hat Rin Town); a small inland collection of restaurants and bars.

Needless to say, the prices listed here are meaningless during periods of maximum lunar orbicularity. Also, during full moon events, bungalow operations expect you to stay for a minimum number of days. If you plan to arrive the day of the party (or even the day before), we strongly suggest booking a room in advance, or else you'll probably have to sleep on the beach (which you might end up doing anyway).

Budget

Some of the places listed here with midrange options have one cheap room/bungalow, which will most likely already be booked out.

Paradise Bungalows (Map p214; ☎ 0 7737 5244; Hat Rin Nok; bungalows 250-1200B; ☹) The world-famous full moon party was hatched at this scruffy bunch of bungalows, and the place has been living on its name fame ever since. Nowadays, the grounds look more like a junkyard than a resort. Paradise lost.

Sun Cliff (Map p214; ☎ 0 7737 5134; bungalows 250-2000B; Hat Rin Nai; ☹) Perched on a palm-studded knoll, Sun Cliff overlooks the sea and basks in the tropical sun amid huge boulders and rolling vegetation. Each bungalow is a completely different species; some are dipped in pastels, others embody the quintessential island hut.

Last Resort (Map p214; ☎ 08 3595 0085; Ban Hat Rin; sebastian_prct@yahoo.com.sg; bungalows 300-3508) Just minutes away from the beach, the Last Resort (which shouldn't be your last resort) is a great place to base yourself for some no-frills full moon fun. Concrete bungalows have been painted with warm earth tones, giving them a desert adobe vibe – a refreshing change from the exhausted bamboo beach shack. Spaz, the charismatic owner, will bend over backwards to make sure you have the best time possible in Hat Rin.

Seaside Bungalow (Map p214; ☎ 08 6940 3410, 08 7266 7567; Hat Rin Nai; bungalows 300-600B; 🏠) Seaside sees loads of loyal customers who return for the mellow atmosphere, cheap drinks, free pool table, and comfy wooden bungalows staggered along Sunset Beach. At 500B, we're pretty sure that these huts are the cheapest air-conditioned rooms on the island.

Same Same Lodge (Map p214; ☎ 0 7737 5200; www.same-same.com; Ban Hat Rin; r 300-800B; 🏠) This busy backpacker hangout is a Hat Rin institution. In the party-prone restaurant, the affable staff works around the clock making sure that smiles (and drinks) abound. Above the action, the no-frills motel rooms are cheery, but need some freshening up.

Coral Bungalows (Map p214; ☎ 0 7737 5023; www.coralhaadrin.com; Hat Rin Nai; bungalows 300-1500B; 🏠 📺 📺) Coral Bungalows has firmly planted its flag in 'Backpackerland' as the go-to resort for a holiday on a shoestring. By day, sun-worshippers straddle beachside chaises or jet skis. Then, by night, like a superhero, Coral transforms into its alter ego; a pool-party machine fuelled by gregarious employees and a couple of vodka/Red-Bulls. The party-centric paradise has grown to almost 100 motel-style rooms clustered around an amoeba-shaped pool.

Lighthouse Bungalow (Map p214; ☎ 0 7737 5075; Hat Seekantang; bungalows 350-800B) Hidden at the far end of Hat Rin, this low-key collection of humble huts gathers along a sloping terrain punctuated by towering palms. The wood-planked restaurant is breezy (in both senses of the word) and offers ocean vistas ripped right off a postcard. To access this secluded resort, walk through Leela Beach Bungalows (don't bother stopping) and follow the wooden boardwalk as it curves to the left (southeast) around the sea-swept boulders.

Seaview Haadrin Resort (Map p214; ☎ 0 7737 5160; Hat Rin Nok; bungalows from 500B; 🏠) If you want a

front row seat for the full moon party then you've come to the right place. Bungalows are scattered right along the north end of beach; the cheaper huts have walls that look like tatami mats.

Sarikantang (Map p214; ☎ 0 7737 5055, 08 1444 1322; www.sarikantang.com; Hat Seekantang; bungalows 500-3500B; 🏠 📺) Don't get too strung out over trying to pronounce the resort's name – you can simply call this place 'heaven'. Cream-coloured cabins, framed with teak posts and lintels, are sprinkled amongst swaying palms and crumbling winged statuettes. Inside, the rooms look like the set of a photo shoot for an interior design magazine.

Sea Breeze Bungalow (Map p214; ☎ 0 7737 5162; bungalows 500-8000B; 🏠) Sea Breeze gets a good report card from our readers, and we agree; the labyrinth of secluded hillside cottages is an ideal hammocked retreat for any type of traveller. Several bungalows, poised high on stilts, deliver stunning views of Hat Rin and the sea.

Blue Marine (Map p214; ☎ 0 7737 5079; Hat Rin Nai; bungalows 600-1200B; 🏠) The shimmering blue-tiled roofs act like a beacon luring in curious backpackers in search of a good deal, and most of them stay since the cheery interiors sparkle as well. Try to nab a concrete cottage closer to the beach as a few affiliated bungalows have sprung up on the far side of the road.

Cocohut Village (Map p214; ☎ 0 7737 5368; www.cocohut.com; Hat Seekantang; r 600B, bungalows 1900-4500B; 🏠 📺 📺) A super-social place unto itself, guests might forget that they are just up the street from the brouhaha on Sunrise Beach. The backpacker digs, with shared locker-room-styled toilets, are a bit sub-par, however the pricier options, such as the cliff villas and beachfront bungalows, are some of the best bets in Hat Rin.

Midrange & Top End

Many budget places offer midrange options as well.

Pha-Ngan Bayshore Resort (Map p214; ☎ 0 7737 5227, 0 7737 5224; www.phanganbayshore.com; Hat Rin Nok; bungalows 1000-3000B; 🏠 📺 📺) At the time of research, this hotel-style option was getting a much-needed overhaul as the owners prime themselves for the ever-increasing influx of flashpackers.

Rin Beach Resort (Map p214; ☎ 0 7737 5112; www.kohphanganrinbeach.com; Hat Rin Nai; bungalows 1000-

3000B; 🏠 📺) Giant amphorae, spewing forth gushes of water, welcome weary travellers as they tumble off the wooden ferry. Cottages are bright and airy with dark cherry wood accents and colourful sutra paintings. The enormous flower-shaped pool is a booby trap for sun-seekers.

Fairyland Resort (Map p214; ☎ 0 7737 5076, 08 5057 1709; www.haadrinfairyland.com; Hat Rin Nok; bungalows from 1400B; 🏠) Although the name sounds like a board game for six-year-old girls, these sparkling bungalows are serious competition for the older resorts on Sunrise Beach. Walk-ins might be lucky enough to score a 60% discount depending on the time of the month and year – be sure to ask the other vacationers how much they're paying before you check in.

Palita Lodge (Map p214; ☎ 0 7737 5172; www.palita.lodge.com; Hat Rin Nok; bungalows 1500-4500B; 🏠 📺) Smack in the heart of the action, Palita is a tribute to the never-ending party that is Hat Rin's Sunrise Beach. Spacious concrete bungalows, with wooden accents and modern design elements, are neatly pressed together on this beachy wedge of sand and shrubs. Week-long bookings are a must during full moon revelry.

Drop In Club Resort & Spa (Map p214; ☎ 0 7737 5444; www.dropinclubresortandspa.com; Ban Hat Rin; r 1500-12,000B; 🏠 📺) The Drop In Club feels like a rambling Thai temple with detailed double-peaked architecture and a turquoise swimming pool. The proximity to Sunrise Beach means that things get pretty wild when the full moon rolls around. Although the resort is located in Ban Hat Rin (Hat Rin Town), most of the rooms offer glimpses of the sea.

Tommy Resort (Map p214; ☎ 0 7737 5215; www.phangantommyresort.com; Hat Rin Nok; r 1800-2200B; 🏠 📺 📺) Tommy is a trendy address in the heart of Hat Rin, striking a good balance between chic boutique and carefree backpacker hangout. The rectangular swimming pool can be jarring at first, since every other man-made body of water on the island looks like it was manufactured at the kidney-shaped pool factory.

Phangan Buri (Map p214; ☎ 0 7737 5481; www.phanganburiresort.com; Hat Rin Nai; bungalows from 2700B; 🏠 📺) The front façade looks a bit like a drab oriental-themed hotel from the 1950s, but the 40 tight-knit bungalows along the orchid-lined beach are modern and charming. Soft-spoken staff members don identical uniforms

and greet guests with pressed palms and a gracious bow.

SOUTHERN BEACHES

Accommodation along the southern coast offers the best bang for your baht on Ko Pha-Ngan. There are fleeting views of distant Ang Thong Marine Park; however, the beaches aren't particularly stunning. This section starts in Thong Sala and heads east towards Hat Rin.

Thong Sala

There's really no reason to stay in Thong Sala, unless you're paranoid about missing a morning ferry, or feeling ill and seeking medical attention nearby.

Bua Kao Inn (☎ 0 7723 7226; buakao@samart.co.th; r 550-900B; 🏠) If you're looking for a town vibe rather than a strip of sand, Bua Kao isn't a bad choice. The rooms are well kept and the restaurant downstairs teems with chatty expats.

Pha-Ngan Chai Hotel (☎ 0 7737 7068, 0 7737 7286; r 700-1200B; 🏠 📺) Think 'Soviet tenement meets tropical holiday' and you'll immediately spot this dowdy behemoth while landing at the Thong Sala pier. The convenient location is the hotel's best feature, although you'll need some taxi fare to find a swimmable beach.

Ao Bang Charu

There are some great bargains on this sandy stretch between Thong Sala and Ban Tai.

Chokana (☎ 0 7723 8085; bungalows 300-1200B; 🏠) Our favourite spot on Bang Charu is the Jabba the Hut of huts; these wooden beachside bungalows are shockingly large. The bubbly owner genuinely cares about her clientele – the cabins have loads of personal touches such as wooden carvings and mosaics, and it feels as though all of the guests are repeat customers.

Holiday Resort (☎ 0 7737 7468; www.holidaybeachresort.net; bungalows 800-1700B) The owners aren't too fussed about landscaping, but the bungalows are kept very tidy – the best deals are the 900B bungalows (loaded with air-con and a TV) right along the water. There's a funky bar doused in fluorescent blues and greens, a couple of volleyball nets strung up, and a well-worn pool table hilariously positioned a mere 5m from the rolling tide.

Ban Tai

The waters at Ban Tai tend to be shallow and opaque, especially during low season, but

lodging options are well-priced compared to other parts of the island.

Lifestyle Bungalows (☎ 08 5916 3852; bungalows 250-600B; 🍷) A skin artist by trade, the owner has tattooed each fan bungalow with a blazing palette of colours. Each elaborate design fuses tribal imagery with inspired patterns of swirling shapes. The cluster of sandy huts embodies the true essence of Ko Pha-Ngan; no capitalist nonsense here, just a sign saying 'eat, drink and chill'.

Phangan Beach Resort (☎ 0 7723 8809; phanganbeachresort@hotmail.com; bungalows 450-1200B; 🍷) A solid backpacker pick, Phangan Beach's fan rooms ooze old-school bamboo charm while remaining prim. Air-conditioned rooms have been outfitted with hot water, a TV and fridge; however, they are otherwise identical to the fan rooms.

Phangan Great Bay Resort (☎ 0 7723 8659; fax 0 7723 8697; bungalows 1250-2000B; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Take your pick from motel rooms housed in a mauve structure, or comfy bungalows further afield that also make use of ostentatious colours such as radioactive carrot and lime. Idle away the day trying to anthropomorphize the curious shape of the pool, or catch a movie on the TV in the restaurant.

Milky Bay Resort (☎ 0 7723 8566; www.milkybay.com; bungalows 1200-8000B; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Milky white walls, which permeate the grounds, are peppered with large black stones resembling the spots on a cow. These bovine bulwarks snake through the resort, linking the airy thatched bungalows to the sea. The smart, semicovered swimming pool is a big hit with the kids, as are the hanging gardens, billiards, table tennis and beach volleyball.

Ban Khai

Like Ban Tai, the beaches aren't the most stunning, but the accommodation is cheap and there are beautiful views of Ang Thong Marine Park in the distance.

Lee's Garden (☎ 08 5916 3852; bungalows 250-600B) If Lee's Garden had a soundtrack it would probably be Bob Marley's greatest hits. The clump of comfy wooden huts is a welcomed throwback to a time when Pha-Ngan attracted a grittier backpacker who wasn't fussed about hot showers or air-con.

Mac Bay (☎ 0 7723 8443; bungalows 500-1500B; 🍷 🍷) Home to the Black Moon Party (another lunar excuse for Ko Pha-Ngan to go wild), Mac Bay is a sandy slice of Ban Khai

where even the cheaper bungalows are spic and span. At beer o'clock, grab a shaded spot on the sand and watch the sun dance amorphous shadows over the distant islands of Ang Thong Marine Park.

Morning Star (☎ 0 7737 7756; morningstarkpn@yahoo.com; bungalows 1190-2490B; 🍷 🍷) This collection of wooden and concrete jungle cottages has spotless interiors; some rooms are furnished with noticeably ornate dressers and vanities, others have subtle dark wood trimming. A dozen white wooden beach chairs orbit the adorable kidney-bean-shaped swimming pool.

Hin Lor

Quiet Hin Lor sits along the coast right before the main road takes a dramatic plunge into Hat Rin.

Boom's Cafe Bungalows (☎ 0 7723 8318; www.boomscafe.com; bungalows 300-1000B; 🍷) Staying at Boom's is like visiting the Thai family you never knew you had. The friendly owners lovingly tend their sand acreage and dote on the contented clientele. No one seems to mind that there's no swimming pool, since the curling tide rolls right up to your doorstep.

WEST COAST BEACHES

The west coast has seen a lot of development in recent years, now that there's a smooth road between Thong Sala and Chalok Lam. The atmosphere is a pleasant mix between the east coast's quiet seclusion and Hat Rin's sociable vibe.

Ao Nai Wok

If you need to be near Thong Sala, consider staying along Nai Wok, only a few kilometres north.

Grand Sea Resort (☎ 0 7737 7777; www.grandsearesort.com; bungalows 1200-3000B; 🍷 🍷) A good choice for those wanting a bit of sand close to Thong Sala, Grand Sea feels like a collection of wooden Thai spirit houses.

Ao Hin Kong to Hat Chaophao

After a quieter stretch of coastline, there's a continuous string of resorts that start at the northern end of Hin Kong. Like Hat Yao up the coast, Hat Chaophao's rounded beach is lined with a variety of bungalow operations. There's an inland lake further south, and a 7-Eleven to cure your midnight munchies.

Loy Fa (☎ 0 7737 7319; loyfabungalow@yahoo.com; Srithanu; bungalows 400-1200B) Loy Fa scores high

marks for its friendly staff, charming gardens, and sturdy huts guarding sweeping ocean views. Modern bungalows tumble down the promontory onto an uber-private sliver of ash-coloured sand.

Sunset Cove (☎ 0 7734 9211; www.thaisunsetcove.com; Hat Chaophao; bungalows 1500-3350B; 🍷 🍷 🍷) There's a feeling of Zen symmetry among the forested assortment of boutique bungalows; the towering bamboo shoots are evenly spaced along the cobbled paths weaving through brush and boulders. The beachside abodes are particularly elegant, sporting slatted rectangular windows and barrel basined bathtubs.

Pha-Ngan Paragon (☎ 08 4728 6064; www.phanganparagon.com; Hat Chaophao; bungalows 2500-13,000B; 🍷 🍷 🍷) A tiny hideaway with seven rooms, Paragon's décor incorporates stylistic elements from the ancient Khmer, India and Thailand, without forfeiting any modern amenities. The 'royal bedroom' deserves a special mention – apparently the canopied bed has been imported from Kashmir.

Hat Son

Little Hat Son sits between two rocky cliffs.

Tantawan Bungalows (☎ 0 7734 9108; www.tantawanbungalows.com; bungalows 450-550B; 🍷) Little Tantawan sits high up in the jungle like a tree house, boasting soaring sea views from the sprinkle of rugged bungalows. Guests can take a dip in the trapezoidal swimming pool or enjoy the sunrise on their small bamboo porches. Don't forget to try the tasty French and Thai dishes at the on-site restaurant (see p225).

Haad Son Resort (☎ 0 7734 9104; www.haadson.info; bungalows 1000-8000B; 🍷 🍷 🍷) The word 'complex' has a double meaning at this vast resort; we suggest leaving a trail of breadcrumbs along the serpentine paths if you ever want to find the way back to your room. The poshest rooms aren't worth the baht, so go for the budget digs; they're simple, but you'll have access to all of the on-site amenities.

Hat Yao

One of the busier beaches along the west coast, Hat Yao sports a swimmable beach, numerous resorts and a few extra conveniences such as ATMs and convenience stores.

Ibiza (☎ 0 7734 9121; www.ibizabungalows.com; bungalows 150-1300B; 🍷) Ibiza brings Hat Rin's youthful backpacker vibe up the west coast to Hat Yao. The no-frills bungalows are run-

of-the-mill, but the friendly staff, appealing central garden, and cheap rates keep budget travellers coming back for more. An on-site ATM machine is an added perk, as are the free barbecue dinners on Saturday nights.

High Life (☎ 0 7734 9114; www.highlifebungalow.com; bungalows 500-2000B; 🍷 🍷) We can't decide what's more conspicuous: the dramatic ocean views from the infinity-edged swimming pool, or the blatant double entendre in the resort's name. True to its moniker, the 25 bungalows, of various shapes and sizes, sit on a palmed outcropping of granite soaring high above the cerulean sea. Advance bookings will set you back an extra 200B.

Long Bay Resort (☎ 0 7734 9057; www.long-bay.com; bungalows 1200-3000B; 🍷 🍷 🍷) The Long Bay is a solid midrange option that has all the bells and whistles of a top-end resort. Most of the action takes place at the large swimming pool, while golf carts plod around shuttling guests to various activities. The cheapest rooms are slightly ramshackle; we recommend upgrading to a 'deluxe' bungalow. Visitors staying in the air-conditioned accommodation receive complimentary breakfast.

Haad Yao Bay View (☎ 0 7734 9193, 0 7734 9141; www.haadyao-bayviewresort.com; r & bungalows 1500-5000B; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Sparkling after a recent facelift, this conglomeration of bungalows and hotel-style accommodation looks like a tropical mirage on Hat Yao's northern headland. Vacationers, in various states of undress, linger around the large turquoise swimming pool catching rays and Z's. Others nest in their private suites amid polished hardwood floors and wicker daybeds.

Hat Salad

One of the best beaches on the island, Hat Salad has a string of quality accommodation along the sand.

Cookies Salad (☎ 0 7734 9125, 08 3181 7125; www.cookies-phangan.com; bungalows 1200-2400B) The resort with a tasty name has delicious Balinese-styled bungalows orbiting a two-tiered lap pool tiled in various shades of blue. Shaggy thatching and dense tropical foliage gives the realm a certain rustic quality, although you won't want for creature comforts.

Green Papaya (☎ 0 7737 4182; www.greenpapayaresort.com; bungalows 4000-7500B; 🍷 🍷 🍷) The polished wooden bungalows at Green Papaya

are a clear standout along the lovely beach at Hat Salad; however, they come at quite a hefty price.

Ao Mae Hat

The northwest tip of the island has excellent ocean vistas, and little Ko Ma is connected to Pha-Ngan by a stunning sandbar.

Pha-Ngan Utopia Resort (☎ 0 7737 4093; www.phanganutopia.com; bungalows 1500-3000B; 🏠 📶 🚶) It's pretty audacious to name one's resort 'Utopia', but the owners have done an excellent job of creating an idyllic jungle retreat perched high above the sea. Our favourite rooms – the two-storey villas – slope down the mountainside and have an entire level dedicated to an extra-large Jacuzzi.

NORTHERN BEACHES

Stretching from Chalok Lam to Thong Nai Pan, the dramatic northern coast is a wild jungle with several stunning and secluded beaches.

Ao Chalok Lam (Chaloklum)

The cramped fishermen's village at Chalok Lam is like no other place on Ko Pha-Ngan. The conglomeration of teak shanties and huts is a palpable reminder that the wide-reaching hand of globalisation has yet to touch some parts of the world. The village has several restaurants and plenty of amenities such as grocery stores, laundry, internet, and motorbike-rental places. Sǒrng-tǎa-ou ply the route from here to Thong Sala for 50B to 100B per person.

Malibu (☎ 0 7737 4013; bungalows 300-1300B; 🏠) The casual vibe around the large backyard lagoon sets Malibu apart from the other budget bungalows around Chalok Lam. A drink-wielding hut, stationed on the private sandbar, lures guests of every ilk. The cheapest huts are a bit rough around the edges – try the higher-priced air-conditioned rooms for a restful sleep.

