

EXCURSIONS

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Believe it or not, there is life after Bangkok. The city's central location, not to mention its role as the country's transportation hub, makes it a convenient base to explore much of what central Thailand has to offer. Destinations range from renowned beaches to critter-laden jungles, and can be done either as a day trip or a more relaxed overnighter. Much of the tourism surrounding Bangkok is geared towards the natives, and as such there's an emphasis on religious pilgrimages and food – the latter ranging from 'famous' restaurants to buzzing night markets for socialising and dining. Both of these also allow for fascinating insights into Thai culture. Bangkok's outlying areas also have many theme parks and animal attractions that will entertain children who are sick of humouring their parents.

BACK TO NATURE

Going from concrete jungle to real jungle is not as hard as you'd think, and a couple hours on a bus will take you to places so wild you can count elephants and tigers among your neighbours.

To the northeast, the Dangrek Mountains geographically fuse Thailand and Cambodia and break the fertile central plains around Bangkok. Occupying this wooded landscape is **Khao Yai National Park (p246)**, one of Thailand's biggest and best preserves. Its mountainous monsoon forests dress and undress with the comings and goings of the seasons and claim hundreds of resident species. Visitors can take quick dips into nature while staying at a nearby resort, playing golf and touring start-up wineries. And hard-core nature types can immerse themselves completely in rustic park shelters in the forest. Waterfalls tend to dominate Khao Yai itineraries, but in between you might be lucky enough to spot the big game, though don't get your hopes up too high – the wildlife is, erm, wild, and unlikely to just wander up for a quick chat and a beer.

West of Bangkok, limestone hills rise out of the sun-parched land like a great ruined city. **Kanchanaburi (p242)** is the best base for exploring this area of waterfalls, caves and tropical jungle. Bike rides will take you past shaggy fields of sugar cane being harvested by hand and lovingly tended spirit houses guarding uninhabited woods. Organised tours take visitors on whirlwind outings by land, water and rail.

Moving south along Thailand's rugged border with Myanmar (Burma), **Kaeng Krachan National Park (p241)**, the country's largest, is a paradise for birders and others looking to do some camera hunting.

TIME TRAVEL

Thailand's heroic ancient capital, **Ayuthaya (p226)**, is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and a major pilgrimage site for anyone interested in Thai history. The remaining red-brick temples, which resisted the Burmese siege in the 18th century, are now resisting the pull of gravity. It is hard to imagine today, but this modern city of temple ruins was once a golden city that bewitched European traders in the heyday of the Asian trade route. Nearby Bang Pa-In, a royal summer palace, is a surviving homage to the world's architectural styles that convened near this port city.

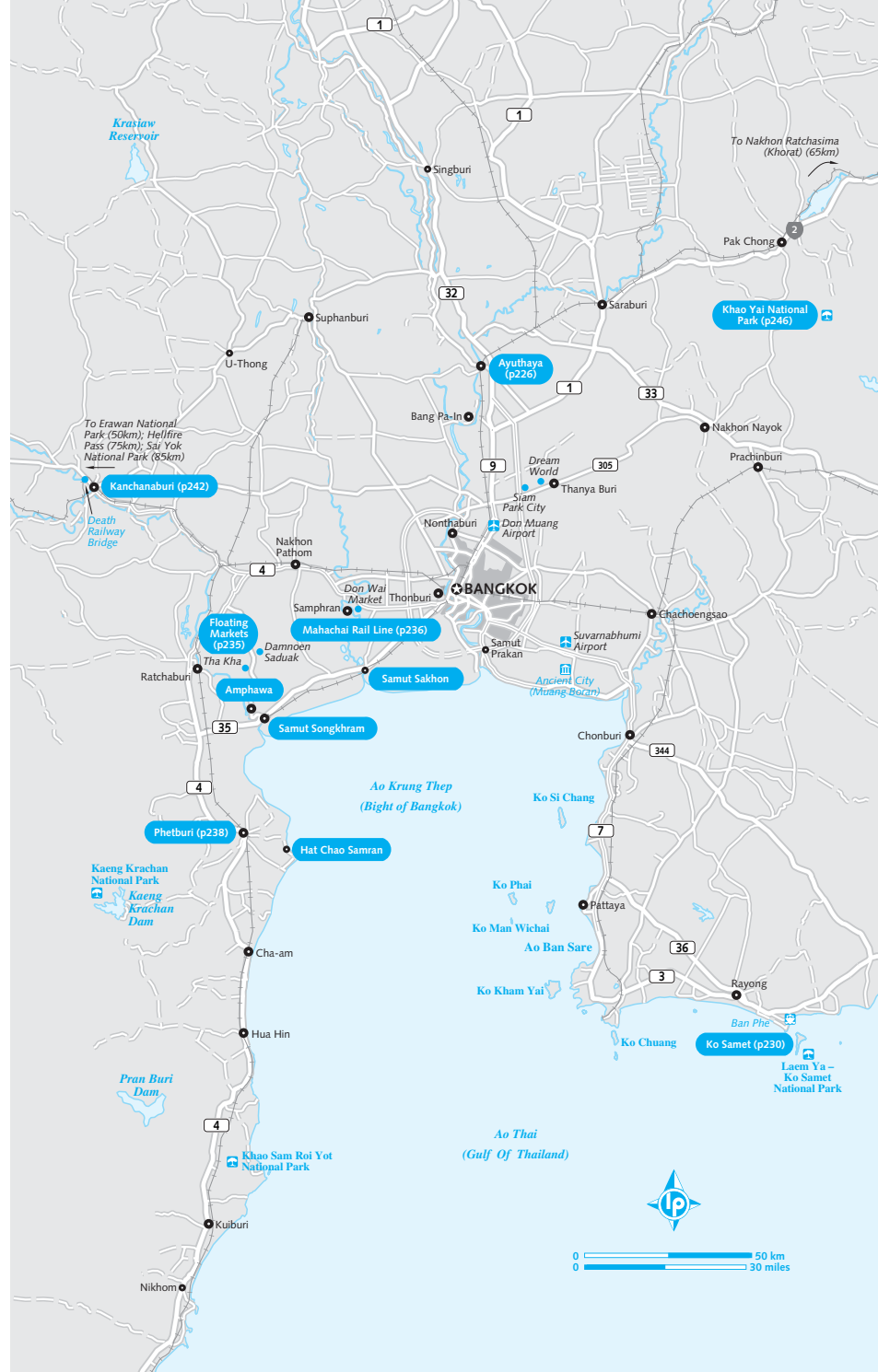
More recent masterpieces of Thai art can be seen in the vivid wall paintings and graceful stucco façades of **Phetburi's (p238)** numerous temples. A day of wandering can provide views into several of the recognised masterpieces of central Thai art.

The **Ancient City (p248)**, an architectural museum in Samut Prakan, has reproduced Thailand's great monuments into a tastefully arranged park. Like Ayuthaya, the Ancient City is best explored by bicycle, when the peaceful grounds and impressive structures will inspire further-flung excursions throughout the country.

Modern history is only a train ride away in **Kanchanaburi (p242)** where vivid museums, themed excursions and touching monuments bring home the area's tragic setting as a WWII labour camp.

THAI LIFE

The **Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya (p236)** will transport you directly to the rhythms of daily life outside the capital. The destinations, a string of gulfside market towns, are just as interesting as the villages and markets that comprise the journey.