Mandalai (☎ 0 7737 4316; www.mymandalai.com; r 2750-5600B; 🏠 📶 🚶) Like a white-washed Riyadh from a distant Arabian land, this small boutique hotel quietly towers over the surrounding shantytown of fishermen's huts. Floor-to-ceiling windows command views of tangerine-coloured fishing boats in the bay and the intimate wading pool in the hidden cloister. The only palpable flaw is the oc-

casional stench of sun-drying squid in the village nearby.

Hat Khom

Hat Khom is smaller and more peaceful than Bottle Beach next door. There's a dirt road leading to Chalok Lam, and water taxis are available as well (50B to 100B).

Coconut Beach (☎ 0 7737 4298; www.coconutbeach-bungalows.com; bungalows 250-800B) Grab a Corona, 'cause this is the perfect place to shoot one of those idyllic beach beer commercials. Wooden and concrete bungalows, all with green metal roofing, lie splayed across a forested acreage of swaying palms and scraggly mangroves.

Hat Khuat (Bottle Beach)

This isolated dune, commonly known as Bottle Beach, has garnered a reputation as a low-key getaway, and has thus become quite popular. During high season, places can fill up fast so it's best to try and arrive early. Grab a long-tail taxi boat from Chalok Lam for 50B to 100B.

Bottle Beach I (☎ 0 7744 7572, 0 7744 5151; www.bottlebeach.com; bungalows from 400B; 🏠) These bungalows make up one-third of a lodging triumvirate, all with the same name (and all owned by different members of the same family). The best of the bunch, Bottle Beach I's older rooms offer excellent beach views while showing visible signs of wear and tear. Newer avatars are further field, but are spacious and constructed from polished wood and concrete.

The other Bottle Beach brothers are:

Bottle Beach II (☎ 0 7744 5156; www.bottlebeach.com; bungalows 200-600B) Rows of rustic huts.

Bottle Beach III (☎ 0 7744 5127; www.geocities.com/haadkhuad_resort; bungalows 800-3200B; 🏠) Newer but pricey.

Ao Thong Nai Pan

Thong Nai Pan sort of looks like buttocks, with two rounded bays separated by a thin promontory; Ao Thong Nai Pan Yai (*yài* means 'big') is the northern half, and Ao Thong Nai Pan Noi (*nóy* or *noi* means 'little') curves just below. There are no paved roads to Thong Nai Pan, although sǒrng-tǎa-ou can make the trek for 100B to 200B depending on your departure point.

Dolphin (bungalows 500-700B) Dolphin gives yuppie travellers a chance to rough it in style, while granola-types will soak up every inch of the laid-back charm. Quiet afternoons

are spent lounging on a comfy cushion in one of the small pagodas hidden throughout the jungle. Lodging is only available on a first-come basis.

Baan Panburi (☎ 0 7723 8599; www.baanpanburi-village.com; bungalows 500-2500B; 🏠) This swanky place still offers basic huts with shared bathroom. The midrange bungalows have gabled roofs with straw moustache-like awnings dangling over the front porches. The restaurant here is great.

Panviman Resort (☎ 0 7744 5101-9; www.panviman.com; r & bungalows from 4900B; 🏠 📶 🚶) One of the most charming (and expensive) places on Ko Pha-Ngan, Panviman sits atop a narrow promontory separating two picturesque bays. The older rooms look like the captain's quarters on a wooden steam ship, while others incorporate the ashen rock face into the shape of the dwelling. Cheaper hotel options give off a '70s tropical hunting-lodge vibe, but are spacious and immaculate nonetheless.

Santhiya (☎ 0 7723 8333; www.santhiya.com; bungalows from 10,000B; 🏠 📶 🚶) Beautiful Santhiya feels a bit out of place on Ko Samui's shabby younger brother – Ko Pha-Ngan is accustomed to bamboo huts, not maid service and flamboyant gestures of Siamese design. Warm outdoor lighting flickers on after sunset and drenches the curving palms and thatched bungalows in a rich caramel hue.

EAST COAST BEACHES

Robinson Crusoe; eat your heart out. The east coast is the ultimate hangout for hermits. For the most part, you'll have to hire a boat to get to these beaches, but water taxis are available at every pier.

Than Sadet & Hat Thong Reng

The ultra-remote coast of Ao Thong Reng has a striking, intimate beach that has been visited by many of Thailand's kings. Most travellers only come to see the waterfalls, but basic accommodation is also available.

Than Sadet Resort (bungalows 150-300B) Hat Thong Reng's only accommodation, these huts are one of Ko Pha-Ngan's best-kept secrets. The friendly owners manage two classes of bungalows – primitive shacks, and sturdier cabins that are considerably more spacious. Seclusion seekers will love the boulder-strewn property, wild forest, and private beach.

Mai Pen Rai (☎ 0 7744 5090; www.thansadet.com; Than Sadet; bungalows 450-800B; 🏠) 'Mai Pen Rai'

can be interpreted as the Thai 'don't worry, be happy', which isn't too surprising since this bay elicits nothing but sedate smiles. Bungalows have been constructed with panels of straw weaving, and some have aluminium sheeting on the gabled roofs.

Hat Thian & Hat Yuan

Geographically, Hat Thian is quite close to Hat Rin; however, there are no roads and the crude hiking trail is lengthy and confusing. Ferry taxis are available from Hat Rin for less than 100B. Hat Yuan has a few bungalow operations, and is quite secluded as there are no roads connecting this little beach to Hat Rin down the coast.

Barcelona (☎ 0 7737 5113; Hat Yuan; bungalows 200-600B) Solid wood huts come in two shades: natural wood or creamy white. They climb up the hill on stilts behind a palm garden and have good vistas and jovial staff.

Beam Bungalows (☎ 0 7927 2854, 08 6947 3205; Hat Thian; bungalows 300-500B) Beam is set back from the beach and tucked behind a coconut palm grove. Charming wooden huts have dangling hammocks out front, and big bay windows face the ocean through the swaying palms.

Sanctuary & Wellness Centre (☎ 08 1271 3614; www.thesanctuary-kpg.com; Hat Thian; bungalows 400-4000B) A friendly enclave promoting well-being and natural harmony, this relaxing retreat offers everything from yoga classes, to detox, dancing, and hydrotherapy. Accommodation, in various manifestations of twigs, is scattered around the resort, married to the natural surroundings. You'll want to Nama-stay forever.

Eating

Ko Pha-Ngan's no culinary capital, especially since most visitors quickly absorb the lazy lifestyle and wind up eating at their accommodation. If you're feeling adventurous, check out the tasty fare at independent restaurants scattered around the island. It's best to steer clear of the barbecue seafood stands – even though you're on a tropical island, the stuff that wasn't sold yesterday is kept on ice over night and sold again the following day.

HAT RIN

This bustling burb has the largest conglomeration of restaurants and bars on the island, yet surprisingly most of them are quite lacklustre. The infamous Chicken Corner is a popular

intersection stocked with several poultry peddlers promising to cure the munchies, be it noon or midnight.

Dong 100% (Map p214; ☎ 0 7737 5245; dishes 40-100B; ☺ lunch & dinner) This vegetarian joint gets an honourable mention for its snicker-inducing name. The diner-cum-tattoo parlour seems like a bit of a mismatch at first, but what's better than a spicy curry to distract your mind from the sting of a bamboo needle? Oh, and don't worry, the food's not made with a 100% dong.

Mr K (Map p214; ☎ 0 7737 5470; dishes 50-80B; ☺ 24hr) Our favourite joint at 'Chicken Corner', Mr K offers local eats all night long. Cheesy Thai soap operas blare on the TV, and there's dirt-cheap beer to wash down your meal.

Same Same Restaurant (Map p214; ☎ 0 7737 5200; dishes 50-200B; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This raucous chow house gives the oft-heard phrase 'same same, but different' a whole new meaning – where else can you get *pât tai* with a side of Frikadeller (Swedish meatballs)? Crowds gather for live music, pub-crawls, or to watch sports on the large TVs. If you like the food, enrol in the on-site cooking school (p217).

Bamboozle (Map p214; ☎ 08 7896 4941; dishes 70-180B; ☺ 3pm-midnight) Head up the steps and go 'south of the border' for nachos, burritos and chilli *rellenos*. The Mexican theme continues behind the bar – wash your meal down with a pitcher of margaritas.

Om Ganesh (Map p214; ☎ 0 7737 5123; dishes 70-190B; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) At the entrance, 'Namaste' is written in blue tile. Customers meditate over curries, biryani rice, roti and lassis beneath a ceiling of painted clouds and cartoon murals of the Himalayas. Two-person platters cost 350B.

Lazy House (Map p214; ☎ 0 7737 5432; dishes 90-270B; ☺ lunch & dinner) This joint used to be the owner's apartment – everyone liked his cooking so much that he decided to turn the place into a restaurant and hangout spot. Today, Lazy House is easily one of Hat Rin's best places to veg in front of a movie with a scrumptious shepherd's pie.

Lucky Crab (Map p214; dishes 100-400B; ☺ lunch & dinner) Lucky Crab is your best bet for seafood in Hat Rin. Rows of freshly caught creatures are presented nightly atop miniature long-tail boats loaded with ice. Once you've picked your prey, grab a table inside amid dangling plants and charming stone furnishings.

Outback Bar (Map p214; ☎ 0 7737 5126; dishes 120-250B; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner; ☺) Stop by this expat eatery and coat your stomach with international faves such as burgers and salad, before inhaling 'buckets', shooting some pool, and heading off into the night.

SOUTHERN BEACHES

Lately, the night market in the heart of Thong Sala is all the rage; prices hover around 30B per dish, there are heaps of BBQ stalls and plenty of plastic patio furniture for sitting.

Boom's Cafe (☎ 0 7723 8318; www.boomscafe.com; Hin Lor; dishes 30-100B; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) A family-run operation nestled between impassable boulders, this secluded option promises scrumptious local meals, scraped together at a moment's notice as the super-smiley owner cheerfully clangs her weathered pots and pans.

Somtum Inter (☎ 0 7737 7334; Ban Tai; dishes 40-100B; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Right next door to Boat Ahoy (and owned by the same family), the Somtum announces its speciality in the restaurant's name: spicy papaya salad (pronounced *sôm-dam* in Thai). Other Isan favourites include spicy minced pork and grilled chicken.

A's Coffee Shop and Restaurant (☎ 0 7737 7226; Thong Sala; dishes 40-170B; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner 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.

Boat Ahoy (☎ 0 7723 8759, 0 7737 7334; www.firstvilla.com/boatahoy; Ban Tai; dishes 40-180B; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) A compound of open-air pavilions encased in slats in mahogany wood, Boat Ahoy offers a night's worth of fun. After feasting on a variety of delicious Asian victuals, grab a drink at the boat-shaped bar, or re-enact the Spice Girls' reunion tour in your own private karaoke suite.

Ando Loco (☎ 08 6780 7200; Ao Bang Charu; meals from 59B; ☺ dinner) This outdoor Mexican hangout looks like an animation cell from a vintage Hanna-Barbera cartoon, with assorted kitschy accoutrements such as paper-maché cacti. Sling back a super-sized margarita and test for skills on the beach volleyball court.

Anahata (☎ 08 6952 4563; dishes 120-180B; Ban Khai; ☺ lunch & dinner) Sunday evening at Anahata is the ultimate gorge-fest; feast on an endless assortment of Mediterranean dishes including

couscous, salads, pasta and meats for 290B. These dishes, and much more, are also served throughout the week. Anahata is sometimes closed for lunch during low season.

WEST COAST BEACHES

Sandy Bay Restaurant (☎ 0 7734 9119; Hat Yao; dishes 60-180B; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Sandy Bay Bungalow's long-running restaurant in the centre of Hat Yao gets good reviews for its Thai and Western dishes. Tables are sprinkled along the sand, some within arm's reach of the ocean.

Tantawan (☎ 0 7734 9108; www.tantawanbungalow.com; Hat Son; dishes 60-200B; ☺ lunch & dinner) This charming teak hut, nestled amongst jungle fronds, is dripping with clinking chandeliers made from peach coral and khaki-coloured seashells. Diners sit in a sea of geometric cushions while gobbling up some of the tastiest Thai and French-inspired dishes on the island.

Absolute Island (☎ 0 7734 9109; Hat Yao; dishes 60-250B; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) The name sounds like a Swedish vodka ad, but it's only by coincidence that the menu has some Scandinavian classics. Actually, every traveller will find a dish from his or her native country – Absolute's menu is so vast it really needs an index. Try the egg sandwich baguette with a side of massaman curry (or maybe a taco) while staring out over the beautiful bay.

Me'n'u (☎ 08 9289 7133, 08 7897 0025; www.menu-phangan.com; Hin Kong; dishes 60-300B; ☺ dinner Tue-Sun) Me'n'u (get it?) is a newer addition to Pha-Ngan's palette (palate?). It's decidedly gourmet, with dishes such as grilled duck in a black currant sauce and crab salad with caviar dressing. There's a kids' menu too, so you can bring the brood along.

NORTHERN & EAST COAST BEACHES

Most of the dining options on this part of the island are affiliated with accommodation – the only exception being several small restaurants in the fishermen's village at Chalok Lam.

Bamboo Hut (☎ 0 7737 5139; Hat Yuan; dishes 40-180B; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) High up the rocks at the northern end of the beach, this spacious eatery has awesome views of the bay. It's a good thing there are some comfy bungalows on the premises; you might like your dinner so much that you'll want to stay for breakfast.

Nong Nook (☎ 08 6953 1908; Chalok Lam; dishes from 60B; ☺ dinner) This little gem, hidden among

the clutter of Chalok Lam, serves a fresh assortment of seafood with big smiles from the staff.

Cucina Italiana (Chalok Lam; pizza 180B; ☺ dinner) Cucina Italiana is starting to have a cult following on Ko Pha-Ngan. The friendly Italian chef is passionate about his food, and creates all of his dishes from scratch. On Thursday and Sunday, you can order unlimited toppings on your oven-roasted pizza for only 180B.

Drinking

Every month, on the night of the full moon, pilgrims pay tribute to the party gods with trance-like dancing, wild screaming, and glow in the dark body paint. The throngs of bucket-sippers and fire twirlers gather on the infamous Sunrise Beach (Hat Rin Nok) and party til the sun replaces the moon in the sky.

Recently, a few other noteworthy party spots have opened up around the island – they're definitely worth a look if you want something a bit mellower.

HAT RIN

Hat Rin is the beating heart of the infamous full moon fun, and the area can get pretty wound up even without the influence of lunar phases. There are loads of bars and dance clubs crammed along Hat Rin Nok; the following are some of our favourites.

Paradise Bungalows (Map p214; ☎ 0 7737 5244) The full moon's Garden of Eden, if you will, Paradise basks in its celebrity status as the genesis of the lunar *loco*-motion. Check out the guest DJs spinning international beats at the Paradise Shark Tent.

Drop-In Bar (Map p214; ☎ 0 7737 5374) A fan favourite during full moon festivities, this dance shack blasts the chart toppers that everyone knows and loves. The other nights of the year are equally as boisterous – someone's always twirling a fire stick, while others are winning 'buckets' of whisky by scoring football goals.

Tommy Bar (Map p214; ☎ 0 7737 5215) Tommy Bar, one of Hat Rin's largest venues, lures the masses with black lights and trance music blaring on the sound system. Drinks are dealt to partiers from a large wooden structure that looks a bit like Noah's ark.

Mellow Mountain (Map p214; ☎ 0 7737 5347) Also called 'Mushy Mountain' (you'll know why when you get there), this trippy hangout sits

is really three islands joined by a sand bar during low tide.

About the only thing of historic interest on the island is a large boulder, which has the initials of King Rama V, commemorating his royal visit in 1900.

Information EMERGENCY

Police station (☎ 0 7745 6631) Just north of Mae Hat near the beach.

INTERNET ACCESS

If your accommodation doesn't offer internet access, there are heaps of places to check your email in Hat Sai Ri and Mae Hat. You may find that certain useful tourism websites have been firewalled at internet cafés affiliated with travel agencies. Several restaurants offer wi-fi connections – most have a bright 'wi-fi' sticker or sign at the entrance. Rates are generally 2B per minute, with a 20B minimum and discounts if you log on for one hour.

LAUNDRY

After a few dives, you'll probably want to wash your swim trunks (especially if you saw a shark and 'accidentally' peed your wetsuit). Almost every bungalow operation (and even some restaurants) offers laundry service. One kilo of laundry should be 30B, although operations closer to the beach tend to charge 40B. You may want to ask your diving instructor where (s)he gets their washing done, as sometimes items get conveniently lost. Express service is usually available for 60B per kilo.

MEDIA

The ubiquitous *Koh Tao Info* booklet lists loads of businesses on the island and goes into some detail about the island's history, culture and social issues. The small section detailing nearby destinations is also quite helpful.

MEDICAL SERVICES

All divers must sign a medical waiver before exploring the sea. If you have any medical condition that might hinder your ability to dive (including mild asthma), you will be asked to get medical clearance from a doctor on Ko Tao. Consider seeing a doctor before your trip as there is no official hospital on the island and the number of qualified medical professionals is limited. Also, make sure your traveler's insurance covers scuba diving. **Badalveda**

(☎ 0 7745 6580, 08 6272 4618, for diving emergencies 08 1989 9482; www.badalveda.com; Mae Hat; ☎ on call 24hr) has a hyperbaric chamber and emergency evacuation services. It has a related physician's clinic in Hat Sai Ri. The **Ko Tao Evacuation Centre** (☎ 0 7745 6572; www.sssnetwork.com) is also on call.

MONEY

As a general rule, there are 24hr ATMs at every 7-Eleven on the island. We also found more than five ATMs orbiting the ferry docks at Mae Hat. Money-exchange windows are also at the pier, in Hat Sai Ri, and at the far end of Mae Hat near Ko Tao's main road.

Siam City Bank (☎ 0 7745 61533, ☎ 8.30am-3.30pm Mon-Fri) In Mae Hat.

POST

Post Office (☎ 0 7745 6170, 0 7745 6555) A 10 to 15 minute walk from the pier; at the corner of Ko Tao's main road and 'Mae Hat Boulevard'.

TELEPHONE

There are numerous places in Mae Hat, Hat Sai Ri and Chalok Ban Kao offering long-distance phone services. Mobile-phone service can be a tad temperamental in the more remote portions of the east coast.

TOURIST INFORMATION

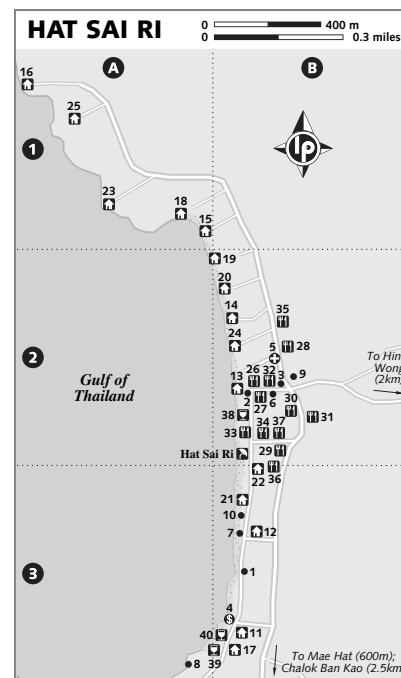
There's no official TAT office on Ko Tao.

Dangers & Annoyances

There's nothing more annoying than enrolling in a diving course with your friends and then having to drop out because you scraped your knee in a motorcycle accident. The roads on Ko Tao are horrendous, save for the main drag connecting Sai Ri to Chalok Ban Kao. While hiring a moped is extremely convenient, this is not the place to learn how to ride. The island is rife with abrupt hills and sudden sand pits along gravel trails. Even if you escape unscathed from a riding experience, we've heard reports that some shops will claim that you damaged your rental and will try to extort you for some serious bling. See p239 for information about renting a motorcycle.

Sights

Sightseeing on Ko Tao revolves around its scenic **beaches**. While the beautiful Hat Sai Ri offers spectacular sunset vistas, it's by no means the stunning, secluded beach



you were dreaming about. To find a hidden cove, venture through the jungle to the undeveloped east and northern coasts. Follow the weaving dirt road east from Sai Ri until you roll down the steep hill at **Hin Wong** – a stunning, rounded bay. There's no beach here, but the water is impossibly clear and the giant schools of black sardines look like an oozing oil spill as they swish through the sea. Hundreds of thick coconut palms bend over the cove as though they were trying to drink the water. The boulder-strewn inlet at **Ao Tanot** (Tanote Bay) has a similarly magical juxtaposition of jungle and sea. **Ao Leuk**, further south, is the choice retreat for many, and **Ao Thian Ok** (Shark Bay) is another stunning option, although despite the nickname, there are no sharks in the bay.

In the far north, **Ao Mamuang** (Mango Bay) has become a choice spot for scuba rookies – the bay is shallow and swimmable, with a picture-perfect backdrop featuring a rolling forest dotted with the occasional pitched roof of a hidden bungalow. In good weather you can get there by sörng-tăa-ou; otherwise take a water taxi.

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Just off the island's northwest coast, the rugged **Ko Nang Yuan** is a lonely island featuring three dramatic cone-shaped peaks connected by a remarkable sandbar. This idyllic beige strip is a stunning natural phenomenon that finds its way onto virtually every local postcard. Ferries from Mae Hat and water taxis from northern Sai Ri stop regularly at Ko Nang Yuan. There is a 100B levy to access the island.

LOCAL VOICE: DIVE SCHOOL ADVICE

Chris Clark is a videographer who specialises in underwater work. He owns and operates ACE Marine Images in Sai Ri.

With so many scuba centres on Ko Tao, how should one go about picking a dive school? As a videographer, I've worked with many dive centres on the island and can safely say that there are many great schools to choose from. My suggestion would be to arrive on Ko Tao, find a place to crash, and then chill out for a couple days before starting your dive adventure. This will give you plenty of time to have a look around the island. Chances are you'll bump into a dive instructor at a bar who can give you some insider advice. Chopper's Bar is always a good choice (p237). You'll also meet loads of divers already enrolled in various schools – they'll be frank about their experiences. When picking a dive shop, you also have to decide what kind of school you want. If you're looking for a family vibe, then don't head to one of the centres certifying 30 people a day – try a place that is only working with a small group. If you want the party scene there are tonnes of places offering a sociable bar scene in the evening.

As told to Brandon Presser

Activities DIVING

If you've been toying with the idea of diving on your Thailand adventure, Ko Tao is the place to do it. The island certifies more divers than any other place in the world, which means that prices are low and quality is high as dozens of dive shops vie for your baht.

It's no surprise that this underwater playground has become exceptionally popular; the waters are crystal clear, there are loads of reefs and temperatures feel like bathwater. The best dive sites are found at offshore pinnacles within a 20km radius of the island (see the boxed text, opposite). The local marine wildlife includes grouper, moray eels, batfish, bannerfish, barracuda, titan triggerfish, angelfish, clownfish (Nemos), blue-spotted stingrays, a slue of sharks, and the occasional whale shark.

When you alight at the pier in Mae Hat, swarms of touts will try to coax you into staying at their dive resort with promises of a 'special price for you'. There are over 40 dive centres on the island, so it's best to arrive armed with the names of a few reputable dive schools. Remember: the success of your diving experience (especially if you are learning how to dive) will largely depend on how much you like and respect your instructor. There are other factors to consider as well, such as the size of your diving group, the condition of your equipment, and the condition of the dive site, to name a few. Smaller dive centres, such as New Way Diving, have familial atmospheres, while larger outfitters, such as Ban's Diving School or Big Blue, enjoy a

party-prone vibe with on-site accommodation, restaurants and bars. For information about these, and other standout operations, consult our list (opposite). Check out also p291 for details on dive sites in Thailand and p383 for general diving information.

Diving prices are standardised across the island so there's no need to spend your time hunting around for the best deal. A PADI Open Water Certification course costs 9800B; an SSI Open Water Certification is slightly less (9000B because you do not have to pay for instructional materials). An Advanced Certification will set you back 8500B, a rescue course is 9500B, and the Divemaster program costs 25,000B. Fun divers should expect to pay 1000B per dive, or 7000B for a 10-dive package. These rates include gear, boat, instructor and snacks. Discounts are given if you bring your own equipment. Be wary of dive centres that offer too many price cuts – safety is paramount, and a shop giving out unusually good deals is probably cutting too many corners.

Most dive schools can hook you up with cheap (or even free) accommodation. Expect larger crowds between December and April, and a monthly glut of wannabe divers after the full moon party on Ko Pha-Ngan.

The following list includes a variety of standout operations on the island.

Ban's Diving School (Map p229; ☎ 0 7745 6466; www.amazingkohtao.com; Hat Sai Ri) A well-oiled dive machine and relentlessly expanding conglomerate, Ban's certifies more divers per year than any other scuba school in the world. Classroom sessions may be conducted in large groups, but there's good amount of individual attention in

the water. A breadth of international instructors means that students can learn to dive in their native tongue. The affiliated resort is quite popular with party-seekers (see p233).

Big Blue Diving (Map p229; ☎ 0 7745 6415; 0 7745 6772; www.bigbluediving.com; Hat Sai Ri) This midsize diving centre gets praise for its awesome staff and youthful vibe. Big Blue usually hires videographers to create purchasable DVDs of the final dives of your Open Water certification. Divers of every ilk can score dirt-cheap accommodation at their resort (see p233).

Buddha View (☎ 0 7745 6074; www.buddhaview-diving.com; Chalok Ban Kao) Another big dive operation on Ko Tao, Buddha View offers the standard fare of certification and special programs for technical diving (venturing beyond the usual parameters of recreational underwater exploration). Discounted accommodation is available at their friendly resort.

Crystal (☎ 0 7745 6107; www.crystaldive.com; Chalok Ban Kao) Divers who choose this large scuba school will benefit from the friendly management, a multilingual staff, air-conditioned classrooms and an on-site swimming pool to learn the ropes. Groups are capped at six people, and there are spacious boats to shuttle divers to the sites. Crystal offers accommodation in both Mae Hat (see p234) and Sai Ri.

New Heaven (☎ 0 7745 6587; www.newheavendive-school.com; Chalok Ban Kao) The owners of this small diving operation dedicate a lot of their time to preserving the natural beauty of Ko Tao's underwater sites by conducting regular reef checks and contributing to reef restoration. A special CPAD research diver certification program is available in addition to the regular order of programs and fun dives.

New Way Diving (Map p229; ☎ 0 7745 6527; www.newwaydiving.com, www.scubadivingkohtao.com; Hat Sai Ri) One of our favourite diving centres on Ko Tao, this small school has built an impressive reputation based upon small

diving groups and a friendly yet professional atmosphere. Their early-morning excursions depart before the larger schools, which means less traffic in the water and higher chances of seeing large pelagics. It's not too uncommon to go out for a post-dive dinner with the school. The manager can organise discounted accommodation nearby and there's free internet access at the dive shop.

Planet Scuba (☎ 0 7745 6110; www.planet-scuba.net/kohtao; Mae Hat) Planet Scuba is affiliated with a larger network of schools called the Samui International Diving School Group. They were the first company in Southeast Asia to be awarded PADI's Career Development Centre rating. Special courses using Nitrox (oxygen-enriched air tanks) are also on offer. Accommodation can be arranged at one of four locations around Mae Hat and Sai Ri.

Scuba Junction (Map p229; ☎ 0 7745 6164; www.scuba-junction.com; Hat Sai Ri) Scuba Junction guarantees a maximum of four people per diving group. 'Fun' divers get to use a Suunto diving computer for extra charge.

SNORKELLING

Snorkelling is a popular option for travellers. Orchestrating your own snorkelling adventure is simple, since the bays on the east coast have small bungalow operations offering equipment for 100B to 200B.

Almost every dive operation offers snorkelling day-trips tailored to the customers' desires. Prices range from 500B to 700B (usually including gear, lunch and a guide/boat captain) and stop at various snorkelling hotspots around the island. **Laem Thian** is popular for its small sharks, **Shark Island** has loads of fish (and ironically no sharks), **Hin Wong** is known for its crystalline waters, and **Light House Point**, in

TOP FIVE KO TAO DIVE SITES

- **Sail Rock** (34m max depth) Near Ko Pha-Ngan, features a massive rock chimney with a vertical swim-through, and large pelagics such as barracuda, kingfish and the occasional whale shark.
- **Chumphon Pinnacle** (36m max depth) West of Ko Tao, has a colourful assortment of sea anemones along the four interconnected pinnacles. The site is home to schools of giant trevally, tuna, and large grey reef sharks. Whale sharks are known to pop up once in a while.
- **Green Rock** (25m max depth) An underwater jungle gym featuring caverns, caves and small swim-throughs. Rays, grouper and triggerfish are known to hang around. It's a great place for a night dive.
- **Japanese Gardens** (12m max depth) Between Ko Tao and Ko Nang Yuan, it is a low-stress dive site perfect for beginners. There's plenty of colourful coral, and turtles, stingrays and pufferfish often pass by.
- **White Rock** (29m max depth) Home to colourful corals, angelfish, clown fish and territorial triggerfish. Another popular spot for night divers.

the north, offers a dazzling array of colourful sea anemones.

Don't forget to wear sunscreen on your back and consider wearing a T-shirt (very effective) – time quickly passes when you hover near the surface hobnobbing with pelagics. **AC Tours** (☎ 0 7745 6197; Mae Hat; 550-650B) Trips depart at 9am daily and stop at five different sites. Lunch included.

Golden Travel (☎ 0 7745 6978; Mae Hat; 550-700B) Day-long trips to some of the 20-odd snorkelling sites. Located across from the Songserm pier in Mae Hat. Rates include lunch, equipment and taxi service. Staff also organise fishing excursions, sunset cruises, and speedboat trips to stunning Ang Thong Marine Park.

OTHER WATER ACTIVITIES

In recent years, **underwater photography** and filmmaking has become quite popular on Ko Tao. Many scuba schools hire professional videographers to film the final dives of your Open Water diving certification. If this piques your interest, consider enrolling in an underwater video and film course. **ACE Marine Images** (Map p229; ☎ 0 7745 7054; www.acemarkineimages.com), located beside Chopper's Bar & Grill in Sai Ri, is one of Thailand's leading underwater film-production companies. The exceptionally knowledgeable and friendly staff happily runs courses and internships for those who are serious about gaining field experience.

If hanging out underwater doesn't appeal to you, there are a few things you can do on the surface. Most bungalows and midsize dive centres offer sundry watersports such as kayaks or surfboards. 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 while you ride a variety of items including water skis, wakeboards or even an inflatable sumo suit. Two exhausting 10-minute sessions will cost you 1250B. Fishing enthusiasts can swing their tackle out at sea by contacting the **Adventure Centre** (☎ 08 9019 1761; Mae Hat), which arranges all-day fishing *seafaris* for around 1500B (minimum two people).

SPA & YOGA

If you are paying more than 2500B for your bungalow, then you probably have access to on-site spa services. Budget travellers looking to be pampered will find several good places to splurge. **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. While the spas on Ko Samui outshine it, Jamahkiri is one of the best on Ko Tao, and the prices are relatively cheap. Stunning cliffside bungalows are also available (see p236). Call for free transport, or swing by their wooden storefront near the Mae Hat pier. **Charm Churee Villa** (☎ 0 7745 6393; www.charmchureevilla.com), just south of Mae Hat, is another solid choice. Rejuvenation suites are dripping with Balinese decoration and sit close to the water's edge along a rugged escarpment of boulders. Seaside villas are on offer here as well (see p235). In the heart of Mae Hat, **Royal Thai Massage** (☎ 0 7745 6472) offers quality spa treatment at low prices. One-hour massages start at 250B, and aromatherapy costs 400B.

The Japanese-style bathhouse at **Yakuzen** (☎ 0 7745 6229, 08 4837 3385), in Mae Hat, changes things up by offering this unique form of relaxation and rejuvenation.

Ko Tao's only full-time yoga studio is a beautiful wooden *sāh-lah* (often spelt *sala*) located on the forested grounds of **Blue Wind** (☎ 0 7745 6116, 0 7745 6015), a collection of budget bungalows along Sai Ri Beach (see opposite). Classes are 300B.

OTHER ACTIVITIES

Ko Tao Bowling & Mini Golf (☎ 0 7745 6316; 📍 noon-midnight), on the main road between Mae Hat and Chalok Ban, has several homemade bowling lanes where the employees reset the pins after every frame (300B per hour). The 18-hole mini-golf course has a landmark theme – putt your ball through Stonehenge or across the Golden Gate Bridge. Petanque is also available, and if you're feeling snackish, the restaurant dishes out finger food favourites such as wings and ribs.

Sleeping

If you are planning to dive while visiting Ko Tao, your scuba operation might offer you discounted accommodation as an extra incentive. Some schools have on-site lodging, while others have deals with nearby bungalows. It's important to note that you only receive your scuba-related discount on the days you dive. So, if you buy a package, and decide to take a day off in the middle, your room rate will not be discounted on that evening. Also, a restful sleep is important in between dives, so scope out these 'great room deals' before saying yes – some of them are one roach away from

being condemned. During the busier months, discounts are often unavailable and prices can spike when resorts are at full capacity.

There are also many sleeping options that have absolutely nothing to do with the island's diving culture. Ko Tao's secluded eastern coves are dotted with stunning retreats that still offer a true getaway experience, but these can be difficult to reach due to the island's dismal network of roads. You can often call ahead and arrange to be picked up from the pier.

HAT SAI RI (SAIREE BEACH)

Giant Sai Ri is the longest and most developed strip on the island, with a string of dive operations, bungalows, travel agencies, minimarkets and internet cafés. The narrow 'yellow brick road' stretches the entire length of the beach (watch out for motorcycles).

Budget & Midrange

Some of the places listed here with midrange options have one cheap room/bungalow, which will most likely already be booked out.

Here & Now (Map p229; ☎ 0 7745 6730; www.hereandnow.be; bungalows 100-700B) At Here & Now, the crashing waves sound exactly like those ocean recordings people use to relax when they're not on vacation. The bungalows aren't particularly stellar, however there's something rather charming about climbing over gargantuan boulders to reach your teetering abode.

Big Blue Resort (Map p229; ☎ 0 7745 6050; www.bigbluediving.com; r 200-1000B; 📍 📍) This scuba-centric resort has a summer camp vibe – diving classes dominate the daytime, while evenings are spent en masse, grabbing dinner or watching fire twirling. Both the basic fan bungalows and motel-style air-conditioned rooms offer little when it comes to views, but who has the time to relax when there's an ocean out there to explore?

Sunlord Bungalows (Map p229; ☎ 0 7745 6139; bungalows 300-400B) Just north of the action on the beach, these basic-but-sturdy bungalows trickle down a rugged escarpment that abruptly dumps into the sea. The owner, an older Thai lady, should host 'Let's Make a Deal' – she's ready at a moment's notice to strike a bargain for your lodging.

Blue Wind (Map p229; ☎ 0 7745 6116, 0 7745 6015; bluewind_wa@yahoo.com; bungalows 300-900B; 📍) Hidden within a cluster of bodacious lodging options, Blue Wind offers a breath of fresh

air from the high-intensity dive resorts strung along Sairee Beach. Sturdy bamboo huts are peppered along a dirt trail between the beachside bakery and a newly built yoga *sāh-lah*. Large, tiled cabins are also available, boasting air-con, hot showers and TVs.

AC Resort (Map p229; ☎ 0 7745 6197; acresort@yahoo.com; info@phoenix-divers.com; bungalows 300-1900B; 📍 📍 📍) A large sign, half-covered by a man-made waterfall, welcomes vacationers to the party at AC Resort. Backpackers will find a standard issue of well-worn huts. The air-conditioned cottages have gargantuan beds, but the bathrooms are microscopic. Divers get a 30% to 40% discount, which increases depending on how long you stay.

Sairee Cottage (Map p229; ☎ 0 7745 6126, 0 7745 6374; saireecottage@hotmail.com; bungalows 400-1500B; 📍) The air-con bungalows are hard to miss since they've been painted in various hues of fuchsia. Low prices mean low vacancy – so arrive early to score one of the brick huts facing out onto a grassy knoll.

our pick Ban's Diving Resort (Map p229; ☎ 0 7745 6466, 0 7745 6061; www.amazingkohtao.com; r 400-3000; 📍 📍 📍) This dive-centric party palace offers a palette of quality accommodation from basic backpacker digs to sleek hillside villas. Post-scuba chill sessions happen on Ban's prime slice of beach, or at one of the two swimming pools tucked within the strip of jungle between the two motel-like structures. Evenings are spent at the bar downing international cuisine and 'buckets' in equal measure.

Seashell Resort (Map p229; ☎ 0 7745 6299; www.seashell-resort.com; bungalows 450-3800B; 📍) Several bungalows have ocean views from their porches (a rarity in Sai Ri), while others sit in a well-maintained garden of colourful vegetation and thin palm trunks. Seashell welcomes divers and non-divers alike.

In Touch (Map p229; ☎ 0 7745 6514; bungalows 500-1200B; 📍) Older bungalows are a mishmash of bamboo and dark wood. Several rounded air-conditioned rooms have a cave theme – it's all very 'Flintstones', except the shower nozzle hasn't been replaced with the trunk of an elephant. The bustling restaurant can get a bit rowdy in the evening.

Pranee's (Map p229; ☎ 0 7745 6080; bungalows 500-2000B) Tidy budget bungalows, made of wood and rattan-woven walls, are shaded by coconut-wielding palms. A new fleet of air-con options are an uninspiring mix of white

and blue, but some still have that new car smell. Afternoon excursions, like a visit to nearby Ko Nang Yuan, are easily executed since a few long-tail boat taxis park along Pranee's beachfront.

Bow Thong (Map p229; ☎ 0 7745 6266; bungalows 500-3400B; 🏠 🚗) A member of the more upscale northern section of Hat Sai Ri, Bow Thong has high prices but the rooms aren't up to snuff. This friendly resort is, however, worth a second look if you are planning to dive, as a couple of affiliated scuba schools can give you a hefty discount.

Sunset Buri Resort (Map p229; ☎ 0 7745 6266; bungalows 700-2500B; 🏠 🚗) A long beach-bound path is studded with beautiful white bungalows featuring enormous windows and flamboyant temple-like roofing. The kidney-shaped pool is a big hit, as are the large beach recliners sprinkled around the resort.

Top End

Koh Tao Cabana (Map p229; ☎ 0 7745 6250; www.kohtaocabana.com; bungalows 3000-6300B; 🏠 🚗) This prime piece of beachside property offers timber-framed villas and crinkled white adobe huts dotted along the landscape between sea-swept boulders and verdant bursts of luscious palms. Bric-a-brac cheers the colourful bungalows: bamboo message cylinders dangle at the doors and stone gnomes greet you with a naughty smirk as you shower in the indoor/outdoor bathrooms.

Thipwimarn (Map p229; ☎ 0 7745 6409; www.thipwimarnresort.com; bungalows 3100-4900B; 🏠 🚗) Tucked away just north of the bustling beach, this cliff-side retreat is undisputedly the poshest address in the Sairee Beach neighbourhood. The steep curvature of the property promises dramatic evening panoramas from every balcony as the flaming equatorial sun plunges into the crystalline sea.

Koh Tao Coral Grand Resort (Map p229; ☎ 0 7745 6431; www.kohtaocoral.com; bungalows 3200-4500B; 🏠 🚗) The plethora of pink façades at this family-friendly option feels a bit like Barbie's Thai beach dream house. Cottage interiors are coated in cheery primary colours framed by white truncated beams while pricier digs have a more distinctive Thai flavour, boasting dark lacquered mouldings and gold-foiled art. Guests can participate in an array of organised off-site activities such as fishing, hiking, kayaking and boat-

ing, although it might be hard to tear yourself away from the relaxing resort and large beachside pool.

HAT AO MAE (MAE HAT)

All ferry arrivals pull up at the pier of the busy village of Mae Hat. There are several guesthouses in town, but the more charming accommodation options extend in both directions along the sandy beach. The options to the south are much more secluded and relaxed.

North of the Pier

Mr J Bungalow (☎ 0 7745 6066, 0 7745 6349; bungalows 250-1000B) Even though Mr J tried to charge us 50B for his business card, we still think he's well worth the visit. The eccentric owner entangles guests in a philosophical web while tending to his flock of decent bungalows. Ask him about reincarnation if you want to hear some particularly twisted conjectures.

View Cliff Resort (☎ 0 7745 6353; www.viewcliff.com, www.kohtaoholiday.com; bungalows from 400, r 1500B; 🏠) A photogenic strip of Italianate double-decker bungalows links the narrow street with the rocky shoreline. The perfectly manicured lawns feel almost like the green of a golf course, and large rounded balconies overhead offer glimpses of the turquoise sea. If a competition was held for Ko Tao's biggest smile, the affable manager would surely win.

Tommy's Dive Resort (☎ 0 7745 6039; bungalows 700-2500B) Follow the undulating curve of the motel's porches as they slope down a hill, and check out the seaside views from the 700B rooms – these are the best bang for your baht at Tommy's. The convenient location between the bustle of Mae Hat and Sai Ri is a big plus.

Crystal (☎ 0 7745 6107; www.crystaldiver.com; bungalows 800-1500B; 🏠 🚗) At Crystal, you'll probably hear the phrase 'what a dive!' – the guests are talking about scuba, not the accommodation. Divers can grab a room for as little as 300B, and if you enrol in a course, they'll knock the price down to 200B (500B for air-con.)

South of the Pier

Take a right after exiting the main pier. Most of these establishments will require a taxi ride.