Phetburi's (p238) twisting back lanes, peak-roofed Thai-style wooden houses and rambling morning market combine to form the epitome of central Thai life.

Outside the capital, village life is still tied to the *khlong* (canals) and rivers that knit the land to the sea. **Amphawa's** (p236) canalside setting and ancient wooden houses are straight out of a movie set, and homestays provide a first-hand view of this uniquely Thai community. Elsewhere, largely touristy **floating markets** (p235) are the last remnants of a traditional Thai lifestyle that has all but disappeared.

SAND & SUN

With its emerald seas, languid breezes and blonde strips of sand, **Ko Samet** (p230) is an easy weekend getaway for urban warriors. Small bungalows dot the various bays, which are connected by footpaths traversing rocky outcrops. You can claim a piece of sand and watch the day expire, dine at beachside barbecues and listen to the music of the hidden insects.

Hat Chao Samran (p241), a short jaunt from Phetburi, provides all the necessary elements of sand, cosy accommodation and cheap seafood necessary for a proper Thai-style beach getaway.

AYUTHAYA

พระนครศรีอยุธยา

Drawn by the prospect of ancient ruins, the majority of visitors to this former Thai capital do so from a big bus on a tight schedule. If you're willing to explore rather than be led, you'll find that not only does Ayuthaya offer a glimpse into the past, but it is also a great break from city life. Throw in excellent riverfront dining, cheap but comfortable accommodation and the chance to see the temples in the cool, quiet dawn, and you might even be persuaded to stay a night or two.

JUST ANOTHER TOWN?

Since 1991 Ayuthaya has been included on Unesco's prestigious World Heritage List. Referred to as the Historic City of Ayutthaya and Associated Historic Towns, the designation is a point of pride among many Thais, and a selling point for many of the tourists who visit the ruins. However, along with the prestige comes a strict set of rules detailing land use near the historic sites. In late 2007 increasing land encroachment and rapid development were rumoured to have threatened the city's Unesco status. The news unleashed a series of emotional newspaper editorials in which the greed of local entrepreneurs was likened to the invading Burmese originally responsible for the city's destruction. Thailand's Culture Minister admitted that being removed from the list would be 'unfortunate and embarrassing', and has pledged to work with local authorities and Thailand's Fine Arts Department to remedy the situation.

Built at the confluence of three rivers (Chao Phraya, Pa Sak and Lopburi), this island city was the seat of a powerful Siamese kingdom that dominated the region for 400 years. Both courted and aided by foreign interests, the empire eventually extended its control deep into present-day Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar (Burma).

Ayuthaya remained one of the world's most splendid and cosmopolitan cities until 1767, when the Burmese, after several attempts, eventually conquered and destroyed it. The surviving Thai army fled south to re-establish control in Thonburi and, 15 years later, to the founding of the new capital, Bangkok.

The famed capital suffered greatly at the hands of the invading Burmese army. Many of the city's temples were levelled, and the sacred Buddha figures were decapitated as if they were enemy combatants. Although Thailand's Fine Arts Department has done extensive restoration work on the ancient capital, it is still rare to find an unscarred Buddha amid Ayuthaya's ruins.

Getting a handle on the religious and historical importance of the temples is difficult without some preliminary research. **Ayuthaya Historical Study Centre** (☎ 0 3524 5124; Th Rotchana; adult/student 100/50B; ☎ 9am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm Sat & Sun) has informative, professional displays that paint a clear picture of the ancient city. Other museums in town include **Chao Sam Phraya National Museum** (☎ 0 3524 1587; cnr Th Rotchana & Th Si Sanphet; admission 30B; ☎ 9am-4pm Wed-Sun), which features a basic roundup of Thai Buddhist sculpture with an emphasis on Ayuthaya pieces, and **Chantharakasem National Museum** (☎ 0 3525 1587; Th U Thong; admission 30B; ☎ 9am-4pm Wed-Sun), a museum piece in itself, in the north-east corner of town.

AYUTHAYA HISTORICAL PARK

The Ayuthaya Historical Park is separated into two geographical districts. Ruins 'on the island', in the central part of town west of Th Chee Kun, are best visited on bicycle or

TRANSPORT: AYUTHAYA

Distance from Bangkok 85km

Direction North

Travel Time One hour by bus; 1½ hours by train

Bus 1st-class air-con (72B) and 2nd-class air-con (61B) buses depart Bangkok's Northern and Northeastern Bus Terminal (also called Mo Chit; **Map pp124-5**) to Th Naresuan in Ayuthaya every 20 minutes between 5am and 7pm. On Th Naresuan in Ayuthaya, a minivan service shuttles passengers to and from Bangkok's Victory Monument (**Map pp52-3**) from 5am to 5pm (60B).

Train Northbound trains leave from Bangkok's Hualamphong station (**Map p84**) roughly every 30 minutes between 6.20am and 9.30am, and 6pm and 10pm. The 3rd-class fare is 20B. You can also take the train from Bangkok's Don Muang airport to Ayuthaya (20B) roughly every hour from 6am to 9am and 3pm to 10pm. From Ayuthaya's train station, the quickest way to reach the city is to walk straight west to the river, where you can take a short ferry ride (3B) across. Alternatively, a *túk-túk* to any point in old Ayuthaya should be around 30B to 50B.

Boat Many boat companies in Bangkok offer scenic boat tours to Ayuthaya; see p264.

Getting Around Guesthouses rent bicycles for 50B per day or motorcycles for 250B; *túk-túk* tours cost 200B per hour. A longtail boat trip (one-hour evening trip 600B) involves a semicircular tour of the island, as well as views of river life. Arrange at the pier behind Hua Ro Market.

motorbike; those 'off the island', opposite the river from the centre, are best visited on an evening boat tour. You can also take a bicycle across the river by boat from the pier near Pom Phet fortress, inside the southeast corner of the city centre. At many of the ruins a 30B admission fee is collected from 8am to 6.30pm.

On the Island

Wat Phra Si Sanphet was once the largest temple in Ayuthaya and was used as the royal temple-palace by several kings. Built in the 14th century, the compound contained a 16m standing Buddha coated with 250kg of gold, which was melted down by the Burmese conquerors. Its three Ayuthaya-style *chedi* (stupas) have come to be identified with Thai art more than any other style. The adjacent **Wat Phra Mongkhon Bophit**, built in the 1950s, houses one of the largest bronze seated Buddhas in Thailand.

Wat Phra Mahathat, on the corner of Th Chee Kun and Th Naresuan, has one of the first *prang* (Khmer-style tower) built in the capital and a Buddha head engulfed by fingerlike tree roots – one of the most photographed sites in Ayuthaya. Across the road, **Wat Ratburana** contains *chedi* and faded murals that are among the oldest in the country. Neighbouring **Wat Thammikarat** features overgrown *chedi* ruins and lion sculptures.

Wat Lokayasutaram features an impressive 28m-long reclining Buddha, ostensibly dating back to the early Ayuthaya period.

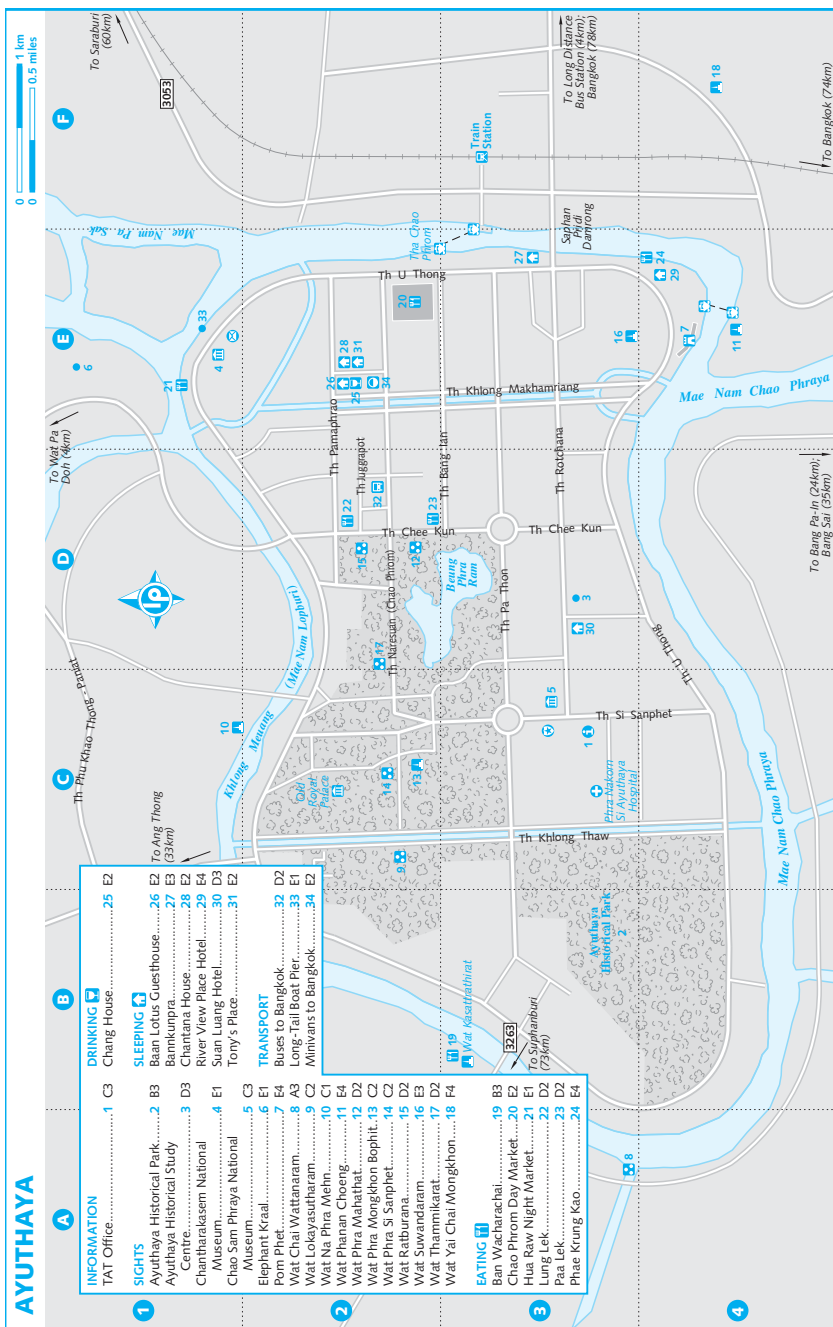
Wat Suwandaram's two main structures boast attractive murals, including a modern-era depiction of a famous Ayuthaya-era battle in the *wihāan* and classic *Jataka* (stories from the Buddha's lives) in the adjacent *bòt* (ordination hall). Nearby **Pom Phet** served as the island's initial line of defence for centuries. Only crumbling walls remain today, but the spot features breezy views and is also home to a river crossing ferry to the mainland.

Off the Island

Southeast of town on Mae Nam Chao Phraya, **Wat Phanan Choeng** was built before Ayuthaya became a Siamese capital. The temple's builders are unknown, but it appears to have been constructed in the early 14th century, so it's possibly Khmer. The main *wihāan* (central sanctuary) contains a highly revered 19m sitting Buddha image from which the wat derives its name. The area surrounding the temple was once home to a large Chinese community, and at weekends it is crowded with Buddhist pilgrims from Bangkok who pay for lengths of saffron-coloured cloth to be ritually draped over the image.

The ruined Ayuthaya-style tower and *chedi* of **Wat Chai Wattanaram**, on the western bank of Mae Nam Chao Phraya, boast the most attractive setting of any of the city's temples. The manicured Thai-style compound across the river belongs to the Thai royal family.

Wat Yai Chai Mongkhon is southeast of the town proper; it can be reached by white-and-green



BANG PA-IN

บางปะอิน

This postcard-perfect palace lies just 24km south of Ayutthaya. A hodgepodge of international architectural styles reflects the eclectic tastes of Rama IV (King Mongkut; r 1851–68) and his son and heir Rama V (King Chulalongkorn; r 1868–1910), both of whom used the residence as a retreat from the summer rains. The winged-eaved Thai-style pavilion, the ornate Chinese-style Wehat Chamrun Palace and a Swiss chalet mansion (the preferred residence of Rama V) are all on display. A flamboyant lookout tower (Withun Thatsana) gave the king fine views over the gardens and lakes.

At the nearby **Royal Folk Arts & Crafts Centre** (☎ 0 3536 6252; admission 100B; 🕒 9am–5pm Mon–Fri, 9am–7pm Sat & Sun) at Bang Sai you can see traditional Thai handicrafts and artwork being made. The centre is also home to Thailand's largest freshwater aquarium.

Bang Pa-In can be reached by blue *sǎwngthǎew* (pick-up truck; 13B; 45 minutes) or minibus (30B) from Ayutthaya's Chao Phrom Market (Map p228) on Th Naresuan. From Bangkok there are buses (50B) every half-hour from the Northern & Northeastern Bus Terminal (Mo Chit; Map pp124–5). You can also reach Bang Pa-In by two morning trains from Bangkok (3rd class, 12B).

minibus 6. It's a quiet place built in 1357 by King U Thong and was once famous as a meditation centre. The compound contains a very large *chedi*, and a community of *māe chii* (Buddhist nuns) lives here.

North of the city, the **Elephant Kraal** is a restoration of the wooden stockade once used for the annual roundup of wild elephants. A huge fence of teak logs planted at a 45-degree angle enclosed the elephants. The king had a raised observation pavilion for the thrilling event.

North of the old royal palace (*wang luang*) grounds is a bridge to **Wat Na Phra Mehn**. This temple is notable because it escaped destruction in the 1767 Burmese capture, though it has undergone restoration over the years. The main *bòt* (central chapel) was built in 1546 and features fortress-like walls and pillars. The *bòt* interior contains an impressive carved wooden ceiling and a splendid 6m-high sitting Buddha in royal attire. Inside a smaller *wihāan* behind the *bòt* is a green-stone, European-pose (sitting in a chair) Buddha from Ceylon, said to be 1300 years old. The walls of the *wihāan* show traces of 18th- or 19th-century murals.

INFORMATION

Tourist Authority of Thailand (TAT) (☎ 0 3524 6076; 108/22 Th Si Sanphet; 🕒 9am–5pm) Occupying an imposing building dating back to 1941, TAT provides maps, bus schedules and information about Loi Krathong festivities. Ask for a free copy of *Ayutthaya*, the excellent illustrated booklet published by TAT.