Sai Thong Resort (☎ 0 7745 6868; www.saihong-resort.com; bungalows 300-2500B; 🏠 🚗) As the rush of Hat Ao Mae dwindles away along the island's southwest shore, Sai Thong emerges

along sandy Hat Sai Nuan. Bungalows, in various incarnations of weaving and wood, have colourful porch hammocks and palm-filled vistas. Guests frequent the restaurant's relaxing sun deck and open-air spa pagodas.

Tao Thong Villa (☎ 0 7745 6078; bungalows from 500B) Very popular with long-termers seeking peace and quiet, these funky, no-frills bungalows have killer views. Tao Thong actually straddles two tiny beaches on a craggy cape about halfway between Hat Ao Mae and Chalok Ban Kao. The pair of neighbouring swim spots is the perfect place for a hermitic afternoon.

Utopia Suites (☎ 0 7745 6729, 08 9816 5654; r 800-1600B, ste 1800-2800) Utopia's apartment-style accommodation is a stone's throw from the busy Mae Hat pier. The spacious suites have all the amenities you left behind at home: a kitchen, living room, TV, and the list goes on.

Sensi Paradise Resort (☎ 0 7745 6244; www.sensi-paradise.com; bungalows 2500-9000B; 🏠 🚗) There are one too many geckos in the bathroom to call this place 'natural chic', but if you like to be one with nature then you'll appreciate that these rustic cottages are somehow simultaneously upscale. Friendly caretakers and several airy teak *sāh-lahs* add an extra element of charm.

our pick Charm Churee Villa (☎ 0 7745 6393; www.charmchureevilla.com; bungalows 3200-12,200B; 🏠 🚗) Tucked gently under sky-scraping palms, the luxuriant villas of Charm Churee are dedicated to the flamboyant spoils of the Far East. Gold-foiled oriental demigods pose in arabesque positions, with bejewelled eyes frozen in a Zen-like trance. Staircases, chiselled into the rock face, dribble down a palmed slope revealing teak huts strewn across smokey boulders. The villas' unobstructed views of the swishing indigo waters are nothing short of charm-ing.

CHALOK BAN KAO

Ao Chalok, about 1.7km south of Ban Mae Hat, is the third-largest concentration of accommodation on Ko Tao, but can feel a lot more crowded because the beach is significantly smaller than Hat Sai Ri and Mae Hat.

JP Resort (☎ 0 7745 6099; bungalows 400-700B) This little cheapie promises a colourful menagerie of prim motel-style rooms stacked on a small scrap of jungle across the street from the sea. Sun-soaked rooms have polished pastel-coloured linoleum floor, and many of the tiled bathrooms have been recently refurbished. The beachside restaurant, doused in blaz-

ing yellow paint, doubles as a restaurant and hangout spot.

Tropicana (☎ 0 7745 6167; www.koh-tao-tropicana-resort.com; r from 400) With some intense refurbishment underway, Tropicana is upping the ante when it comes to quality budget digs. Low-rise hotel units are peppered across a garden campus providing fleeting glimpses of the ocean between fanned fronds and spiky palms.

Viewpoint Resort (☎ 0 7745 6666; www.kohtaoviewpoint.com; bungalows 800-1300B) A hot-shot architect from Bangkok allegedly designed this friendly, family-run retreat at the end of civilization. Cottages are spartan but airy and well maintained. Some have partial sea views; others quietly sit in a gorgeous hillside garden that thrums with cicadas at night.

New Heaven Resort (☎ 0 7745 6422; newheavenresort@yahoo.co.th; r & bungalows 1200-3900B) Just beyond the clutter of Chalok Ban Kao, New Heaven proffers colourful huts perched over impossibly clear waters. A steep path of chiselled stone tumbles down the shrubby rock face revealing unique bungalows with views ripped straight from the pages of *National Geographic*. The fan rooms are an unbelievable steal especially since evenings welcome cool gusts from the moonlit bay.

Ko Tao Resort (☎ 0 7745 6133; www.kotaoresort.com; r & bungalows 1600-3000B; 🏠 🚗) The entrance is a throwback to the days when taste and architecture weren't particularly synonymous (the '70s perhaps?), but the facilities themselves fit the true definition of a resort. The rooms are well stocked, water sports equipment is on offer, and there are several bars ready to serve you a variety of fruity cocktails.

EAST COAST BEACHES

The serene east coast is, without a doubt, one of the best places for escapists in this entire region of Thailand. The views are stunning, beaches are silent, yet all of your creature comforts are 10 minutes away. Accommodation along this coast is organised from north to south.

Hin Wong

A sandy beach has been swapped for a coast that is boulder-strewn, but the water is crystal clear. The road to Hin Wong is paved in parts, but sudden sand pits and steep hills can toss you off your motorbike.

Hin Wong Bungalows (☎ 0 7745 6006, 08 1229 4810; bungalows from 300B) Pleasant wooden huts are

scattered across vast expanses of untamed tropical terrain – it all feels a bit like TV’s *‘Lost’* (minus the body snatchers). A rickety dock juts out just beyond the breezy restaurant and dips into the lucent bay. This line of weathered wooden planks is the perfect place to dangle your legs and watch schools of black sardines slide through the cerulean water.

View Rock (☎ 0 7745 6548/9; viewrock@hotmail.com; bungalows 300-400B) When coming down the dirt road into Hin Wong, follow the signs as they lead you north (left) of Hin Wong Bungalows. View Rock is precisely that: views and rock; the hodge-podge of wooden huts, which looks like a secluded fishing village, is built into the steep rockface offering stunning views of the bay.

Laem Thian & Ao Tanot

Laem Thian is a scenic cape with a small patch of sand. Ao Tanot (Tanote Bay) is slightly more populated than some of the other eastern coves, but it’s still quiet and picturesque. There are a couple of simple shops in the area.

Laem Thian (☎ 0 7745 6477; r & bungalows 400-1500B; ☎) Nestled far from civilization on a lush stretch of jungle, this small boulder-filled resort is the only operation on Laem Thian. The modern rooms tend to be better than the bungalows, so long as you don’t mind the ugly façades. The road here is very rough; call for a pick-up.

Black Tip Dive Resort (☎ 0 7745 6488; www.blacktip-kohtao.com; Ao Tanot; bungalows 600-2800B; ☎) Part dive shop and water-sports centre, Black Tip also has a handful of lovely wooden bungalows with thatched roofing. The scuba centre is housed in a wacky structure made of rippling white adobe and strange geometric protrusions. Guests get a 50% discount when enrolled in a diving course and ‘fun divers’ get 25% off room rates.

Ao Leuk & Ao Thian Ok

The dirt roads to Ao Leuk and Ao Thian Ok are steep, rough and rutty, especially towards the end; don’t attempt it on a motorcycle unless you’re an expert. Both bays are stunning and serene.

Ao Leuk Bungalows (☎ 0 7745 6692; bungalows 400-1500B) Lodging at Ao Leuk comes in several shapes and sizes ranging from backpacker shacks to modern family-friendly options. The elevated restaurant is a tad cheesy but

has top views. Flickering torches and ambient cackles of curious cicadas accent the jet-black evenings.

Jamhokiri Resort & Spa (☎ 0 7745 6400; www.jamhokiri.com; bungalows 6900-13,900B) The flamboyant décor at this whitewashed estate is decidedly focused around tribal imagery. Wooden gargoyle masks and stone fertility goddesses abound amid swirling mosaics and multi-armed statues. Feral hoots of distant monkeys confirm the overarching jungle theme, as do the thatched roofs and tiki-torched soirees. The resort’s seemingly infinite number of stone stairways can be a pain, so it’s a good thing Ko Tao’s most luxurious spa is located on the premises (see p232).

North Coast

Ao Mamuang

The isolated rocky bay of Ao Mamuang has great snorkelling and a dramatic backdrop of jungle and rocky hills.

Mango Bay Grand Resort (☎ 0 7745 6097; www.mangobaygrandresortkohtaotailand.com; bungalows 1400-3000B; ☎) Spacious mahogany villas with burgundy roofs are perched high on stilts above the ashen boulders surrounding the bay. A thin necklace of mosaic-lined paths winds through the tropical shrubbery, connecting the secluded cottages. The on-site restaurant offers delicious sea views from the wood-planked veranda.

Ko Nang Yuan

Little Ko Nang Yuan sits just off the coast of Ko Tao, easily accessible by regular ferry, by Lomprayah catamaran, and by water taxis that depart from Mae Hat and Sai Ri.

Ko Nanyuan Dive Resort (☎ 0 7745 6088, 0 7745 6093; www.nanyuan.com; bungalows 1500-7000B; ☎) While the obligatory 100B tax to access the island is a bit off-putting, and the inflated prices positively reek of a monopoly, Nanyuan Dive Resort is nonetheless a charming place. The rugged collection of wood and aluminium bungalows winds its way across three coolie-hat-like conical islands connected by an idyllic beige sandbar. The resort also boasts the best restaurant on the island, but then again, it’s the only place to eat...

Eating

With super-sized Samui lurking on the horizon, it’s hard to believe that quaint little Ko Tao is a worthy opponent in the gastronomy

category. Most resorts offer on-site dining, and stand-alone establishments are multiplying at lightning speed in Hat Sai Ri and Ao Hat Mae. The diverse population of the diver community means a broad range of international cuisine, including Mexican, French, Italian, and even African. On our quest to find the tastiest Thai fare on the island, we discovered, not surprisingly, that our favourite local meals were being dished out at small, unnamed restaurants on the side of the road.

HAT SAI RI (SAIREE BEACH)

Sairee Beach is tiny Tao’s unofficial capital of cuisine, offering an impressive assortment of international flavours. In the evenings there are several foods carts scattered around the village serving tea and treats. Stop by the 7-Eleven beside Big Blue Resort to check out Ally The Pancake Man as he dances around, like an Italian chef making pizza, while cooking your tasty dessert. He’s become quite the local legend and has even appeared on YouTube.

Budget

Coffee Boat (Map p229; ☎ 08 5784 4831; dishes 30-70B; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) A perilous set of rickety steps hoists nibblers up into the tiny tree-house-like hut. The service isn’t big on smiles, but the scrumptious curries and low prices will have you coming back for seconds.

Tong (Map p229; ☎ 0 7745 6458; dishes 30-70B; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) The food doesn’t win any awards, but the menu is vast and cheap. Ogle their hideous pet fish while waiting for your takeaway order, or grab a table in the large dining room. Laundry service is available for 30B per kilogram.

Café Corner (Map p229; dishes 30-100B; ☎ breakfast & lunch) The flaky *pain au chocolat* can easily be mistaken for a Parisian patisserie. Customers enjoy their desserts at swirling stainless steel countertops while watching movies on a swank plasma TV. Swing by at 5pm to stock up for tomorrow morning’s breakfast; the scrumptious baked breads are marked down 50% before being tossed at the end of the night.

E-san Inter (Map p229; ☎ 0 7745 7003; dishes 40-90B; ☎ 10.30am-11pm) If you’ve never had *sôm-dam tai* (spicy papaya salad), here’s the perfect place to start. The matronly owner caters each serving to meet her customer’s tastes – ask for four chillies if you’re feeling really adventurous (which is still milder than the original

Thai recipe). Try the recommended side order of sticky rice and BBQ chicken.

Blue Wind Bakery (Map p229; ☎ 0 7745 6116; dishes 40-150B; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This beachside shanty dishes out Thai favourites, Western confections and freshly blended fruit juices. Enjoy your thick fruit smoothie and flaky pastry while reclining on tattered triangular pillows.

Chopper’s Bar & Grill (Map p229; ☎ 0 7745 6641; dishes 60-200B; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) A great place to widen that beer belly, Chopper’s offers live music, sports on the big-screen TVs, billiards, and a cinema room upstairs. Friday nights are particularly popular; the drinks are ‘two for one’, and dishes are half-priced as well. Cheers for scored goals are interspersed with the exaggerated chatter about creatures seen on the day’s dive.

East Restaurant (Map p229; ☎ 0 7745 6416; dishes 75-250B; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Big Blue Resort’s busy chow house, located about 2m from the crashing tide, dispatches the best personal pizzas on the island. The joint fills up around sunset with divers who chuckle at the daily dive bloopers shown on the big-screen TV.

El Gringo (Map p229; ☎ 0 7745 6323; dishes 80-150B; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) As if there weren’t already enough nicknames for white people in Thailand. The self-proclaimed funky Mexican joint slings burritos of questionable authenticity at two locations in Sai Ri and a third in Ao Hat Mae.

Portobello (Map p229; ☎ 0 7745 7029; dishes 80-250B; ☎ lunch & dinner) Portobello pays tribute to the boot-land by serving up favourites such as ravioli stuffed with shrimp and crab, or personal pizzas topped with scrumptious imported cheeses. Dessert enthusiasts can earn a place in the ‘hall of fame’ by devouring a slice of thick chocolate cake sans hands.

Papa’s Tapas (Map p229; ☎ 0 7745 7020; papas.tapas.kohtao@gmail.com; plates 90-130B; ☎ dinner) Another member of Ko Tao’s new designer diner army, this swish set-up takes a stab at nouveau cuisine with sample-sized platters. Those with a big wallet (and a little foresight) can order the Chef’s Special – a menu of unique dishes that requires 24 hours to procure and prepare (2500B). Reservations recommended.

Zanzibar (Map p229; ☎ 0 7745 6452; dishes 90-140B; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Grab a seat in the sea of velvety cushions – Zanzibar’s pressed sandwiches are a welcomed break

from the endless supply of rice and noodles. The tribal spears have been hung on the burnt sienna walls, so there's no jungle fare at this joint, just an assortment of yuppie condiments betwixt two slices of whole grain bread.

Midrange

Rim Lae (Map p229; ☎ 0 7745 6505; dishes 150-300B; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Ko Tao Cabana's *piece de resistance*, Rim Lae is perched high over the gaping bay offering exquisite views of the bobbing long-tail boats. Dinnertime is particularly special as scorching sunsets are on order almost every evening.

Morava (Map p229; ☎ 0 7745 6270; dishes 160-300B; 🍴 dinner) This Sairee splurge has out-swanked the competition with the effective use of dark purples and Zen stepping stones. The food can be a little bit hit or miss, so have your friendly waiter educate you on the house favourites (the omelettes are a surprisingly good choice).

HAT AO MAE (MAE HAD)

Yang (☎ 0 7745 6226; dishes 30-70B; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) For mounds of cheap Thai fare, try Yang – Tong's Mae Hat cousin (see p237).

Cappuccino (☎ 08 7896 8838; cappuccino_koh tao@hotmail.com; dishes 30-90B; 🍴 breakfast & lunch) Cappuccino's décor falls somewhere between the New York deli on *Seinfeld* and a French *brasserie* – it's a great place to grab a coffee and croissant while waiting for the ferry.

Farango Pizzeria (☎ 0 7745 6205; dishes 60-220B; 🍴 lunch & dinner) Ko Tao's first farang restaurant spins tasty steaks, seafood and Italian dishes alongside matching wine selections. The cheery atmosphere drips with burnt yellows and Spanish-themed posters of flamboyant matadors.

Zest Coffee Lounge (☎ 0 7745 6178; dishes 70-190B; 🍴 breakfast & lunch) Zest is a great spot to indulge in the street-café lifestyle. Idlers can nibble confections or nurse their cup of joe all the way 'til sunset. A second location has opened in Hat Sai Ri (Map p229).

Café del Sol (☎ 0 7745 6578; dishes 70-250B; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner; 🍷) Even the pickiest eater will be satisfied with the menu's expansive selection of 'world cuisine'. The focus is namely European (French and Italian) with specialities such as homemade liver paté, bruschetta, and tender steaks imported from New Zealand. There's free wi-fi.

CHALOK BAN KAO

New Heaven Restaurant (☎ 0 7745 6462; lunch dishes 60-180B, dinner dishes 60-350B; 🍴 lunch & dinner) The best part about New Heaven Restaurant is the awe-inducing view of Shark Bay (Ao Thian Ok) under the lazy afternoon moon. The turquoise waters below are so translucent that the curving reef is easily visible from your seat. The menu is largely international, and there are nap-worthy cushions tucked under each low-rise table.

Drinking

Ko Tao's favourite pastime, after diving, is drinking. And there's definitely no shortage of places to get tanked. Flyers detailing upcoming parties are posted on various trees and walls along the west coast (check at the 7-Elevens in Hat Sai Ri). Also keep an eye out for posters touting 'jungle parties' held on nondescript patches of scrubby jungle in the centre of the island. The tides also play an integral part in the island's night scene. On evenings when the tides are high, there tends to be less raucous revelling along Hat Sai Ri since there's not a lot of room to go and get wild.

Just remember: don't drink and dive.

Fizz (Dry Bar; Map p229; ☎ 08 7887 9495; Hat Sai Ri) Recline on mattress-sized pillows and enjoy designer cocktails while listening to Moby, or Enya, mixed with hypnotic gushes of the rolling tide.

Lotus (Map p229; ☎ 0 7745 6358) Lotus, next door to Fizz, is the de facto late-night hangout spot along the northern end of Hat Sai Ri. Muscular fire twirlers toss around flaming batons, and the drinks are so large there should be a life-guard on duty.

Whitening (☎ 0 7745 6199; Ao Hat Mae) Artsy folk will appreciate the venue's interesting use of positive and negative space. Drinkers will love the groovy atmosphere; the 'floors' are sandy, torches glow in the evening, and house music gently wafts in the background.

Dirty Nelly's Irish Pub (☎ 0 7745 6569; Ao Hat Mae) True to its name, Dirty Nelly's is unapologetically Irish; the draught beers, the managers – everything's been imported straight from the motherland (except the weather). There's billiards, sports on the big-screen TV and regular weekend BBQs.

Tattoo Bar (☎ 08 9291 9416; Ao Hat Mae) Just 30m south of Whitening (at the edge of town), Tattoo is a casual affair with a cosy area for TV-watching. If you're hungry, try the mas-

sive Aussie burger, homemade meat pies and sausage rolls.

Dragon Bar (☎ 0 7745 6423; Ao Hat Mae) This bar caters to those seeking snazzy, cutting-edge surroundings. There is a happening 'Communist chic' retro styling throughout, and everything's dimly lit, moody and relaxing. Dragon Bar is rumoured to have the best cocktails on the island.

Safety Stop Pub (☎ 0 7745 6209; Ao Hat Mae) A haven for homesick Brits, this pier-side pub feels like a tropical beer garden. Stop by on Sundays to stuff your face with an endless supply of barbecued goodness.

Clumped at the southern end of Sai Ri Beach, these three nightspots take turns reeling in the partiers throughout the week.

AC Party Pub (Map p229; ☎ 0 7745 6197)

In Touch (Map p229; ☎ 0 7745 6514)

Maya Bar (Map p229; ☎ 0 7745 6195)

Getting There & Away

As always, the cost and departure times are in flux. Rough waves are known to cancel ferries between October and December. Beware of travel agencies in Bangkok and on Ko Tao selling fake bus/boat or train/boat combinations.

The Lomprayah and Seatran Discovery service has bus/boat combination packages departing from Bangkok and passing through Chumphon. It is also quite hassle-free to take the train from Bangkok to Chumphon and switch to a ferry service (it's roughly the same price). For detailed information about travelling through Chumphon, see p187.

Many different types of ferries connect Ko Tao to the other oft-travelled destinations in the region. The **Lomprayah Catamaran** (☎ 0 7745 6176) shuttles passengers to Ko Pha-Ngan (1¼ hours) with continuing service to Ko Samui (two hours total). Daily boats depart Mae Hat at 9.30am and 3pm. The Ko Tao-bound catamarans leave Ko Samui at 8am and 12.30pm, and leave Ko Pha-Ngan at 8.30am and 1pm. **Seatran Discovery** (☎ 0 7745 6907) offers the exact same service, however, the boats are about 20 minutes slower, and the afternoon ferries headed to Ko Tao depart one hour after Lomprayah. The **Songserm Express** (☎ 0 7745 6274) is also similar, with a departure at 10am daily, stopping in Ko Pha-Ngan at 11.30am, Ko Samui at 12.45pm, and arriving at its final destination, Surat Thani, around 4.30pm. Boats heading to Ko Tao from Surat, leave

at 8am and arrive at 2.30pm. A **night ferry** departs Ko Tao at 10.30pm, and reaches Surat at 5.30am. Or, the boat leaves Surat at 11pm and alights at Ko Tao's Mae Hat pier around 8am.

Getting Around

Sörng-tāa-ou crowd around the pier in Mae Hat as passengers alight. If you're a solo traveller, you will pay 100B to get to Sai Ri and Chalok Ban Kao. Groups of two or more will pay 50B each. Rides from Sai Ri to Chalok Ban Kao cost 80B per person, or 150B for solo tourists. These are non-negotiable prices, and passengers must wait until each sörng-tāa-ou is full before it departs. If these taxis are empty, you will be asked to pay for the entire cab (300B to 500B). Prices double for trips to the east coast, but rain makes the roads harder to negotiate and drivers will raise the prices in these situations. If you know where you intend to stay, you can call ahead for a pick-up. Several guesthouses also send representatives to the pier offering free cab rides to the resort.