EATING

Ban Wacharachai (☎ 0 3532 1333; Wat Kasattrathirat; dishes 60–150B; 🕒 10–2am) A must for visiting foodies,

this hidden gem is legendary among locals and regular visitors alike for its perfectly executed central Thai-style dishes, not to mention a pleasant riverfront location. The smoked snakehead fish is sublime. To get there, cycle or take a *túk-túk* to Wat Kasattrathirat (known as Wat Kasat); the rambling restaurant is hidden in a thick garden directly north of the temple.

Hua Raw Night Market & Chao Phrom Day Market (Th U Thong) These markets are the highlight of Ayutthaya nosing. The former features several vendors preparing Thai-Muslim dishes.

Phae Krung Kao (Th U Thong; dishes 60–100B; 🕒 10–2am) On the southern side of the bridge, this floating restaurant is so popular that Thai locals even rouse their geriatric grandmas for a night out.

In the past, Ayutthayans got their noodle fix from boat-based vendors who hocked their bowls along the city's canals and rivers. Today the vessels are all landlocked, but the famous *kūaytiaw ruea* (boat noodles) remain as popular as ever. **Lung Lek** (Th Chee Kun; dishes 15B; 🕒 9am–4pm) is a sprawling roadside stall next door to the city's telephone authority.

Sweet snacks associated with Ayutthaya include *roti saay mai* (thin pancake-like sheets wrapped around candy floss), available from numerous vendors near Phra Nakorn Si Ayutthaya Hospital. *Khānǒm bà bin* (tiny pancakes made from sticky rice flour and shredded coconut meat) can be found at the market behind Wat Phra Mongkhon Bophit.

KO KRET

เกาะเกร็ด

Bangkok's closest green getaway is this artificial 'island', the result of a canal being dredged to shorten an oxbow bend in the Chao Phraya River nearly 300 years ago. Today Ko Kret's claim to fame is the hand-thrown terracotta pots that are sold at markets throughout Bangkok. This island and the pottery tradition date back to one of Thailand's oldest settlements of Mon people, who were a dominant tribe of central Thailand between the 6th and 10th centuries AD. There are two pottery centres on the island where you can buy the earthenware and watch the potters work; one is on the east coast and the other is on the north coast. From Wat Paramai Yikawat (Wat Mon), which has an interesting Mon-style marble Buddha, go in either direction to find the pottery shops.

Even more prevalent than pottery is food. At weekends droves of Thais flock to Ko Kret to munch on old-school deep-fried savouries, *khāao chāe* (a Mon dish combining savoury/sweet tidbits and chilled rice) and iced coffee served in the island's distinctive pottery.

If you're thinking of staying overnight, or longer, **Baan Dvara Prateep** (☎ 0 2373 6457; www.baandvaraprateep.com; 53/3 Moo 5, Ko Kret) offers accommodation, not to mention multiday yoga and meditation retreats, in a traditional wooden house on the west coast of the island. At the time of writing they were taking only group bookings; call ahead for details.

The easiest way to reach Ko Kret is to take the special **Chao Phraya Express boat** (☎ 0 2623 6001; www.chao-phrayaboat.co.th; adult/child 299/250B; 🚢) departs 10am, returns 4.30pm) directly to the island departing every Sunday from Tha Sathon (Map pp108–9). Otherwise, the easiest way is to take a bus (ordinary 52, 150, 356, air-con 150, 166) or taxi to Pak Kret and catch a cross-river ferry at Wat Sanam Nuea (1B) for the brief ride to the island.

DRINKING

Chang House (☎ 0 3532 8228; 14/10 Th Naresuan) Left your friends back in Bangkok? You won't have any problems making some new ones at this friendly open-air boozier smack dab in the middle of the lively guesthouse strip.

SLEEPING

Ayuthaya has several hotels but beyond the budget end (mainly found on the Th Naresuan strip, opposite Chao Phrom Market), there isn't a huge amount of character.

Baan Lotus Guest House (☎ 0 325 1988; 20 Th Pamaphrao; r 300–600B; 🛏️) Two tall wooden houses contain spotless and airy rooms, and the service here is genial and warm.

Chantana House (☎ 0 3532 3200; 12/22 Th Naresuan; r 300–450B; 🛏️) Calling itself the 'Local Touch Guest House', this expansive suburban villa is the most authentically domestic of the city's guesthouse accommodation. The tidy rooms are an excellent bargain.

Bannkunpra (☎ 0 3524 1978; www.bannkunpra.com; 48 Th U Thong; dm/s 250/300B, d 400–800B; 🛏️) This genteel old teak house is the most atmospheric place in town and has a prime riverfront location and breezy, though mostly shared-bathroom, rooms. There is also a four-bed dorm.

Tony's Place (☎ 0 3525 2578; Soi Thaw Kaw Saw, off Th Naresuan; d 200–1000B; 🛏️) Tony's is a sprawling establishment with an energetic party atmosphere and busy patio restaurant and

bar. Rooms are dependable, and some have balconies.

Suan Luang Hotel (☎ /fax 0 3524 5537; Rt Rothchana; d 500–600B; 🛏️) This five-storey hotel looks like a government building because it is; Suan Luang functions as a training facility for students at the neighbouring Rajabhat University. The hotel has passable air-con rooms with fridge, TV and private bathroom.

River View Place Hotel (☎ 0 3524 1444; 35/5 Th U Thong; d from 1700B; 🛏️) Great river views, as the name suggests, and spacious rooms. The hotel also features an acclaimed restaurant featuring a variety of local dishes.

KO SAMET

เกาะเสม็ด

The search for sun and sand doesn't have to involve a big trip down south. Only half a day's journey from Bangkok, Ko Samet has famously squeaky sand beaches and an endless expanse of ocean. Plus it is a relatively dry island, making it an excellent place to visit during the rainy season when other island paradises are under water. Of course, all of this makes it very popular with everyone – Thais, foreigners and especially stray dogs (not really *soi* dogs; perhaps they're 'hat dogs') – especially on weekends or holidays. September is a particularly good time.

Ko Samet earned a permanent place in Thai literature when classical Thai poet Sunthorn

Phu set part of his epic *Phra Aphaimani* on its shores. The story follows the travails of a prince exiled to an undersea kingdom governed by a lovesick female giant. A mermaid assists the prince in his escape to Ko Samet, where he defeats a giant by playing a magic flute. Today the poem is immortalised on the island by a **mermaid statue** built on the rocky point separating Ao Hin Khok and Hat Sai Kaew.

In the early 1980s, Ko Samet began receiving its first visitors: young Thais in search of a retreat from city life. At that time there were only about 40 houses on the island. Rayong and Bangkok speculators saw the sudden interest in Ko Samet as a chance to cash in on an up-and-coming Phuket and began buying up land along the beaches. No-one bothered about the fact that Ko Samet had been a national marine park since 1981. When *faràng* (Westerners) soon followed, spurred on by rumours that Ko Samet was similar to Ko Samui '10 years ago' (one always seems to miss it by a decade), the National Parks Division stepped in and built a visitors' office on the island, ordered that all bungalows be moved back behind the tree line and started charging admission to the park.

However, the regulating hand of the National Parks Division is almost invisible beyond the admission gate. Many attempts to halt encroachment have been successfully defeated by resort operators or developers. One successful measure is a ban on new ac-

commodation (except where it replaces old sites), ensuring that bungalows remain thinly spread over most of the island.

Most development is concentrated at the northern end of the island, though compared with Bangkok even this busiest part of Ko Samet seems as sparsely populated as the Australian outback. The further south you go, the less likely you are to be kept awake by a guesthouse party.

Boat trips (per person 600–800B) to nearby reefs and uninhabited islands, such as Ko Thalu and Ko Kut, can easily be arranged.

Around the Island

Ko Samet is shaped like a golf tee, with the wide part in the north tapering away along a narrow strip to the south. Most boats from the mainland arrive at **Na Dan Pier** in the north, which is little more than a transit point. On the northeastern coast is **Hat Sai Kaew** (Diamond Beach), the most developed stretch of beach on the island and the best place for nightlife. Wealthy Bangkokians file straight into Hat Sai's air-con bungalows with their designer sunglasses and (small) designer dogs.

Heading south along the eastern shore is a scruffier set of beaches: **Ao Hin Khok**, **Ao Phai** and **Ao Phutsa**, which are fittingly claimed by backpackers. A rocky headland crossed by a footpath separates palm-shaded Ao Phutsa from beaches further south. Quiet **Ao Nuan** and **Ao Cho** (Chaw) have beaches that aren't quite

TRANSPORT: KO SAMET

Distance from Bangkok 200km

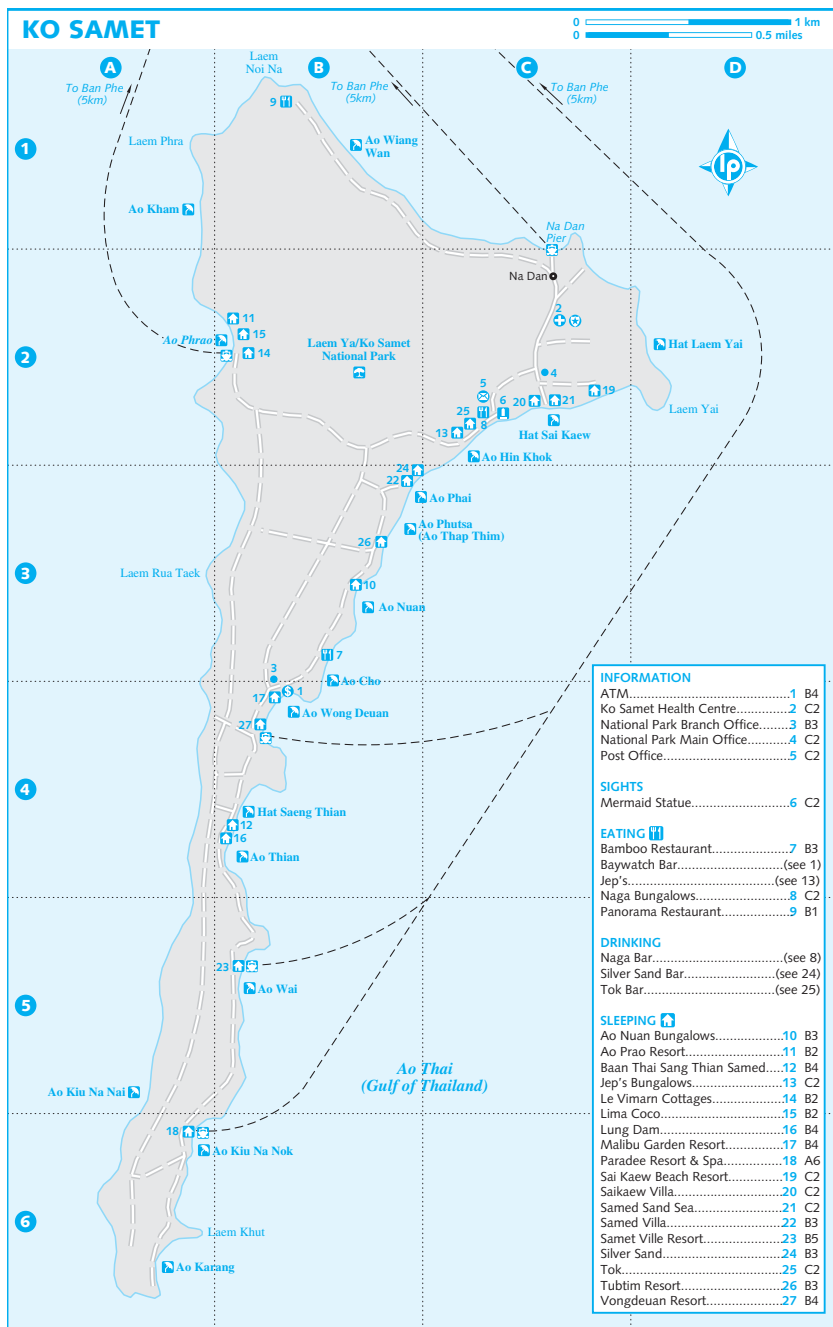
Direction Southeast

Travel Time Four hours

Bus The fastest way to reach Ko Samet by public transport is actually the most roundabout: bus to Rayong, *sāwngthāew* to Ban Phe and boat to the island. Buses directly to Ban Phe (140B), the pier for ferries to Ko Samet, leave from Bangkok as well, but the travel time is slower. Air-con buses to Rayong (137B, 3½ hours, every 30 minutes from 5am to 9.30pm) leave Bangkok's Eastern Bus Terminal (Ekamai; Map pp124–5). From Rayong bus station (or wherever you're dropped), take a *sāwngthāew* (20B, 30 minutes, every 15 minutes) to Ban Phe. Guesthouses around Th Khao San often arrange transport that costs more but is more convenient, although not necessarily faster.

Taxi Of course, you could just ditch the whole bus plan and take a taxi; almost any Bangkok taxi will be up for the job, assuming they have enough time left on their shift (mornings are good). From Bangkok it will cost about 2500B to 3000B one way, and it will take about two hours. From Suvarnabhumi Airport it's about 2300B.

Boat Boats to Ko Samet leave from Ban Phe's many piers; be sure to buy tickets directly from a boat office at the pier instead of a scammer waiting at the bus station. Most boats go to Na Dan Pier (return 100B, about an hour each way), but there are also boats to Ao Wong Deuan (return 120B) and other beaches in high season. Boat schedules vary depending on the season, so prepare to wait an hour or more unless it's very busy. You can also charter a speedboat (1200B to 2000B).



voluptuous enough to attract crowds, and tend to attract romantics instead.

Immediately to the south is the prom queen of the bunch: **Ao Wong Deuan**, whose graceful stretch of sand is home to an entourage of sardine-packed sun-worshippers, screaming jet skis and honky-tonk bars akin to those in Pattaya.

Thai college kids claim **Ao Thian** (Candlelight Beach) for all-night guitar jam sessions, and further south is a castaway's dream of empty beaches and gentle surf, and the starting point for languid walks to the western side of the island to see fiery sunsets.

The only developed beach on the western side of the island is **Ao Phrao** (Coconut Beach), which hosts the island's most luxurious resort and moonlights as 'Paradise Beach' to those escaping winter climates.