There is one paved road on Ko Tao, which connects Sai Ri to Chalok Ban Kao (stopping at Mae Hat in between). If you are planning to travel between these destinations then renting a motorcycle is a possibility (from 150B per day). The other roads on the island are rutty, sandy and often quite steep. See p228 for vital information about rentals and motorcycle safety.

Boat taxis depart from Ban Mae Hat, Chalok Ban Kao and the northern part of Hat Sai Ri (near Prawnee Bungalows). A boat ride to Ko Nang Yuan will set you back around 200B. Long-tail boats can be chartered for around 1500B a day, depending on the number of passengers.

MOTORCYCLE & 4WD

Ko Tao's noticeable lack of paved roads is a daredevil's dream. If you're one to throw caution (and common sense) to the wind (but, hopefully, not overmuch), then consider renting a motorbike or 4WD to explore the island's rugged jungle. There are loads of places to lease a vehicle, but be warned that scams are common (see p228). Go with **Lederhosenbikes** (☎ 08 1752 8994; www.lederhosenbikes.com; Ao Hat Mae; 🍴 8am-8pm Mon-Sat); this expat operation has a great selection of quality equipment, and promises honest service. Daily rental rates

begin with 150/200B for manual/automatic scooters, larger bikes start at 350B, four-wheelers are 500B, and four-seater 4WDs will set you back 1800B.

ANG THONG MARINE NATIONAL PARK

อุทยานแห่งชาติหมู่เกาะอ่างทอง

When Alex Garland wrote his cult novel *The Beach* (which later became a movie with the same name), he must have been dreaming about Ang Thong Marine National Park. Known as ‘Mu Ko Ang Thong’ in Thai, this stunning archipelago contains 42 small islands featuring sheer limestone cliffs, hidden lagoons, perfect peach-coloured beaches and an interesting menagerie of animals, such as otters, crab-eating monkeys, bats, cobras, iguanas, wild boar and over 50 species of bird.

February to April are the best months to visit this ethereal realm of greens and blues; crashing monsoon waves means that the park is almost always closed during November and December.

Sights

Every tour stops at the park’s head office on **Ko Wua Talap**, the largest island in the archipelago. The island’s viewpoint might just be the most stunning vista in all of Thailand. From the top, visitors will have sweeping views of the jagged islands nearby as they burst through the placid green water in easily anthropomorphized formations. The trek to the lookout is an arduous 450m trail that takes roughly an hour to complete. Hikers should wear sturdy shoes and walk slowly on the sharp outcrops of limestone. A second trail leads to **Tham Bua Bok**, a cavern with lotus-shaped stalagmites and stalactites.

The **Emerald Sea** (also called the Inner Sea) on **Ko Mae Ko** is another popular destination. This large lake in the middle of the island spans an impressive 250m by 350m and has an ethereal turquoise tint. A second dramatic viewpoint can be found at the top of a series of staircases nearby.

Across from Mae Ko, kayakers can paddle under the naturally occurring stone bridge on **Ko Samsao**. Beach bums should head to **Ko Tai Plao**, **Ko Wuakantang** and **Ko Hintap**, all of which feature stunning powder-sand beaches. There’s a shallow **coral reef** for snorkellers to explore just off the coast of Ko Tai Plao.

Tours

The best way to experience Ang Thong is through one of many guided tours departing from Ko Samui and Ko Pha-Ngan. The tours usually include lunch, hiking, snorkelling equipment, hotel transfers, and (fingers crossed) a knowledgeable guide. If you’re staying in luxury accommodation, there’s a good chance that your resort has a private boat for group tours. Some midrange and budget options also have their own boats, and if not, they can easily set you up with a tour operator. Dive centres on Ko Samui and Ko Pha-Ngan offer scuba trips to the park, although Ang Thong doesn’t offer the world-class diving that can be found around Ko Tao.

The following companies represent a small fraction of the tour operators in the region:

Blue Stars Kayaking (Map p194; ☎ 0 7741 3231; www.bluestars.info; 2000B) Based in Chaweng Beach on Ko Samui, offers guided sea-kayak trips in the park.

Grand Sea Tours (☎ 0 7742 7001; adult/child 1800/900B) Departs from Thong Sala pier on Ko Pha-Ngan. Hotel transfers and park admission fee are not included. Tours run on Monday, Wednesday and Friday.

Island Discovery (☎ 0 7723 8363; www.island-discovery.com) Based on Ko Pha-Ngan, offers private boat charters; 15,000B for a 15-person boat.

Island Safari (☎ 0 7625 4501; www.islandsafairtour.com; adult/child 1900/1400B) Operates from Samui and departs from Na Thon pier.

Liquid Leisure (☎ 08 7889 4077) Located in Ban Tai on Ko Pha-Ngan.

Sleeping

Ang Thong does not have any resorts; however, the national park has set up five bungalows on Ko Wua Talap, which each house between two and eight guests. The marine park also allows campers to pitch a tent in certain designated zones. Advance reservations can be made with the **National Parks Services** (☎ 0 7728 6025, 0 7728 0222; www.dnp.go.th; bungalows 500-1400B). On-line bookings are possible, although customers must forward a bank deposit within two days of making the reservation. Check out their website for detailed information.

Getting There & Around

The best way to reach the park is to catch a private day-tour from Ko Samui or Ko Pha-Ngan (located 28km and 32km away, respectively). The islands sit between Samui and the mainland pier at Don Sak; however, there are

no ferries that stop along the way. Smaller ferry ‘tours’ make the slow, two- to three-hour trip from Samui’s northern coast and Na Thon town. They leave around 8am and the return trip departs Ang Thong at 2.30pm. There’s officially an adult/child 400/200B admission fee for foreigners, although it should be included in the price of every tour. Private boat charters are also another possibility, although high petrol prices will make the trip quite expensive.

SURAT THANI

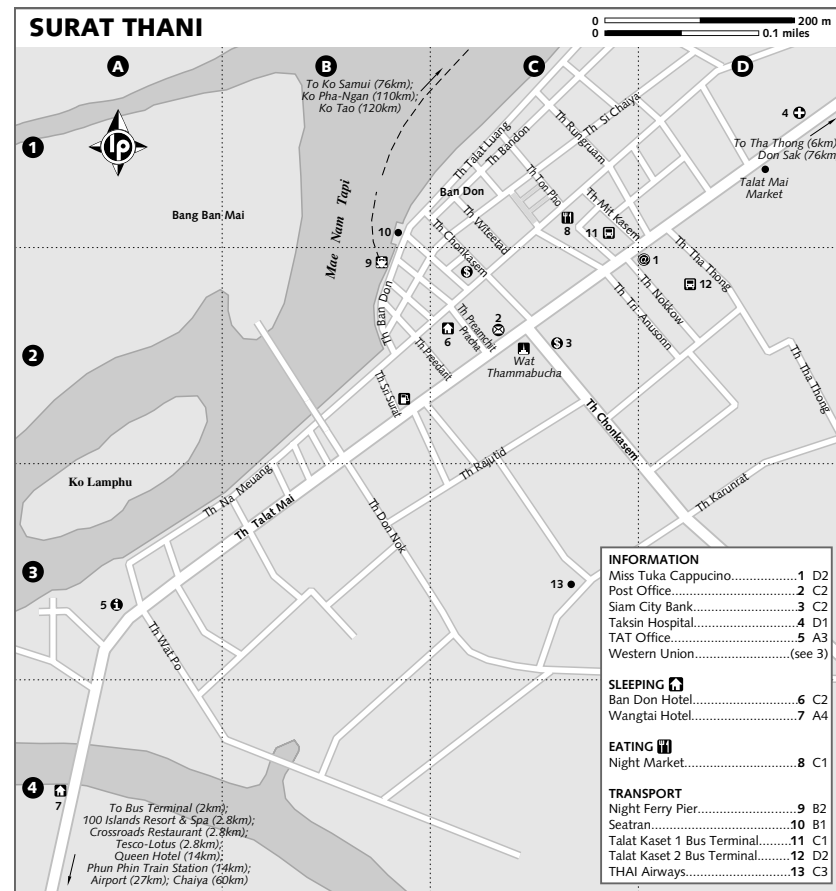
เมืองสุราษฎร์ธานี
pop 126,900

Known in Thai as ‘City of Good People’, Surat Thani was once the seat of the ancient

Srivijaya empire. Today, this busy junction has become a transport hub that indiscriminately moves cargo and people around the country. Travellers rarely linger here as they make their way to the deservedly popular islands of Ko Samui, Ko Pha-Ngan and Ko Tao.

Information

Scores of tourists pass through town every day sparking many unscrupulous travel agencies to develop innovative scams involving sub-standard buses, phantom bookings and surprise ‘extra’ fees. Not everyone’s a crook, of course; just make sure to ask a lot of questions and trust your instincts. Traffic in Surat Thani flows both ways, so when you happen upon



DETOUR: WAT SUAN MOKKHAPHALARAM

It's hard to believe that Chaiya, a sleepy town 60km north of Surat Thani, was once an important seat of the Srivijaya empire. These days, most foreigners who visit are on their way to the outstanding meditation retreats held at the progressive Suan Mokkhaphalaram monastery.

Surrounded by lush forest, **Wat Suan Mokkhaphalaram** (Wat Suanmokkh; www.suanmokkh.org), which means 'the Garden of Liberation', charges 1500B for a 10-day program that includes food, lodging, and instruction (although technically the 'teaching' is free). English-speaking retreats begin on the first day of every month and registration takes place the night before. Founded by Ajahn Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, arguably Thailand's most famous monk, the temple's philosophical teachings are ecumenical in nature, comprising Zen, Taoist and Christian elements, as well as the traditional Theravada schemata.

To reach the temple, located 7km outside of Chaiya, you can catch a 3rd-class local train from Phun Phin (10B to 20B, one hour), or catch a sǒrng-tǎa-ou (40B to 50B, 45 minutes) from Surat's Talat Kaset 2 bus terminal. If you're heading to Surat Thani by train from Bangkok, you can get off before Surat Thani at the small Chaiya train station. Take a motorcycle taxi from the station for an additional 40B.

tourists travelling in the opposite direction, ask them about their experiences.

Th Na Meuang has a bank on virtually every corner in the heart of downtown. If you're staying near the 'suburbs', the Tesco-Lotus has ATMs as well.

Miss Tuka Cappuccino (☎ 0 7721 2723; 442/307 Th Talat Mai; per hr 40B; ☎ 9am-midnight; ☎) Not the cheapest internet in town, but with real coffee, sandwiches, air-con and smiles on tap it's one of the better places to get digital.

Post Office (☎ 0 7727 2013, 0 7728 1966; Th Talat Mai) Across from Wat Thammabucha.

Siam City Bank (Th Chonkasem) Has a Western Union office.

Taksin Hospital (☎ 0 7727 3239; Th Talat Mai) The most professional of Surat's three hospitals. Just beyond the Talat Mai Market in the northeast part of downtown.

TAT office (☎ 0 7728 8817-9; tatsurat@samar.co.th; 5 Th Talat Mai; ☎ Sun-Fri) Friendly office southwest of town. Distributes plenty of useful brochures and maps, and staff speak English very well.

Sleeping

For a comfy night in Surat, escape the grimy city centre and hop on a sǒrng-tǎa-ou heading towards the Phangna district. When you climb aboard, tell the driver 'Tesco Lotus', and you'll be taken over 2km out of the town centre to a large, box-like shopping centre. When looking away from the mall, head right, and as you start walking you'll spot the billboards of at least four hotel options that have low prices and refreshingly modern amenities.

Sleeping options in the downtown area are cheaper, but many tend to offer 'by the

hour' service, so things can get a bit noisy as clients come and go. If you're on a very tight schedule or budget, consider zipping straight through town and take the night ferry (see opposite). When the weather is nice, you may even sleep better on the boat than in a noisy hotel. But if there's a chance of rain, beware – you're likely to be wet and weary in the morning.

Queen Hotel (☎ 0 7731 1003; 916/10-13 Th Sri Sawat, Phun Phin; r 200-400B; ☎) If you are stuck in the cruddy transport junction of Phun Phin, or want to catch a very early train, don't despair; there is one tolerable option. The Queen Hotel is just a block away from the train station. It's no luxury vacation, but at least you won't have to sleep on the streets. Have a look at a couple rooms before putting down your bags – some choices are larger and less dingy than others.

Ban Don Hotel (☎ 0 7727 2167; 268/2 Th Na Meuang; r 200-400B; ☎) This quieter spot with squeaky-clean rooms is the best budget value in the heart of Surat Thani. 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.

our pick 100 Islands Resort & Spa (☎ 0 7720 1150; www.roikoh.com; 19/6 Moo 3, Bypass Rd; r 590-1200B; ☎) Across the street from the suburban Tesco-Lotus, 100 Islands is as good as it gets in Thailand for under 600B. This teak palace looks out of place along the suburban highway, but inside, the immaculate rooms surround an overgrown garden and lagoon-like swimming pool.

Wangtai Hotel (☎ 0 7728 3020; www.wangtaisurat.com; 1 Th Talat Mai; r 790-2000B; ☎) Across the river from the TAT office, Wangtai tries its best to provide a corporate hotel atmosphere. Polite receptionists and tux-clad bellboys bounce around the vast lobby, and upstairs, rooms have unmemorable furnishings, but there are good views of the city from the upper floors.

Eating & Drinking

Surat Thani isn't exactly bursting with dining options. Head to the **night market** (commonly called Sarn Chao Ma; Th Ton Pho) for fried, steamed, grilled or sautéed delicacies – don't forget to try the crunchy insects, we hear they're a great source of protein. During the day many food stalls near the downtown bus terminal sell *kǒw gǎi òp* (marinated baked chicken on rice), which is very tasty.

Crossroads Restaurant (☎ 0 7722 1525; Bypass Rd; dishes 50-200B; ☎ 11am-1am) Located 2km southwest of Surat across from the Tesco-Lotus mall, Crossroads has a quaint bluesy vibe enhanced by dim lighting and live music. Try the oysters – Surat Thani is famous for their giant molluscs, and the prices are unbeatable.

GM Pub (30/16 Th Karunrat; dishes 40-140B; ☎ lunch & dinner) GM has a good mix of locals and faràng English teachers who return time and time again for the mellow atmosphere, tasty international menu, and wide selection of beer and cocktails.

Getting There & Away

In general, if you are departing Bangkok or Hua Hin for Ko Samui, Ko Pha-Ngan or Ko Tao, consider taking the train or a bus/boat package that goes through Chumphon rather than Surat. You'll save time, and the journey will be more comfortable.

AIR

There are two daily shuttles to Bangkok on **Thai Airways International** (THAI; ☎ 0 7727 2610; 3/27-28 Th Karunarat) for around 3000B (70 minutes).

BOAT

In the high season there are usually bus/boat services to Ko Samui and Ko Pha-Ngan directly from the Phun Phin train station. These services don't cost any more than those booked in Surat Thani and can save you a lot of waiting around. There are also several ferry and speedboat operators that connect Surat

Thani to Ko Tao, Ko Pha-Ngan and Ko Samui. All boat services to Samui depart from Don Sak (except the night ferry) and ticket prices include the price of the bus transfer. See the transport section of your desired destination for more details.

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 town's central night ferry pier at 11pm. These are cargo ships, not luxury boats, so bring food and water and watch your bags. If Thai passengers are occupying your assigned berth, it's best to grab a different one nearby rather than asking them to move.

BUS & MINIVAN

Most long-distance public buses run from the Talat Kaset bus terminals 1 and 2. Air-conditioned minivans leave from Talat Kaset 2 and tend to have more frequent departures than buses, although they're usually more expensive.

Air-conditioned buses and minibuses to Khao Sok National Park (two hours) can be booked through travel agencies and should cost no more than 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 as some pushy minivan drivers double as touts for Khao Sok hotels.

TRAIN

When arriving by train you'll actually pull into Phun Phin, a cruddy town 12km west of Surat. From Phun Phin, there are buses to Phuket, Phang-Nga and Krabi – some via Takua Pa, a junction city further west. Transport from Surat moves with greater frequency, but it's worth checking the schedule in Phun Phin first – you might luck out and save yourself a slow ride between towns. Local orange buses chug between Phun Phin and Surat (a 25-minute ride) every 10 minutes (15B). Buses in Phun Phin line up along a white wall with a Pepsi symbol just south of the station.

Fares from Bangkok with fan/air-con: 297/397B in 3rd class, 438/578B for a 2nd-class seat, 498/758B in an upper 2nd-class sleeper, 548/848B in a lower 2nd-class sleeper, and 1279B in 1st class. If you take an early evening train from Bangkok you'll arrive here 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 daily (with a nebulous one-hour lunch break somewhere between 11am and 1.30pm).

Getting Around

Air-conditioned vans to/from the Surat Thani airport cost around 70B per person and they'll drop you off at your hotel. Buy tickets at travel agencies or the **Thai Airways office** (☎ 07727 2610; 3/27-28 Th Karunarat).

To travel around town, sǒrng-tǎa-ou cost 10B to 30B, while sǎhm-lór (also spelt as sǎmlǎw; three-wheeled vehicles) charge from 30B to 40B.

Orange buses run from Phun Phin train station to Surat Thani every 10 minutes (15B, 25 minutes). For this ride, taxis charge 150B. Other taxi rates are posted just north of the train station (at the metal pedestrian bridge).

KHAO SOK NATIONAL PARK

อุทยานแห่งชาติเขาสก

If your leg muscles have atrophied after one too many days of beach-bumming, consider venturing inland to the wondrous Khao Sok National Park. Many believe this lowland jungle to be over 160 million years old, making it the oldest rainforest on the globe. This remarkable 646-sq-km reserve features dramatic limestone formations that pierce the sky, and waterfalls that cascade through juicy thickets drenched with rains and morning dew. A network of dirt trails snakes through the quiet park, allowing visitors to spy on the exciting array of indigenous creatures.

Information

The **park headquarters** (☎ 07739 5025; www.khaosok.com; admission 400B) and visitors centre are 1.8km off Rte 401, close to the Km 109 marker.

The best time of year to visit is between December and May – the dry season. During the June to November wet season, trails can be extremely slippery and waterlogged, and flash flooding is a common and sometimes fatal occurrence. On the other hand, animals leave their hidden reservoirs throughout the wet months, so you're more likely to stumble across some big fauna.

Sights & Activities

Khao Sok's vast terrain makes it one of the last viable habitats for **large mammals**. During the

wetter months you may happen upon bear, boar, gaur, tapirs, gibbons, deer, wild elephants, and perhaps even a tiger. There are also over 180 species of bird, as well as the world's largest flower, the rare *Rafflesia kerrii*. Found only in Khao Sok, these **giant flowers** can reach 80cm in diameter. They have no roots or leaves of their own; instead they live as parasites inside the roots of the liana, a jungle vine.

The stunning **Chiaw Lan Lake** sits about an hour's drive east of the visitor's centre. The lake was created in 1982 by an enormous shale-clay dam called Ratchaprapha (Kheuan Ratchaprapha or Kheuan Chiaw Lan). The 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.

Elephant trekking, kayaking and rafting are popular park activities. The hiking is also excellent, and you can arrange park tours from any guesthouse – just be sure you get a certified guide (they wear an official badge). Various hiking trails from the visitors centre lead to the waterfalls of **Sip-Et Chan** (4km), **Than Sawan** (9km) and **Than Kloy** (9km), among other destinations.

Sleeping

The road leading into the park is lined with charming fan bungalows offering comfortable digs in natural surroundings. Try to arrive in the daytime, so you can walk along the short road leading up to the park and pick where you want to stay.

The following options are recommended: **Jungle Huts** (☎ 07739 5160, 08 7264 6032; huts 150-350B) An excellent choice for backpackers. Free monkey and waterfall tours are on offer.

Art's Riverview Jungle Lodge (☎ 07739 5009; bungalows 350-550B) Pricier huts have verandas and hammocks, in a very tranquil setting.

Khao Sok Rainforest Resort (☎ 07739 5006; www.krabidir.com/khaosokrainforest; bungalows 400-600B) Has huts perched high on stilts along the snaking river.

In-house conservation programs target low-impact hiking and forest restoration.

Tree Tops River Huts (☎ 07739 5000; www.treetopsriverhuts.com; bungalows 420-1800B) A charming retreat with some bungalows built right into the trees.

Morning Mist Resort (☎ 07885 6185; bungalows 600B) Plenty of twigs and thatch with views of the jagged rock formations. Bookings should be made through the National Park Services.

Cliff & River Jungle Resort (☎ 08 7271 8787; www.thecliffandriver.com; bungalow 1800B) A beautiful property set just below the jagged silver cliffs. The plunge pool and steam spa are extra perks.