INFORMATION

There is an ATM near Malibu Garden Resort. **Ko Samet Health Centre** (☎ 0 3861 2999; btwn Hat Sai Kaew & Na Dan; ☎ 8.30am-8pm Mon-Fri, to 4.30pm Sat & Sun) Small public clinic with English-speaking doctors for minor health problems.

National Park entrance gates (Hat Sai Kaew; admission 200B; ☎ sunrise-sunset) There's another office on Ao Wong Deuan; wherever you arrive a ranger will find you to charge the fee.

Post office (Ao Hin Khok, next to Naga Bungalows; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-noon Sat) Poste restante and internet access.

DRINKING

Naga Bar (dishes 50-160B; ☎ 8-2am) On Ao Hin Khok at Naga Bungalows, this is a good destination for post-dinner shenanigans. Ao Wong Deuan is so packed with wall-to-wall bars it's difficult to know where one ends and the next begins – but does it really matter? **Tok Bar** (dishes 40-150B; ☎ 7-2am), nearby, offers the same thing.

Silver Sand Bar (☎ 0 6530 2417; Ao Phai; ☎ 1pm-2am) As the clock ticks towards the witching hour, the island's night owls congregate under trippy spherical lights to watch the fire twirlers show off, grind to cheesy dance music, and knock back more than 35 types of cocktail (all served in buckets, of course).

EATING

Most guesthouses have restaurants, and many offer beachside dining in the evenings. There

BEFORE SAMET MEANT ESCAPE

If marketing minds had been involved, Ko Samet would still be known by its old name: Ko Kaew Phitsadan (Vast Jewel Isle), a reference to the abundant white sand. But the island's first cash cow, the cajeput (or *sâmèt*) tree, lent its name to the island as this valuable firewood source grew in abundance here. Locally, the *sâmèt* tree has also been used in boat building.

are several food stalls along the main drag between Na Dan pier and Sai Kaew Beach, and it's worth looking out for the nightly beach barbecues, particularly along Ao Hin Khok and Ao Phai.

Bamboo Restaurant (Ao Cho; dishes 80-150B; ☎ 8am-10pm) This restaurant offers inexpensive, but tasty, food and good service.

Baywatch Bar (☎ 08 1826 7834; Ao Wong Deuan; dishes 190-290B; ☎ 8-2am) Sorry fellas, Pam Anderson is nowhere to be found, although the delicious cocktails and international dishes are a decent consolation prize.

Jep's (Ao Hin Khok; dishes 60-400B; ☎ 8am-10pm) If you're going to leave your bungalow in search of other restaurants, try Jep's. It's on the pricier side, but the almanac-sized menu offers everything from Thai staples to Indian and French faves.

Naga Bungalows (☎ 0 3865 2448; Ao Hin Khok; dishes 150-200B; ☎ 8am-10pm) This guesthouse restaurant has a bakery with warm rolls, croissants and donuts in the morning and great sandwiches and pizza throughout the day. There are plenty of tofu dishes on the menu and weekly buffet meals.

Panorama Restaurant (Moo Ban Talay Resort, Ao Noi Na; dishes 120-300B; ☎ 11am-11pm) City sensibilities serve Asian and Western cuisine instead of guesthouse grub. It's northwest of Na Dan.

SLEEPING

Because of demand, Ko Samet's prices aren't always reflective of amenities. A ramshackle hut starts at 300B, and with air-con this can climb to 800B. Reservations aren't always honoured, so at peak times it is advisable to arrive early, poised for the hunt.

Hat Sai Kaew

Sai Kaew Beach Resort (☎ 0 2438 9771/2; www.samedresorts.com; r 3600-4800B, bungalows 4800-14,500B; ☎) Smart, blue and white bungalows dot this fairly classy beach resort. Off-beach resorts

are better than they sound, and away from the jetskis.

Saikaew Villa (☎ 0 3864 4139-48; www.saikaew.com; bungalows 700-2500B; 📶 📺 📺) A huge and not especially personal complex that serves up comfortable accommodation. It's worth asking for a room away from the noisy generators.

Samed Sand Sea (☎ 0 3865 1126, 08 7508 3250; www.samedsandsea.com; r 2400-4000B; 📶 📺) The last new place on Hai Sai Kaew (since there's now officially no more room to build), Samed Sand Sea has beautiful wooden bungalows with refreshing air-con that's borderline cryogenic.

Ao Hin Khok & Ao Phai

Jep's Bungalows (☎ 0 3864 4112; www.jepbungalow.com; r 300-1200B; 📶 📺) Jep's bungalows are a cheery mix of mahogany and magenta, although there are better options around if you're going to fork out more than 600B. Guests staying in the pricier pads get free breakfast. Mosquito repellent is a must.

Samed Villa (☎ 0 3864 4094; www.samedvilla.com; r incl breakfast 1800-2800B; 📶 📺) Hugely popular place with well-maintained, tree-shaded bungalows with large verandas. The larger bungalows are large indeed and are suited to families, while the best of the lot have sea views.

Silver Sand (☎ 08 6530 2417; www.silversandresort.com; bungalows 300-1800B; 📶 📺) This establishment has about 40 comfortable but oddly green bungalows with their own verandas and some with beach frontage. There is also a lively beach bar.

Tok (☎ 0 3864 4072; bungalows 300-800B; 📶 📺) One of the island's first bungalow operations is still kicking along, with clean but spartan fan and air-con bungalows with and without bathroom. The hillside lodgings are popular because they are fair value.

Ao Phutsa (Ao Thap Thim) & Ao Nuan

Ao Nuan Bungalows (Ao Nuan; bungalows 600-1000B) If you blink you'll miss this beach and the secluded rustic huts scattered about the hillside. They all have shared bathrooms and intermittent electricity. It's a five-minute walk over the headland from Ao Phutsa. There's no phone and it doesn't take reservations.

Tubtim Resort (☎ 0 3864 4025; www.tubtimresort.com; r 600-2000B; 📶 📺) Tubtim has five rows of bungalows climbing a rugged hill from the beach

up into the jungle. Spend the extra 200B and go for an upgraded fan bungalow – they have sparkling bathrooms and varnished fixtures, and are noticeably better than the rickety cheapies.

Ao Wong Deuan & Ao Thian

Baan Thai Sang Thian Samed (☎ 08 1305 9408; Ao Thian; r 1500-2500B; 📶 📺) This newer address, featuring traditional Thai architecture with a treehouse twist, confirms quiet Ao Thian's move away from its budget backpacker origins and into the flashpacker realm.

Lung Dam (☎ 08 1659 8056; Ao Thian; bungalows 600-1200B; 📶 📺) This is good for low-budget romance – the huts are built of scrap and junk, both organic and otherwise. It all looks as if it belonged to some settlement of castaways marooned on a deserted island.

Malibu Garden Resort (☎ 0 3864 4020; Ao Wong Deuan; bungalows 1550-7000B; 📶 📺) This resort has well-built brick or wooden bungalows; the more expensive rooms have a fridge and TV. Breakfast is included.

Vongdeuan Resort (☎ 0 3865 1777; www.vongdeuan.com; Ao Wong Deuan; r 2000-3500B; 📶 📺) This is the best of Ao Wong Deuan, and is quite extravagant by Ko Samet standards. Most bungalows are teak-style houses with front-row beach seating; cheaper and less attractive concrete cottages are at the back.

Other Eastern Beaches

Paradee Resort & Spa (☎ 0 2438 9771; www.samedresorts.com; villas 15,000B; 📶 📺 📺) The price tag is high, but you get your own self-contained, beachfront villa on probably Ko Samet's best beach. There's gorgeous Thai furniture, a personal plunge pool, DVD player, espresso maker – even your own butler. Speedboats from Ban Phe are arranged – you'll be way too busy being pampered to have time to plan a ferry connection.

Samet Ville Resort (☎ 0 3865 1682; www.sametvilleresort.com; r 980-3780B; 📶 📺) Samet Ville is a private getaway where guests can enjoy luxury and isolation in equal measure. The shaded restaurant is lovely spot for a romantic dinner. Staff can arrange speedboat transfers from Ban Phe.

Ao Phrao

Ao Phrao Resort (☎ 0 2438 9771-72; www.samedresorts.com; chalets 6500-18,200B; 📶 📺) The oldest lux-

ury lodging on Samet has been surpassed by younger models, but the private seclusion and all the bells and whistles still earn their keep. Ao Phrao Divers, at the resort, provides diving, windsurfing, kayaking and boat trips.

Le Vimarn Cottages (☎ 0 2438 9771/2, Dhivarin Spa 0 3864 4104-7; www.samedresorts.com; r 8000-10,500B; 📶 📺 📺) Possibly the island's most luxe option, Le Vimarn is manicured tranquillity with elegant and modern rooms. Facilities include the lavish **Dhivarin Spa** (☎ 0 3864 4104-7).

Lima Coco (☎ 0 2938 1811; www.limacoco.com; d 2500-6900B; 📶 📺) Formerly the Dome Bungalows, this bungalow village is built on the hillside and has a few midrange options worth investigating. The resort also offers a free ferry from Ban Phe's Chok Pitsada Pier.

FLOATING MARKETS

ตลาดน้ำ

Pictures of floating markets (*tàlàat náam*) jammed full of the wooden canoes pregnant with colourful exotic fruits have defined the official tourist profile of Thailand for decades. The idyllic scenes are as iconic as the Grand Palace (p54) or the Reclining Buddha (p54), but they are also almost completely contrived for, and dependent upon, tourists. Roads and motorcycles have long moved daily errands onto dry ground.

The most famous of the breed – the one you've seen photographed hundreds of times – is the **Damnoen Saduak Floating Market** (Khlong Damnoen Saduak; 🕒 7am-noon). You can hire a boat from any pier that lines Th Sukhaphiban 1, which is

TRANSPORT: FLOATING MARKETS

Damnoen Saduak

Distance from Bangkok 65km

Direction Southwest

Travel Time Two hours

Bus Air-con buses (80B) go direct from Thonburi's Southern Bus Terminal (Map pp124–5) to Damnoen Saduak every 20 minutes, beginning at 6.30am. Most buses will drop you off at a pier along the *khlong*, where you can hire a boat directly to the floating market. The regular bus stop is in town just across the bridge. A yellow *sáwngtháew* (5B) does a frequent loop between the floating market and the bus stop in town.

Don Wai Market

Distance from Bangkok 50km

Direction Southwest

Travel Time 1½ hours

The easiest way to reach Don Wai Market is to take a minibus (45B; 35 minutes) from beside Central Pinklao (Map pp124–5) in Thonburi.

Amphawa Market

Distance from Bangkok 80km

Direction Southwest

Travel Time 1½ hours

Buses run every 40 minutes from Thonburi's Southern Bus Terminal (Map pp124–5) directly to Amphawa (72B).

Tha Kha Floating Market

Distance from Bangkok 55km

Direction Southwest

Travel Time Two hours

Tours can be organised through Baan Tai Had Resort (p236).

TRANSPORT: MAHACHAI RAIL LINE

Distance from Bangkok 28km to Samut Sakhon; 74km to Samut Songkhram

Direction Southwest

Travel Time One hour to Samut Sakhon, 1½ hours to Samut Songkhram

Train Trains leave Thonburi's Wong Wian Yai station (Map pp52–3) roughly every hour starting at 5.30am to Samut Sakhon. You'll need to leave Thonburi before 8.30am in order to do the trip entirely by train. There are four departures (7.30am, 10.10am, 1.30pm and 4.40pm) from Baan Laem to Samut Songkhram. The 3rd-class train costs 10B for each leg. Returning, the last two departures are 11.30am and 3.30pm from Samut Songkhram to Baan Laem, which has hourly departures to Thonburi until 7pm.

Bus If you get a late start, you can always return to Bangkok by bus. In both Samut Sakhon and Samut Songkhram the train station is a five-minute walk from the bus terminal. Regular buses from Samut Sakhon (44B) and Samut Songkhram (65B) arrive at the Southern Bus Terminal (Map pp124–5) in Thonburi. Both cities have bus service to Damnoen Saduak (p235).

the land route to the floating market area. The going rate is 250B per person per hour. The 100-year-old market is now essentially a floating souvenir stand filled with package tourists. But beyond the market, the residential canals are quite peaceful and can be explored by hiring a boat for a longer duration. South of the floating market are several small family businesses, including a Thai candy maker, a pomelo farm and a knife crafter.

Not technically a swimmer, **Don Wai Market** (Talat Don Wai; ☎ 6am–6pm) claims a riverbank location in Nakhon Pathom province, having originally started out in the early 20th century as a floating market for pomelo and jackfruit growers and traders. Like many tourist attractions geared towards Thais, the main attraction here is food, including fruit, traditional sweets and *pèt pháló* (five-spice stewed duck), which can be consumed on board large boats that cruise the Nakhorn Chaisi River (one hour, 60B).

The **Amphawa Floating Market** (Talat Náam Ampháwaa; ☎ 4pm–9pm Fri–Sun), about 7km north-west of Samut Songkhram, convenes near Wat Amphawa. If you can get your timing right, several nearby floating markets meet in the mornings on particular lunar days and tend to be mainly tourist-free zones. **Tha Kha Floating Market** (☎ 2nd, 7th & 12th day of waxing & waning moons, 7am–noon Sat & Sun) is one notable example, coalescing along an open, breezy *khlong* lined with greenery and old wooden houses.

INFORMATION

Baan Tai Had Resort (☎ 0 3476 7220; www.baantaihaid.com; 1 Moo 2, Th Tai Had, Samut Songkhram) Rents

kayaks and organises trips for exploring the Amphawa and Tha Kha markets.

Bike & Travel (☎ 0 2990 0274; www.cyclingthailand.com) This tour company organises bike trips to Damnoen Saduak and the surrounding villages.

Damnoen Saduak Tourist Information Office (Th Sukhaphiban 1; ☎ 9am–5pm) This office, across from the floating market, can organise transport to outlying canal sites if you want a two- to three-hour tour. It also arranges for home stays and other canal trips.

MAHACHAI RAIL LINE & AMPHAWA

สายรถไฟมหาชัย

If you've got the need to get out of the city but don't know where you want to go, this might be the perfect trip. The Mahachai Line, a rail spur linking Thonburi with a string of gulfside towns scented with the fishy perfume of the sea, is a pleasant, pointless trip for sat-ting the lust to wander. However, if you're the type that requires a destination, the quaint canalside village of Amphawa boasts enough atmosphere, accommodation and activities to warrant an overnight stay.