Getting There & Around

Minivans to Kho Sok from Surat Thani (80B, one hour, 100km) leave at least twice daily. Tickets 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. From the Andaman coast, there are buses from Takua Pa to the park (25B, one hour, nine daily) that drop you off along the highway, 1.8km from the visitors centre. If guesthouse touts don't meet you, you'll have to walk to your chosen guesthouse (from 50m to 2km).

To visit Chiaw Lan Lake, it is best to book a tour (which can be easily arranged at your guesthouse for 1000B to 3000B).

AO KHANOM

อำเภอ

Halfway between Surat Thani and Nakhon Si Thammarat, little Khanom quietly sits along the blue gulf waters. Overlooked by tourists who flock to the jungle-islands nearby, this pristine region, simply called Khanom, is a worthy choice for those seeking a serene beach setting unmarred by enterprising corporations.

The police station and hospital are located just south of Ban Khanom at the junction leading to Kho Khao Beach. There's a 7-Eleven (with an ATM) in the heart of Ban Khanom.

Sights

The most unique feature in Khanom are the **pink dolphins** – a rare breed of albino dolphins that have a stunning pink hue. They are regularly seen from the old ferry

pier and the electric plant pier around dawn and dusk.

The area is also home to a variety of pristine geological features including **waterfalls and caves**. The largest falls, known as **Samet Chun**, has tepid pools for cooling off, and great views of coast. To reach the falls, head south from Ban Khanom and turn left at the blue Samet Chun sign. Follow the road for about 2km and after crossing a small stream, take the next right and hike up into the mountain following the dirt road. After a 15-minute walk, listen for the waterfall and look for a small trail on the right. The scenic **Hin Lat Falls** is the smallest cascade, but it's also the easiest to reach. There are pools for swimming and several huts providing shade. The falls are located south of Nai Phlao.

There are also two beautiful caves along the main road (Hwy 4014) between Khanom and Don Sak. **Khao Wang Thong** has a string of lights guiding visitors through the network of caverns and narrow passages. A metal gate covers the entrance; stop at the house at the base of the hill to retrieve the key (and leave a small donation). Turn right off the main highway at Rd 4142 to find **Khao Krot Cave**, which has two large caverns, but you'll have to bring a flashlight.

For a postcard-worthy vista of the undulating coastline, head to **Dat Fa Mountain**, located about 5km west of the coast along Hwy 4014. The hillside is usually deserted, making it easy to stop along the way to snap some photos.

Sleeping & Eating

In the last few years, construction in the area has started to take off. The area is far from booming, but large-scale development is definitely on the cards. A recent surge in gulf-oil rigging has meant that developers are eyeing Khanom as a potential holiday destination for nearby workers.

One More Beer (☎ 08 1396 4447; www.1morebeer.net; bungalows 800-1000B; ☎ ☎) One More Beer is a chill spot to grab some delicious international cuisine. The tidy bungalows and friendly farang staff make it a worthy option even though it's not directly on the beach.

Talkoo Beach Resort (☎ 07552 8397, 08 3692 2711; bungalows 800-1500B; ☎ ☎) This charming operation has dozens of snazzy white cottages featuring quirky fixtures such as sinks made from hollowed out tree trunks.

JATUKHAM RAMMATHEP

If you've spent more than 24 hours in Thailand then you've probably seen a Jatukham Rammathep dangling around someone's neck – these round amulets are everywhere.

The bearers of the Jatukham Rammathep are supposed to have good fortune and protection from any harm. The origin of the amulet's name remains a mystery, although a popular theory suggests that Jatukham and Rammathep were the aliases of two Srivajayan princes who buried relics under Nakhon's Wat Mahathat some 1000 years ago.

A notorious Thai police detective first wore the precious icon, and firmly believed that the guardian spirits helped him solve a particularly difficult murder case. He tried to popularise the amulet, but it wasn't a market success until his death in 2006. Thousands of people attended his funeral, including the crown prince, and the Jatukham Rammathep took off.

The talismans are commissioned at the Mahathat temple, and in the last several years, southern Thailand has seen an incredible economic boom. The first amulet was sold in 1987 for 39B, and today, over 100 million baht are spent on the town's amulets every week. The desire for these round icons has become so frenzied that a woman was crushed to death on the temple grounds during a widely publicised discount sale (she was not wearing her talisman).

Everyday, trucks drive along Nakhon's main roads blaring loud music to promote new shipments. These thumping beats have started to shake the ground beneath the temple, and the repeated hammering has, in an ironic metaphor, bent the main spire of Wat Mahathat.

Sleeping

Lodging options are limited to a few respectable places.

Thai Hotel (☎ 0 7534 1509; fax 0 7534 4858; 1375 Th Ratchadamnoen; r with fan 220-270B, r with air-con 340-450B, ste 750B; 🍽️) The Thai Hotel is the most central sleeping spot in town – look for a small sign (which actually says 'Thai Hotel' in Thai) pointing down a busy sidestreet. The walls are thin, but the air-con options are a good deal for the price. Each room has a TV and the higher floors have good views of the urban bustle.

Nakorn Garden Inn (☎ 0 7532 3777; 1/4 Th Pak Nakhon; r 445B; 🍽️) The motel-style Nakorn Garden Inn offers a pleasant alternative to the usual cement cube. Rooms are encased in exposed crimson brick and set around a sandy garden. Each unit is identical, sporting a TV and fridge; try to score a room that gets plenty of sunlight.

Grand Park Hotel (☎ 0 7531 7666-73; fax 0 7531 7674; 1204/79 Th Pak Nakhon; r 700-1700B; 🍽️) The Grand Park offers fine, modern rooms with TV and fridge – nothing too fancy or luxurious. The rooms are on seven floors, some with sweeping vistas of the city. Guests can loiter in the spacious lobby and restaurant.

Twin Lotus Hotel (☎ 0 7532 3777; www.twinlotus hotel.net; 97/8 Th Phattananak Khukhwang; r 1100-3000B; 🍽️ 📺) Its age is starting to show, but Twin Lotus is still a nice spot for a little pampering while visiting Nakhon. The well-

equipped hotel gym is very popular with the local English teachers. This 16-storey behemoth sits several kilometres southeast of the city centre.

Eating & Drinking

Nakhon is a great place to sample cuisine with a distinctive southern twist. In the evening, Muslim food stands sell delicious *kôw môt* (chicken biryani), *má-dà-bà* (pancakes stuffed with chicken or vegetables) and roti. Several tasty options cluster around Bovorn Bazaar on Th Ratchadamnoen.

Hao Coffee (☎ 0 7534 6563; Bovorn Bazaar; dishes 30-60B; ☕ breakfast & lunch) Dishes out quick and convenient breakfasts, and the coffee is pretty darn good.

Rock 99 (☎ 0 7531 7999; 1180/807, Bavorn Bazaar; dishes 40-100B; 🍽️ dinner) The choice faràngout (faràng-hangout) in Nakhon, Rock 99 has a good selection of international fare – from taco salads and steak sandwiches, to pizzas and fried potatoes. There's live music on Wednesday, Friday and Saturday nights, but expect to bump into friendly expats almost all the time.

Krua Talay (Th Pak Nakhon; dishes 40-300B; 🍽️ lunch & dinner) Located Near the Kukwang Market, Krua Talay is the top spot in town for succulent seafood. It can be a little pricey compared to the other non-touristy chow spots around town, but the locals agree that it's definitely worth it.

Khrua Nakhon (☎ 0 7531 7197; Bovorn Bazaar; dishes 60-200B; ☕ breakfast & lunch) This joint, next to Hao Coffee, has a great selection of traditional Nakhon cuisine. Order one of the sharing platters, which comes with five types of curry (including an unpalatable spicy fish sauce), or try the *kôw yam* (southern-style rice salad). There's a second location in Robinson Ocean mall.

Country Home (☎ 08 1968 0762; 119/7 Th Ratchadamnoen) This large, open-air bar invokes the Wild West with saloon-style seating and an odd smattering of straw hats. There's live music every night and the joint gets packed with beer-toting locals.

For an all-night dance fest, head south towards the Twin Lotus Hotel and you'll find the popular Venice Pub. For a tamer evening of beers and pub grub, check out Bar 60 (known locally as 'Bar Hok Sip'), near the corner of Th Ratchadamnoen and Th Phra Ngoen.

Getting There & Away

Due to the burgeoning popularity of the Jatukham amulet (opposite), transport to Nakhon is booming.

Several small carriers (plus Thai Airways) fly from Bangkok to Nakhon every day. There are about six one-hour flights daily costing around 3500B.

There are two daily train departures from Bangkok to Nakhon (via Hua Hin, Chumphon and Phun Phin). They are both 12-hour night trains leaving at 5.35pm and 7.15pm. Second-class fares cost between 590B and 890B. These trains continue on to Hat Yai and Sungai Kolok.

Buses from Bangkok depart either between 6am and 8am, or between 5.30pm and 10pm. There are about seven daily departures (1st class/2nd class around 700/600B, 12 to 13 hours). Ordinary buses to Bangkok leave from the bus terminal, but a couple of private buses leave from booking offices on Th Jamroenwithi, where you can also buy tickets.

When looking for minivan stops to leave Nakhon, keep an eye out for small desks along the side of the downtown roads (minivans and waiting passengers may or may not be present nearby). It's best to ask around as each destination has a different departure point. Krabi and Don Sak minivans are grouped together – just make sure you don't get on the wrong one. Stops are scattered around Th Jamroenwithi, Th Wakhit and Th Yommarat. There are frequent minivans (that leave when they're full) to Krabi (180B to 240B, 2½ hours) and Phuket (175B to 275B, five hours), Surat Thani (100B, one hour), Khanom (85B, one hour) and Hat Yai (around 120B, three hours).

Getting Around

Sörng-tāa-ou run north-south along Th Ratchadamnoen and Th Si Thammasok for 10B (a bit more at night). Motorcycle-taxi rides start at 20B and cost up to 50B for longer distances.

SONGKHLA & AROUND

สี่จังหวัด
pop 85,600

Unlike many of the urban centres in Thailand's deep south, Songkhla has enough going for itself to entertain visitors for a couple of days.

DETOUR: KHAO LUANG NATIONAL PARK

Known for its beautiful mountain and forest walks, cool streams, waterfalls and orchards, **Khao Luang National Park** (☎ 0 7530 9644-7; adult/child 400/200B) surrounds the 1835m peak of Khao Luang. This soaring mountain range reaches up to 1800m, and is covered in virgin forest. An ideal source for streams and rivers, the mountains show off impressive waterfalls and provide a habitat for a plethora of bird species – this place is a good spot for any budding ornithologist. Fans of flora will also get their kicks here; there are over 300 species of orchid in the park, some of which are found nowhere else on earth.

Park bungalows can be rented for 600B to 1000B per night and sleep six to 12 people. Camping is permitted along the trail to the summit.

To reach the park, take a sörng-tāa-ou (25B) from Nakhon Si Thammarat 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 in 2.5km to the office and a further 450m to the car park.

The city is surrounded by pleasant beaches, has several green parks and has a pretty historical centre. Due to the generous sea breezes, Songkhla manages to feel gracefully cool just about year-round, and also boasts some great food, including copious seafood and two vibrant night markets.

Orientation

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 southeast is Hat Samila, which is comely and peaceful, too. If you enter town coming from the north or leave town heading north, you'll go through Ko Yo (see below) and cross the Tinsulanonda Bridges – the longest concrete bridges in Thailand.

Information

Banks can be found all over town.

Click Me! (cnr Th Phetchakhiri & Th Saiburi; per hr 15B; ☎ 8am-10pm) Internet service.

Corner Bookshop (☎ 0 7431 2577; cnr Th Saiburi & Th Phetchakhiri; ☎ 7am-7.30pm) Stocks a small selection of English-language novels, maps, newspapers, magazines and Lonely Planet guides.

Immigration office (☎ 0 7431 3480; Th Laneg Phra Ram; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri) File for visa extensions here.

Indonesian Consulate (☎ 0 7431 1544; Th Sadao)

Malaysian Consulate (☎ 0 7431 1062; 4 Th Sukhum)

Police station (☎ 0 7431 2133) North of the town centre.

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

Tourist Office (cnr Th Jana & Th Saiburi) Located in the same compound as Prem Tinsulanonda Museum, it has helpful staff and a variety of brochures and maps.

Sights & Activities

KO YO

เกาะยอ

A popular day trip from Songkhla, this island in the middle of Thale Sap is actually connected to the mainland by bridges and is famous for its cotton weaving industry. There's a roadside market selling cloth and ready-made clothes at excellent prices.

If you visit Ko Yo, the **Thaksin Folklore Museum** (☎ 0 74591 618; admission 60B; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm) actively aims to promote and preserve the culture of the region, and is a must-see. The pavilions here are reproductions of southern Thai-style

houses and contain folk art, handicrafts and traditional household implements.

Frequent sörng-täa-ou to Ko Yo depart from Th Ramwithi in Songkhla (15B, 20 minutes). To stop at the small market ask for *näh ðà-làht* (in front of the market). To get off at the museum ask for *pí-pí-tá-pan*.

NATIONAL MUSEUM

พิพิธภัณฑ์สถานแห่งชาติ

The 1878 building that now houses the **national museum** (☎ 0 7431 1728; Th Wichianchom; admission 30B; ☎ 9am-4pm Wed-Sun, closed public holidays) was originally built in a Chinese architectural style as the residence of a luminary. This museum is easily the most picturesque national museum in Thailand and contains exhibits from all Thai art-style periods, particularly the Srivijaya. Also on display are Thai and Chinese ceramics and sumptuous Chinese furniture owned by the local Chinese aristocracy.

BEACHES

The residents are taking better care of the windy strip of white sand along **Hat Samila**, and it is now quite a pleasant beach for strolling along or for an early morning read. 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. Nearby are the **cat and rat sculptures**, named for the Cat and Rat Islands (Ko Yo and Ko Losin).

A few kilometres south of Hat Samila is **Kao Seng**, a quaint beachfront Muslim fishing village – this is where the tourist photos of gaily painted fishing vessels are taken. Sörng-täa-ou run regularly between Songkhla (from near the stand to Ko Yo) and Kao Seng for 10B.

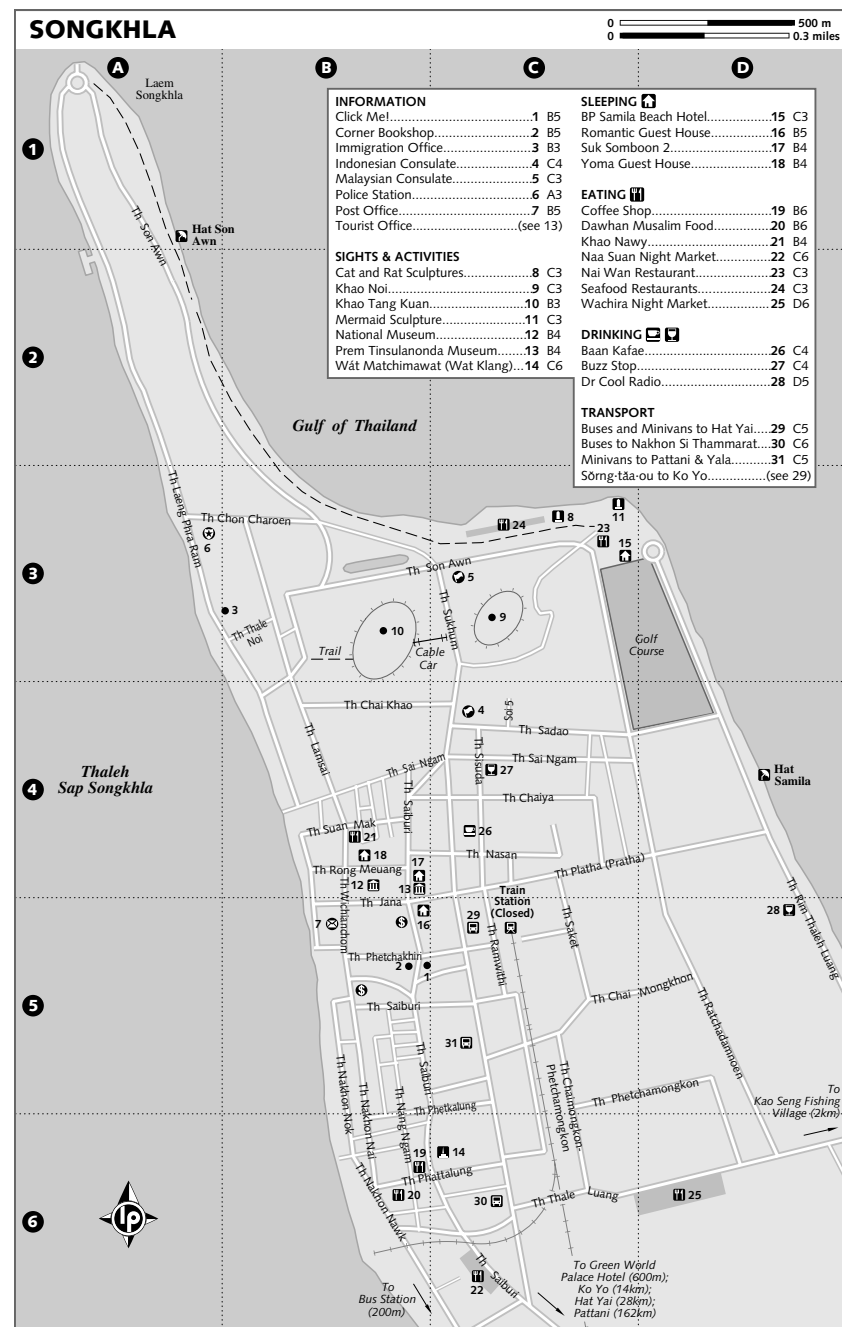
PREM TINSULANONDA MUSEUM

พิพิธภัณฑ์พระบรมราชินีนาถ

The minute **Prem Tinsulanonda Museum** (☎ 0 7431 2679; cnr Th Jana & Th Saiburi; admission free; ☎ 8.30am-4pm Tue-Sun) is touted as the birthplace of Thailand's 16th prime minister, who served from 1980 to 1988. It's actually a wooden house, built in the '90s, upon the site of Prem's birthplace and is a charming example of a traditional Thai house.

WAT MATCHIMAWAT (WAT KLANG)

This large temple compound typifies the Sino-Thai temple architecture in Songkhla



around the 18th-century. The walls of the adjacent *bòht* (ordination hall) are decorated with some of the most beautiful temple murals in southern Thailand, some of which depict life in 19th-century Songkhla. The doors of the *bòht* are often locked; contact one of the resident monks if you'd like to take a look inside.

OTHER ATTRACTIONS

The area around Th Nang Ngam has a long-standing Chinese community and is lined with quaint, rickety old Thai houses and a few multicoloured Chinese temples.

North of the centre are two forested hills, **Khao Tang Kuan** and **Khao Noi** (also known as Monkey Mountain, since hordes of monkeys live here). There's a cable car on the eastern side of Khao Tang Kuan and vendors selling food you can give to the little hairy guys.

Sleeping

Suk Somboon 2 (☎ 0 7431 3809-10; fax 0 7432 1406; 14 Th Saiburi; r 200-550B; 🏠) This is actually two buildings, an old and a new, right next to each other. The new half has pleasant but smallish rooms that are among the nicest in this price range in town, while the rooms in the old half are very basic indeed.

Yoma Guest House (☎ 0 7432 6433; Th Rong Meuang; r 250-350B; 🏠) This tiny guesthouse features ridiculously cute, brightly coloured rooms. It really feels like staying in somebody's home, which may be a bit too close to comfort for some.

Romantic Guest House (☎ 0 7430 7170; 10/1-3 Th Platha; r 250-380B; 🏠) If you're looking for that 'fresh room smell' then look no further. The abodes here are massive and airy and all come with a TV and rather nice bamboo bed frames. Some rooms have shared bathrooms.

Green World Palace Hotel (☎ 0 7443 7900-8; fax 0 7443 7899; 99 Th Samakisuk 2; r 750-900B; 🏠 📺 📶) Judging by the chandeliers, spiralling staircase in the lobby and 5th-floor swimming pool with views, you'd think this place would charge an arm and a leg. It doesn't – and the immaculate rooms here, with a whole stack of mod-cons in the more expensive ones, are deservedly popular. It's south of the town.

BP Samila Beach Hotel (☎ 0 7444 0222; www.bphotelsgroup.com; 8 Th Ratchadamnoen; r 1200-1150B; 🏠 📺 📶) This beachfront hotel provides Songkhla's swankiest accommodation and has all the amenities, including an IDD phone, fridge, satellite TV and sea or mountain views.

Eating

Songkhla has two excellent night markets for you to sample. The **Wachira night market** (Th Thale Luang), so-called for the school it sets up in front of, features a solid kilometre of vendors hocking everything from noodles to curries. Another, known by locals as the **Naa Suan night market** (Th Saiburi), has a palpable Muslim influence.

The seafood in Ko Yo has a reputation for being some of the best in the area. On the

mainland, there are several cheap, excellent seafood restaurants around the beach along Th Som Awm.

Coffee Shop (nr Th Nang Ngam & Th Phattalung; dishes 10-15B; ☎ 6am-6pm) Experience the epitome of southern Thai city life – sipping coffee with the locals in an ancient café. Augment your java with a dish of still-warm *kà-nòm bórk*, dumplings of flour or sticky rice rolled in coconut and sprinkled with sugar, made directly in front of the shop.

Khao Nawy (☎ 0 7431 1805; 14/22 Th Wichianchom; dishes 30-50B; ☎ breakfast & lunch) Songkhla's most lauded *ràhn ków gaang* (curry shop) serves up an amazing variety of authentic southern-style curries, soups, stir-fries and salads. Look for the glass case holding several stainless steel trays of food just south of the sky-blue Chokdee Inn.

Nai Wan Restaurant (☎ 0 7431 1295; Th Ratchadamnoen; dishes 35-200B; ☎ 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 entries.

Dawhan Muslim Food (☎ 0 7431 5637; 140 Th Phattalung; dishes 40-60B; ☎ lunch & dinner) Praised by locals, Dawhan is located in the tall pink building. It has a small selection of Thai-Muslim soups, stir-fries and rich curries, as well as a popular chicken biryani. If you don't see anything you fancy here, there are several other similar Muslim restaurants along this strip of Th Phattalung.

Drinking

Several casual bars and restaurants are found on and around happening Th Sisuda. **Buzz Stop** (☎ 0 7444 0231; 24 Th Sisuda; ☎ 9am-1am), a quasi-Irish boozier, offers a variety of imported draft beers and an expansive menu of pub grub. **Baan Kafae** (☎ 08 6956 8066; Th Sisuda; ☎ 5pm-midnight) is an open-air garden where locals nibble on spicy snacks and drink beer over low tables.

There's a strip of quasi-beachfront restaurant-bars along Hat Samila. **Dr Cool Radio** (Th Rim Thaleh Luang) has great sea views and is filled most nights with Thai students listening to local DJs spinning pop hits.

Getting There & Away

BUS & MINIVAN

Songkhla is something of a Hat Yai transport satellite; 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 bus station is located a few hundred metres south of the town centre. Three 2nd-class buses go daily to Bangkok (593B), stopping in Nakhon Si Thammarat (136B), Surat Thani (207B) and Chumphon (312B), among other places. One VIP bus to Bangkok leaves at 5pm (1125B).

To Hat Yai, buses (19B) and minivans (25B) take around 40 minutes and leave from Th Ramwithi.

Minivans to Pattani (90B) and Yala (100B) leave from 6am to 5pm from further south on Th Ramwithi.

Getting Around

Sòrng-tàa-ou circulate around town or head to Ko Yo for 15B. Motorcycle taxis around town cost around 20B during the day; rates double at night.

HAT YAI

หาดใหญ่
pop 192,500

Hat Yai literally means 'Big Beach', but you won't find a drop of sea in this landlocked urban monstrosity that is a hive of activity. Instead, the city functions as a significant transit hub to virtually every other destination in the region. If you're heading to an island or beach in the deep south, you'll undoubtedly be passing through at some point.

Because of its proximity to the Malaysian border, only 60km away, much of the business in Hat Yai has developed to service cross-border trade. Despite all this, Hat Yai isn't a bad place to get stuck for a night, especially if you count shopping or eating among your hobbies. Markets are plentiful and the malls provide an escape from the heat. The nightlife scene also buzzes and you can hang out in some cosy pubs before heading off.

Information

EMERGENCY

Tourist police (☎ 0 7424 6733; Th Niphat Uthit 3; ☎ 24hr) Near the TAT office.

IMMIGRATION OFFICE

Immigration Office (☎ 0 7425 7019; Th Phetkasem) Near the railway bridge, it handles visa extensions.

TRAVEL WARNING: DEEP SOUTH

At the time of writing, a series of violent incidents had made travel in parts of Songkhla and much of Pattani and Narathiwat a potentially risky enterprise. For the historical background to the insurgency, see the boxed text, p28.

To date, tourists have not been targeted but the haphazard nature of the insurgency makes it difficult to predict which way the situation will turn. We emerged from the research trip for this book entirely unscathed, but there were multiple violent incidents, some involving deaths, in other parts of the provinces that we visited. Generally speaking, travelling in Pattani and Narathiwat in the early morning and late evening is discouraged, and independent travel via rented motorcycle is a potential risk. While in urban areas, it's probably also a good idea not to linger around parked motorcycles, as they have been used as a vehicle for carrying remote-controlled bombs.

If you plan to visit the region and want to know the situation on the ground, the authorities suggest contacting the local Tourist Police or TAT, but be prepared for pessimistic spiel. Our overwhelming impression was that for the vast majority of the inhabitants of the region, not to mention the few tourists that trickle through, life goes on, albeit with machine gun-armed soldiers as a disturbing background.

INTERNET ACCESS

Idea.net (Th Chi Uthit; per hr 20B; ☎ 9am-11pm) Near OH (Oriental Hotel); offers internet and other computer-related services.

MEDICAL SERVICES

Bangkok Hatyai Hospital (☎ 0 7436 5780-9; bhhi mc@bgh.co.th; 75 Soi 15 Th Pechkasam) One of the best health-care providers in southern Thailand, it has English-speaking staff. It's northeast of the centre.

MONEY

Hat Yai is loaded with banks. Several after-hours exchange windows are located along Th Niphat Uthit 2 and 3 near the Th Thamnoonvithi intersection. If you have Malaysian

ringgit the banks won't take them, but many midrange and top-end hotels have exchange windows that will.

POST

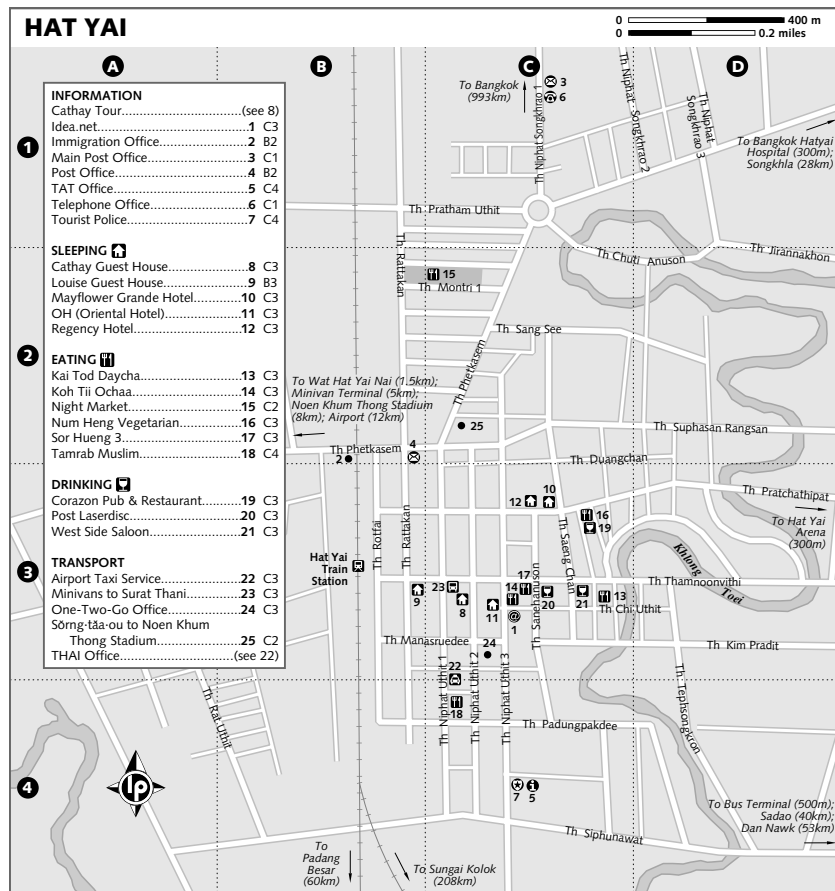
Main post office (1 Th Niphat Songkhrao) At the very north of town. A more convenient post office lies two blocks northeast of the train station.

TELEPHONE

Telephone office (Th Niphat Songkhrao; ☎ 7am-11pm) Adjacent to the main post office.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Tourist maps and pamphlets are available at hotels throughout town.

**ISLAM IN SOUTHERN THAILAND**

At approximately 4% of the population, Muslims make up Thailand's largest religious minority, living side by side with the majority 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 Thailand's southern region between AD 1200 and 1500 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. 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. Indeed, 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 mainstream among a radical few of the southern Muslims (see the boxed text, p38). Some have called for secession, and fewer still have, in the past, taken up armed insurgency (see the boxed text, p28).

Proper etiquette in Thai Muslim communities is simple and predictable. Islam forbids the consumption of pork and alcohol. 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 wát, 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.

TAT Office (☎ 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 entire region.

TRAVEL AGENCIES

Hat Yai is full of travel agencies, but **Cathay Tour** (☎ 08 9466 2491, 0 7423 2202; cathay_tours@hotmail.com; 93/1 Th Niphat Uthit 2; ☎ 9am-9pm) stands out for its super-friendly staff and full range of services, from tickets to tours to visa runs.

Sights**BULLFIGHTING**

A more innocuous version than its Spanish equivalent, **bullfighting** (☎ 0 7438 8753; tickets 300-600B; ☎ 10am-3pm) revolves around two bulls butting heads in opposition, but the real sport here is gambling. Fights occur on the first Saturday of the month, or the second Saturday if the first Saturday is a *wan prá* (Buddhist worship day; full or new moon). The venue

changes from time to time, but lately they've been held at **Noen Khum Thong Stadium**, west of the city on the way to the airport (20/80B by sörng-tää-ou/túk-túk). Check dates and venues with the TAT office.

WAT HAT YAI NAI**วัดหาดใหญ่ไน้**

About 1.5km west of town, on Th Phekkasam, this wát 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, get a motorcycle taxi (40B) or hop on a sörng-tää-ou near the intersection of Th Niphat Uthit 1 and Th Phekkasam and get off after crossing the river – it costs about 12B.

Sleeping

Hat Yai has dozens of hotels within walking distance of the train station.

Cathay Guest House (☎ 074243815; fax 074354104; 93/1 Th Niphath Uthit 2; r 160-250B) Ludicrously helpful staff and plentiful information about onward travel make up for the run-down rooms at this popular cheapie.

Louise Guest House (☎ 074220966; 21-23 Th Thammooonvithi; r 300-400B; ☺) This place has more appealing rooms than the Cathay – though not its buzz. The numerous portraits of the Thai royal family on the walls and the apartment-style layout give the place a homey feel.

OH (Oriental Hotel; ☎ 074230142; fax 074354824; 135 Th Niphath Uthit 3; r 500-550B; ☺) OH offers rooms with TV (no cable), hot water, a fridge and some truly psychedelic carpets. Lack of a writing desk is a downside if you plan to do any work.

Mayflower Grande Hotel (☎ 074234888; mayflowergrande@hotmail.com; 150 Th Saeng Chan; r 990-1190; ☺) Blonde wood floors, full-length windows and minimalist design give the rooms here a real Scandinavian feel. Free wi-fi and a chic coffee shop seal the deal.

Regency Hotel (☎ 074353333-47; www.regency-hatyai.com; 23 Th Prachathipat; r 898-1398B; ☺) This hotel has that grand old-world charm that's so very rare nowadays. The rooms in the old wing are smaller (and cheaper) and feature attractive wood furnishings, while rooms on the upper floors of the new wing boast amazing views.

Eating

Hat Yai is southern Thailand's gourmet mecca, offering Muslim roti and curries, Chinese noodles and dim sum, and fresh seafood.

The extensive **night market** (Th Montri 1) boasts heaps of local eats including several stalls selling the famous Hat Yai-style deep-fried chicken and *kà-nóm jeen* (fresh rice noodles

served with curry), as well as a couple of stalls peddling grilled seafood.

On Th Niyomrat, between Niphath Uthit 1 and 2, starting at Tamrab Muslim, is a string of casual and inexpensive Muslim restaurants open from about 7am to 9pm daily. Meals at these places cost between 20B to 60B.

Num Heng Vegetarian (☎ 074351032; 99/3-4 Th Prachathipat; dishes 20-30B; ☺) breakfast, lunch & dinner) Those who eschew flesh will appreciate this clean and yummy looking veggie corner.

Kai Tod Daycha (☎ 0810983751; Th Chi-Uthit; dishes 30-50B; ☺) lunch & dinner) Locals claim that Daycha does the best Hat Yai-style fried chicken. Enjoy your spicy bird over fragrant yellow rice, or with a plate of *sôm-dam*.

Koh Tii Ochai (☎ 074234243; 134-136 Th Niphath Uthit 3; dishes 30-80B; ☺) lunch) This classic eatery sells all your Sino favourites, including some you didn't even know about such as the delicious *bà-gút-dēh*, pork ribs in a fragrant dark broth.

Sor Hueng 3 (☎ 0818963455; 79/16 Th Thammooonvithi; dishes 30-120B; ☺) 4pm-3am) This popular local legend with branches all over town prepares heaps of delicious Thai-Chinese and southern Thai faves. Simply point to whatever looks good or order something freshly wok-fried from the extensive menu.

Drinking & Entertainment

Th Thammooonvithi boasts a string of lively bars and pubs.

Post Laserdisc (☎ 074232027; 82/83 Th Thammooonvithi; ☺) 9am-2am) Unlike most other places in town, this long-standing pub has no 'theme', but this makes it all the more authentic. The live music here is relatively good, and the happy hour is among the most generous in Thailand.

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

The Malaysian border is about 60km 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. Buses cost 39B (two hours, every 25 minutes, 6am to 6pm) and minivans are 50B (1½ hours, hourly, 6am to 6pm). It's also possible to get a train, but this option is not very fast or frequent. The **immigration office** (☎ 074521020) on the Thai side is open from 5am to 9pm daily.

There's another border at Dan Nawk, south of Sadao, which can be reached by minivan (50B, 1½ hours, 6am to 6pm), but this route sees more through traffic than daytrippers. The **immigration office** (☎ 074301107) on the Thai side is open from 5am to 11pm daily.

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 are run by private tour companies and start from 250B (four hours). Again, trains from Hat Yai to Butterworth are slower and less frequent.

West Side Saloon (☎ 074354833; 135/5 Th Thammooonvithi; ☺) 6pm-midnight) This 'saloon' attracts Thais, Malays and farang to its dim, rustic, public space. Tables are set in front of a stage, where live music rocks from 8.30pm nightly.

Corazon Pub & Restaurant (☎ 074350360; 41 Th Pracharom; ☺) 6pm-midnight) This is a cosy Latin disco-pub, eclectically but well decorated. There's live and DJ music of all kinds (including Latin), and Thai and Western foods are served.

Getting There & Away

AIR

THAI (☎ 074233433; 182 Th Niphath Uthit 1) operates three flights daily between Hat Yai and Bangkok (2500B, 90 minutes). Nearly all of the low-cost airlines now operate flights to and from Bangkok:

Air Asia (☎ 025159999; www.airasia.com) Six daily flights to and from Bangkok (1175B).

Nok Air (☎ 029009955; www.nokair.com) Five daily flights to/from Bangkok's Don Muang Airport for 1090B.

One-Two-Go (☎ in Bangkok 1126, elsewhere 1141 ext 1126; www.fly12go.com; New World Hotel, Th 152-156 Niphath Uthit 2) One flight daily for 1850B.

BUS & MINIVAN

The bus terminal is 2km southeast of the town centre, though all inter-provincial buses and minivans make stops in town. Destinations from Hat Yai are shown in the table below:

Destination	Transport	Fare	Duration
Bangkok	air-con bus	740B	14hr
	VIP bus	783-1065B	14hr
Ko Samui	air-con bus	380B	8hr
Krabi	air-con bus	234B	5hr
Narathiwat	air-con bus	178B	4hr
	minibus	150B	3hr
Padang Besar	ordinary bus	39B	2hr
	minibus	50B	1½hr
Pattani	air-con bus	100B	3hr
	minibus	100B	2½hr
Phuket	air-con bus	371B	8hr
Sadao	minibus	45B	1hr
Satun	air-con bus	65B	2hr
	minibus	100B	1½hr
Songkhla	ordinary bus	19B	1hr
	minibus	25B	1hr
Sungai Kolok	air-con bus	250B	5hr
	minibus	150B	4hr
Surat Thani	air-con bus	240B	5hr
Trang	air-con bus	100B	3hr
	minibus	100B	2½hr
Yala	ordinary bus	90B	3hr

Most north-bound minivans now leave from a minivan terminal 5km west of town at Talat Kaset, a 60B tük-tük ride from the centre of town. Destinations and fares from here include Pak Bara (100B) and Surat Thani (250B).

Cathay Tour (☎ 074232202; 93/1 Th Niphath Uthit 2) also runs minivans to many destinations in the south.

TRAIN

There are four overnight trains to/from Bangkok each day, and the trip takes at least 16 hours. Sample fares include 339B for a 3rd-class seat, 455/675B (fan/air-con) for a 2nd-class seat, 605/945B for a 2nd-class sleeper (in the lower berth) and 1394B to 1594B for a 1st-class sleeper. There are also seven trains daily that run to Sungai Kolok (43B to 286B) and two daily trains running to Butterworth (180B to 322B) and Padang Besar (57B to 272B), both in Malaysia.

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** (☎ 074238452; Uthit 1) makes the run to the airport four times daily (6.45am, 10am, 2pm and 5pm; 80B per person). A private taxi for this run costs about 300B.

Sörng-täa-ou run along Th Phetkasem and charge 10B per person. Tük-tük and motorcycle taxis around town cost 20B to 40B per person.

PATTANI

อ.เมืองปัตตานี
pop 44,800

Once the centre of an independent Muslim principality that included Yala and Narathiwat, sprawling Pattani has never quite adjusted to being a part of the Kingdom of Thailand. 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.

Despite the city's interesting past, there's little of interest in the town except its access to some excellent nearby beaches. Unfortunately, the ongoing insurgency (see the boxed text, p252) has made all but a few of these sandy destinations unsafe for the independent traveller.

Orientation & Information

The Mae Nam Pattani acts as a divider between the older town to the east, and the newer town to the west. Most services are in the older town.

There are several banks along the south-eastern end of Th Pipit, near the Th Naklua Yarang intersection.

Internet café (cfr Th Peeda Talattewiwat 2 and Th Pipit; per hr 20B)

Le Rich Travel (☎ 0 7331 3699; fax 0 7331 3911; 78/13 Th Makrut) This friendly agency can help you arrange everything from safe beach destinations to good local eats.

Main post office (Th Pipit) The attached CAT office provides an overseas phone service from 7am to 10pm daily.

Pattani Hospital (☎ 0 7332 3411-14; Th Nong Jik)

Police station (☎ 0 7334 9018; Th Pattani Phrom) In a central location.

Sights

Along Th Ruedi you can see what is left of old Pattani architecture – the Sino-Portuguese style that was once so prevalent in this part of southern Thailand. West of San Jao Leng Ju Kieng Shrine on Th

Arnoaru are several very old, but still quite intact Chinese-style homes.

BEACHES

If it wasn't for the ongoing violence, Pattani could be one of the better beach destinations in southern Thailand. Unfortunately exploring much of the area independently is not a safe option at this time.

However, there are a few beaches in the area that the locals still frequent. **Laem Tachi**, a sandy cape that juts out over the northern end of Ao Pattani, can be reached by boat taxi from Pattani harbour. **Hat Talo Kapo**, 14km east of Pattani near Yarang Amphoe, is a pretty beach that's also a harbour for *gow-löw*, the traditional fishing boats of southern Thailand. And although it's technically in Songkhla Province, **Thepha District**, located 35km northwest of Pattani, is the most developed beach destination in the area. There you'll find a few slightly aged resorts that cater mostly to middle-class Thais. At **Hat Soi Sawan**, near the Songkhla-Pattani provinces border, several families have set up informal beachfront restaurants that are popular with locals on the weekends.

To reach Thepha, hop on any Songkhla-bound bus from Pattani (or vice versa) and mention the name of your resort – you'll be deposited at the side of the road for the brief walk the beach.

Dress modestly on or near the beaches.

MOSQUES

Thailand's second-largest mosque is the **Matsayit Klang** (Th Naklua Yarang), a traditional structure with a green hue that is probably still the south's most important mosque. It was built in the 1960s.

Sleeping & Eating

Palace Hotel (☎ 0 7334 9171; 10-12 Pipit Soi Talattewiwat 2; r 250-500B; ☎) Despite its location in a grubby market soi, the rooms here, in particular those with air-con on the lower floors, are neat and comfortable.

My Gardens Hotel (☎ 0 7333 1055-8; fax 0 7333 6217; 8/28 Th Charoenpradit; r 300-800B; ☎) A favourite with travelling businesspeople, My Gardens is good value. Rooms are well maintained and comfortable with satellite TV, bath, good hot-water showers and fridge.

The next three places are out of town.

Sakom Cabana (☎ 0 7431 8065; 136 Moo 4, Tambon Sakom; r 600-1000B; ☎) Located in Thepha District, 40km from Pattani, this basic resort features a clean compound with several attractive wooden duplex bungalows a short walk from the beach.

Thepha Beach Resort (☎ 0 7432 5551; 255 Moo 4, Tambon Thepha; bungalows 1140B; ☎) Located near the Pattani-Songkhla border, this resort features attractive bungalows (get one by the lotus pond), not to mention a pool and calm stretch of ocean

CS Pattani Hotel (☎ 0 7333 5093/4; cspattani@cscsoms.com; 299 Muu 4 Th Nong Jik; r 1500-5500B; ☎) Pattani's poshest digs has a gorgeous colonial lobby, two pools, an excellent restaurant, a sauna and steam room...the list goes on. Breakfast is included. Ask about discounts. It's 3km southwest of town.

Roti Bang Loh (☎ 0 81096 9555; Th Naklua Yarang; dishes 15-20B; ☎ 6-9am & noon-8pm) This delicious roti vendor is known around town for the several prizes he's won – if you speak Thai or Yawi ask him about them and he'll go on for ages!

Satay Jao Kao (☎ 0 89737 5417; 37/20 Th Udomwathi; dishes 20-30B; ☎ 10am-6pm) This well respected open-air restaurant serves beef satay local

style with cubes of rice and a sweet dipping sauce. Several other restaurants along this stretch of Th Udomwathi come highly recommended by Pattani's Muslim foodies.

A variety of food vendors convenes at the **night market** (Pipit Soi Talattewiwat 2).

Getting There & Around

Minivans are the most common way to get around this part of Thailand, and just to make things more difficult for visitors, there's no single minivan or bus terminal in Pattani. See Map p258 for pick-up and drop-off locations. All minivans and buses run from approximately 6am to 5pm.

Destination	Transport	Price	Duration
Hat Yai	minivan	100B	1½hr
Narathiwat	ordinary bus	55B	2½hr
	minivan	100B	2hr
Songkhla	minivan	90B	1½hr
Sungai Kolok	minivan	120B	2½hr
Yala	ordinary bus	21B	1hr
	share taxi	50B	40mins

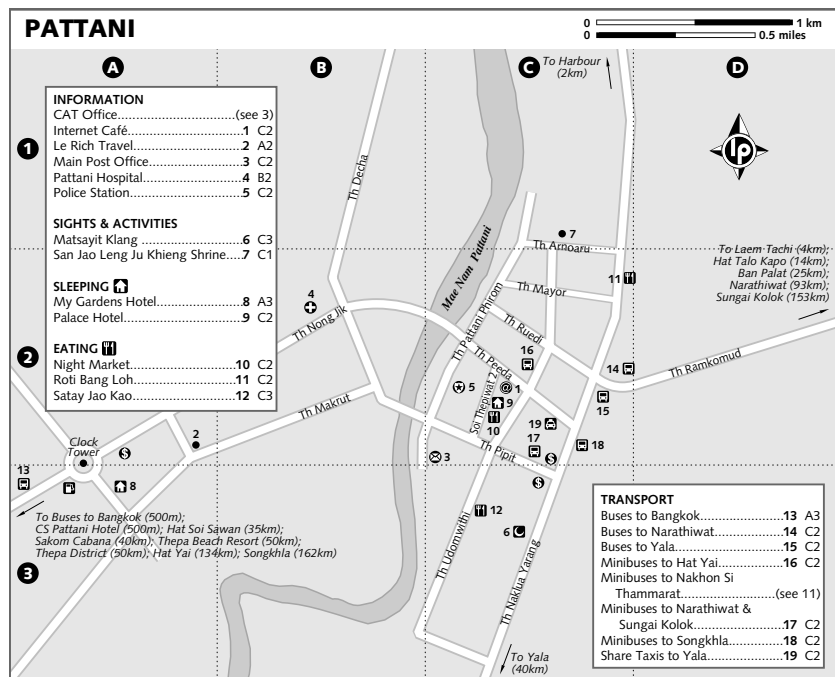
Buses to Bangkok depart from the small lot beside a petrol station near the CS Pattani Hotel – call ☎ 0 7334 8816 for ticket purchase and reservations. The trip takes 15 to 16 hours and costs 1185B (VIP), 763B (1st class) and 615B (2nd class).

Söng-täa-ou go anywhere in town for 10B per person. **Zakee** (☎ 08 9655 3223), a native of Pattani, is a reliable driver who speaks English, has his own car and provides heaps of local knowledge.

NARATHIWAT

เมืองนราธิวาส
pop 44,200

Sitting on the banks of the Bang Nara River, Narathiwat is probably the most Muslim large city in Thailand, and conversations in Yawi (a Malay dialect) and the daily calls to prayer are sounds you can expect to hear here. Some of the Sino-Portuguese buildings lining the riverfront are over a century old, and some of the prettiest beaches on southern Thailand's eastern coast are just outside town. Unfortunately the security situation in this part of the country (see the boxed text, p252) has suffocated the little tourism that this region used to see. Be sure to check the latest situation before travelling in this region.



Information

There's a bunch of banks in the town centre.

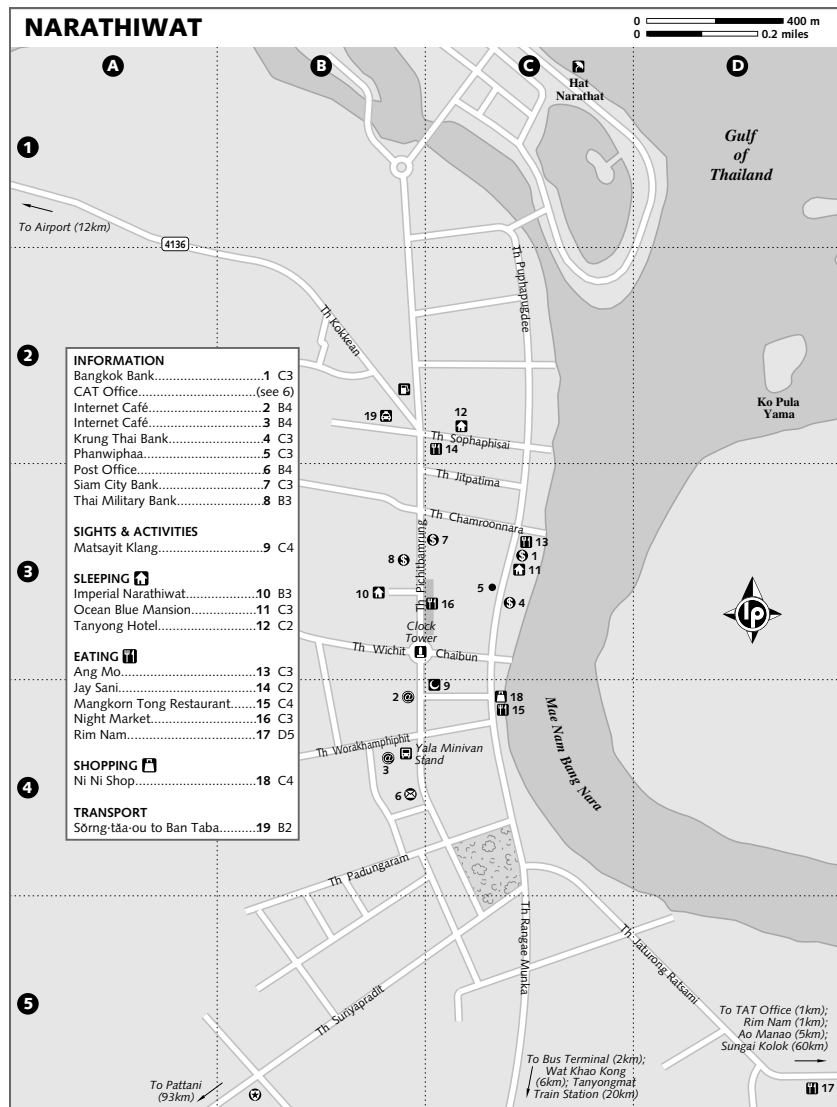
CAT office (Th Pichitbamrung; ☎ 8.30am-10pm Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm Sat & Sun) Same location as the post office.

Internet cafés (☎ 9am-9pm) There's a good café near the clock tower in town and another near the minivan stand for Yala.

Phanwiphaa (☎ 0 7351 1161; Th Puphapugdee; ☎ 8am-5pm) This ticket office, located across from the large Krung Thai Bank, arranges airline tickets as well as transport to the airport.

Post office (Th Pichitbamrung)

TAT (☎ 0 7352 2411; tatnara@cscoms.com) Inconveniently located a few kilometres southeast of town, just across the bridge, on the road to Tak Bai.



Sights

BEACHES

Just north of town is **Hat Narathat**, a 5km-long sandy beach, which serves as a kind of public park for locals. The beach is only 2km from of the town centre – you can easily walk there or take a sàhm-lór.

Five kilometres south of town, **Ao Manao** used to be a popular sun and sand destination, but today is mostly frequented by locals catching fish. Nonetheless, there's accommodation, and on weekends, basic food and drinks.

MATSAYIT KLANG

Towards the southern end of Th Pichitbamrung stands this interesting old, wooden mosque built in the Sumatran style. It was reputedly built by a prince of the former kingdom of Pattani over a hundred years ago.

WAT KHAO KONG

The tallest seated-Buddha image in southern Thailand is at **Wat Khao Kong**, about 6km southwest on the way to the train station in Tanyongmat. The image is 24m high and made of reinforced concrete covered with tiny gold-coloured mosaic tiles that glint magically in the sun. A sòrng-taa-ou to Wat Khao Kong costs 10B from the clock tower, while a motorcycle ride should cost 40B.

Sleeping & Eating

Most of the town's accommodation is located on and around Th Phupha Phakdi (signposted as 'Puphapugdee') along the Bang Nara River.

Ao Manao Resort (☎ 0 7354 2193; bungalows 300B; ☎) This accommodation, 5km southeast of town at Ao Manao, features large, clean cement cottages in a small compound. A motorcycle taxi here costs 40B.

Ocean Blue Mansion (☎ 0 7351 1109; 297 Th Puphapugdee; r 350-450B; ☎) This newish hotel is the only one in town to really take advantage of the riverfront view. Rooms include a huge fridge and cable TV.

Tanyong Hotel (☎ 0 7351 1477-79; fax 0 7351 1834; 16/1 Th Sophaphisai; r 550-750B; ☎) A few decades ago this was undoubtedly Narathiwat's most upscale hotel, but the passing of time has rendered it a competent, although slightly overpriced choice.

Imperial Narathiwat (☎ 0 7351 5041; narathiwat@imperialhotels.com; 228 Th Pichitbamrung; r 1000-2250B; ☎) Narathiwat's nicest accommodation features everything you'd expect in an upscale hotel. Cut rates make this excellent value.

Every evening a ragtag **night market** (Th Pichitbamrung) forms along the north of the clock tower.

Jay Sani (☎ 0 89657 1546; 50/1 Th Sophaphisai; dishes 30-60B; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This is where locals go for excellent Thai-Muslim food. Point to whatever curry or stir-fry looks good, but be sure not to miss the sublime *súp néua* (beef soup).

Ang Mo (cnr Th Puphapugdee & Th Chamroonnara; dishes 30-80B; ☎ lunch & dinner) This exceedingly popular Chinese restaurant is both cheap and tasty, and has even fed the likes of members of the Thai royal family.

Mangkorn Tong Restaurant (☎ 0 7351 1835; 433 Th Puphapugdee; dishes 60-160B; ☎ lunch & dinner) This small seafood place, with a floating dining section out the back, does quite good food and its prices are reasonable.

Rim Nam (☎ 0 7351 1559; 45/6 Th Narathiwat-Tak Bai; dishes 70-200B; ☎ dinner) South of town on the way to Ao Manao, Rim Nam is well worth the ride. The service is warm and attentive, and dishes are artistically presented. Call for free transport.

Shopping

Ni Ni Shop (☎ 0 89736 3346; 439 Th Puphapugdee; ☎ 9am-8pm) This boutique offers a variety of local handicrafts including silks, batik and jewellery.

Community Handicraft Centre (☎ 0 7354 2255; 356/3 Moo 12, Ao Manao; ☎ 9am-4pm) Located near Ao Manao Resort, this community project combines a large showroom and workshop where you can witness batik items being painted by hand.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Air Asia (☎ 0 2515 9999; www.airasia.com) operates one daily flight to and from Bangkok at 11.10am (1496B).

BUS & MINIVAN

Air-conditioned buses to Bangkok and Phuket and most minivans leave from the bus terminal 2km south of town on Th Rangae Munka. The buses to Phuket (530B, 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 Phang-Nga. Buses to Bangkok (VIP/1st/2nd class 1295/833/669B) take at least 15 hours and depart several times during the day.

Minivans heading to Hat Yai (150B, three hours), Pattani (100B, 1½ hours), Songkhla (150B, two hours), Sungai Kolok (70B, one hour) and Yala (100B, 1½ hours) generally leave on an hourly basis from 5am to 5pm.

TRAIN

Narathiwat's train station is in Tanyongmat, 20km west of town (40B by sörng-täa-ou). The town is on the Southern Line, and there are two daily departures heading for Bangkok (174B to 863B) as well as several daily departures for Hat Yai (35B) and Yala (13B).

Getting Around

Phanwiphaa (☎ 0 7351 1161) offers a minivan service to the airport from its office on Th Puphapugdee at 9.30am daily (60B).

Narathiwat is easy to navigate on foot. If you don't feel like walking, motorcycle taxis will take you around for 15B to 30B. There is also a new bus system that circles the city from 7am to 6pm (9B), stopping near Hat Narathat. Look for the light-blue bus stop signs along Th Puphapugdee and Th Pichitbamrung.

SUNGAI KOLOK

สุไหงโคลก
pop 40,500

Although Narathiwat is officially the provincial capital, it's a skinny wimp compared to its bigger and brasher sibling, Sungai Kolok. This soulless border town is the main southern coastal gateway between Malaysia and Thailand, and the primary industries here revolve around border trade and catering to weekend Malaysian men who are often looking for sex. Every night Soi Phuthon and the small strip behind the Marina Hotel come alive with booming bars that make Pattaya or Patong look sedate in comparison.

The border is open from 5am to 9pm (6am to 10pm Malaysian time) and there are several passable sleeping options in town as well as money-changing facilities and good connections to the rest of Thailand.

Information

There are plenty of banks with ATMs in town as well as foreign-exchange booths, which are

also open on weekends. There's one across from the train station.

CAT office (Th Thetpathom) Handles international calls.

CS Internet (Th Asia 18; per hr 20B; ☎ 10am-9pm) Offers internet service.

Easy Net (Soi 1, Th Charoenkhet; per hr 30B; ☎ 9am-6pm) Internet service.

Immigration offices Border (☎ 0 7336 1414; ☎ 5am-9pm); in town (☎ 0 7361 1231; Th Charoenkhet; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri) A larger office across from the Merlin Hotel.

Post office (Th Asia 18) A hike to the western edge of town.

Tourist Police (Th Asia 18) At the border, it has a small selection of free maps and brochures.

Sleeping & Eating

There's heaps of accommodation options here, but most hotels are pretty grubby and cater to the 'by the hour' market. Many places in Sungai Kolok will take Malaysian ringgit as well as Thai baht for food or accommodation.

Merlin Hotel (☎ 0 7361 8111; 68 Th Charoenkhet; r 390-450B; 📺) Don't let the lobby fool you – the rooms here are very plain indeed, but a good choice if you need a cheap room with a view.

Genting Hotel (☎ 0 7361 3231-40; fax 0 7361 1259; 250 Th Asia 18; r 550-1520B; 📺) Geared towards the conference trade, this place comes equipped with a barber, a snooker room, entertainment venues, pub and a karaoke lounge. There are some good, only slightly scuffed, midrange rooms and it's away from the seedier areas.

Marina Hotel (☎ 0 7361 3881-5; fax 0 7361 3385; Soi Phuthon; r 580-780B; 📺) Don't be alarmed by the chirping in the lift; this hotel's elevator shaft doubles as a home to swifts whose nests are a Chinese delicacy. Located right in the epicentre of the entertainment district, the Marina also has multiple bars, clubs and a restaurant all on site.

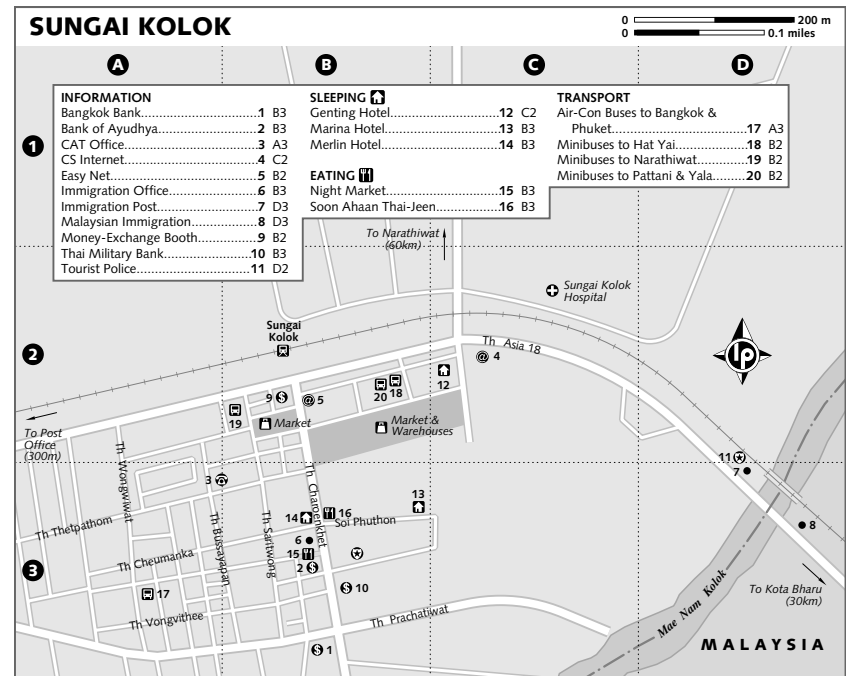
Despite the mix of cultures and emphasis on tourism, Sungai Kolok is definitely not a culinary destination. A small night market unfolds next to the immigration office – exceptionally good and cheap eats can be got at the stall in the centre that only has Chinese writing.

Soon Ahaan Thai-Jeen (Thai-Chinese Food Centre; ☎ 0 7341 8207; cnr Th Charoenkhet & Soi Phuthon; dishes 20-60B; ☎ breakfast & lunch) This small food court serves a variety of mostly Chinese-style dishes.

Getting There & Away

BUS & MINIVAN

The **long-distance bus station** (☎ 0 7361 2045) is located west of downtown, and there are three



daily air-conditioned buses for the 18-hour trip to Bangkok; one VIP (1365B, noon), one 1st class (880B, 1pm) and one 2nd class (706B, 8.30am). From Bangkok, the VIP bus leaves at 5.15pm, three 1st-class buses leave between 9pm and 10pm, and the 2nd-class at 9pm. Buses head off to Phuket (579B) at 6am, 8am and 5.30pm via Krabi (446B).

Minivans to Narathiwat (80B) depart hourly from Th Asia 18, across from the train station. Minivans heading to Pattani (120B), Yala (90B) and Hat Yai (180B) depart hourly from 7am to 5pm, in front of and west of the Genting Hotel.

TRAIN

Trains from Bangkok to Sungai Kolok include the 1pm rapid and 3.10pm special express and take at least 20 hours (180B to 893B). Trains from **Sungai Kolok station** (☎ 0 7461 4060) back to Bangkok include the 11.30am rapid and

2.20pm special express. Sample fares on these trains include 370B for a 3rd-class seat (fan, for sadomasochists only), 607B for a 2nd-class seat (fan), 677/917B for a 2nd-class sleeper (fan/air-con, lower berth) and 1753B for a 1st-class sleeper. There are also daily departures to Phun Phin, Nakhon Si Thammarat and Hat Yai.

Getting Around

The border is about 1km east of the centre of Sungai Kolok or the train station. Transport around town is by motorcycle taxi – it's 30B for a ride to the border or into the centre of town.

From Rantau Panjang (Malaysian side), a share taxi to Kota Bharu will cost about eight Malaysian ringgit per person (or 30 ringgit to charter the whole car yourself) and it takes about an hour. It costs four ringgit to Kota Bharu on the regular yellow and orange bus.

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