The adventure begins when you take a stab into Thonburi looking for the **Wong Wian Yai train station** (Map pp52–3; Th Taksin; bus 37). Just past the traffic circle (Wong Wian Yai) is a fairly ordinary food market that camouflages the unceremonious terminal of this commuter line.

Only 15 minutes out of the station the city density yields to squatty villages where you can peek into homes, temples and shops, many of which are arm's length from the pass-

ing trains. Further on palm trees, small rice fields and marshes filled with giant elephant ears and canna lilies form the way, tamed only briefly by little whistle-stop stations.

The wilderness and backwater farms evaporate quickly as you enter Samut Sakhon, popularly known as **Mahachai** because it straddles the confluence of Mae Nam Tha Chin and Khlong Mahachai. It is a bustling port town, several kilometres from the Gulf of Thailand and the end of the first rail segment.

After working your way through what must be one of the most hectic fresh markets in the country, you'll come to a vast harbour clogged with water hyacinth and wooden fishing boats. A few rusty cannon pointing towards the river testify to the town's crumbling fort, built to protect the kingdom from sea invaders. Before the 17th century, the town was known as Tha Jiin (Chinese Pier) because of the large number of Chinese junks that called here.

A few kilometres west of Samut Sakhon, further along Hwy 35, is the Ayuthaya-period **Wat Yai Chom Prasat**, which is renowned for the intricately carved wooden doors on its *bòt*. To reach here from Samut Sakhon, board a westbound bus (8B) heading towards Samut Songkhram. The *wát* is a short ride outside town, just across the large bridge.

OK, back to the harbour and on with the rail trip. Take the ferry across to Baan Laem (3B), jockeying for space with the motorcycles that cross back and forth, driven by school teachers and errand-running housewives. From the ferry, take a motorcycle taxi (10B) for the 2km ride to Wat Chawng Lom.

Wat Chawng Lom is home to the **Jao Mae Kuan Im Shrine**, a 9m-high fountain in the shape of the Mahayana Buddhist Goddess of Mercy that is popular with regional tour groups. The colourful image, which pours a perpetual stream of water from a vase in the goddess's right hand, rests on an artificial hill into which a passageway is carved, leading to another Kuan Im shrine.

Just beside the shrine is Tha Chalong, a train stop with two afternoon departures for Samut Songkhram (see *opposite*). Rambling out of the city, the surrounding forest is so dense that it seems the surrounding greenery might engulf the train tracks. We know it's an old cliché, but this little stretch of line genuinely feels a world away from the big smoke of Bangkok. Alas, not for long. The illusion that you've entered a parallel universe free of concrete is shattered as you enter Samut Songkhram. And to complete the seismic shift

you'll emerge directly into a hubbub of hectic market stalls, which between train arrivals and departures set up directly on the tracks hiding the station's back-door entrance.

Commonly known as Mae Klong, **Samut Songkhram** is a tidier version of Samut Sakhon, and offers a great deal more as a destination. Owing to flat topography and abundant water sources, the area surrounding the provincial capital is well suited to the steady irrigation needed to grow guava, lychee and grapes. A string of artificial sea-lakes used in the production of salt fill the space between Mae Klong and Thonburi.

Wat Phet Samut Worawihan, in the centre of town near the train station and river, contains a renowned Buddha image called Luang Phaw Wat Ban Laem – named after the *phrá sàksit* (holy monk) who dedicated it, thus transferring mystical powers to the image.

However, it comes as something of a relief that the province's most famous tourist attraction is not a wat. Instead, the honour goes to a bank of fossilised shells known as **Don Hoi Lot** at the mouth of Mae Nam Mae Klong, not far from town. These shells come from *húwy lăwt* (clams with a tubelike shell). The shell bank can really be seen only during the dry season when the river surface has receded to its lowest level (typically April and May). Nearby perennial seafood restaurants are popular with city folk. To get there you can hop into a *săwngthăew* in front of Somdet Phra Phuttalertla Hospital at the intersection of Th Prasitwatthana and Th Thamnimmit; the trip takes about 15 minutes (10B). Or you can charter a boat from the Mae Klong Market pier (*thâa tầlăat mầe klawng*), a scenic journey of around 45 minutes (1000B).

Wat Sathatham, 500m down the road from Don Hoi Lot, is notable for its *bòt* constructed of golden teak and decorated with 60 million baht worth of mother-of-pearl inlay. The inlay completely covers the temple's interior and depicts scenes from the *Jataka* (stories from the Buddha's lives) above the windows and the Ramakian below.

If you're not ready to turn back yet, charter a boat (1000B) or hop in a *săwngthăew* (9B) near the market for the 10-minute ride to **Amphawa**. This canalside village has become a popular destination among city folk who seek out what many consider its quintessentially 'Thai' setting. This urban influx has sparked a few signs of gentrification, but the canals, old wooden buildings, atmospheric cafés and quaint waterborne traffic still retain heaps

of charm. At weekends Amphawa puts on a reasonably authentic floating market (p235); visit on a weekday if you want to have the whole town to yourself.

Steps from Amphawa's central footbridge is **Wat Amphawan Chetiayaram**, a graceful temple thought to be located at the place of the family home of Rama II (King Buddha Loetla; r 1809-24), and which features accomplished murals. A short walk from the temple is **King Buddhalertla (Phuttha Loet La) Naphalai Memorial Park** (Km 63, Route 35, Samut Songkhram; admission 20B; ☞ park 9am-6pm daily, museum 9am-6pm Wed-Sun), a museum housed in a collection of traditional central Thai houses set on four landscaped acres. Dedicated to Rama II, the museum contains rare Thai books and antiques from early-19th-century Siam.

At night longtail boats zip through Amphawa's sleeping waters to watch the star-like dance of the *hing haw* (fireflies). Several operators lead tours, including **Niphaa** (☎ 0 81422 0726), an experienced and well-equipped outfit located at the mouth of the canal, near the footbridge. If you take a tour, be aware that people are often sleeping in the homes you'll pass, so insist that the driver doesn't make more noise than is absolutely necessary.

EATING

Khrua Chom Ao (☎ 0 85190 5677; Samut Sakhon; dishes 60-200B) This open-air seafood restaurant looks over the gulf and has a loyal local following. It is a brief walk from Wat Chawng Lom, down the road running along the side of the temple opposite the statue of Kuan Im.

Tarua Restaurant (☎ 0 3441 1084; Ferry Terminal Bldg, 859 Th Sethakit, Samut Sakhon; dishes 60-200B) Occupying three floors of the imposing ferry building, this seafood restaurant offers views over the harbour and an English-language menu.

Amphawa Floating Market (Talāt Nám Ampháwaa; dishes 20-40B; ☞ 4-9pm Fri-Sun) If you're in town on a weekend, plan your meals around this fun market (see p235) where *phāt thai* and other noodle dishes are served directly from boats.

Phu Yai Thawngyib (☎ 0 3473 5073; Amphawa; dishes 20-60B) This community development project and homestay located outside Amphawa includes a restaurant that serves authentic local dishes and sweets. Call ahead to arrange a visit.

SLEEPING

Amphawa is popular with Bangkok's weekend warriors, and it seems like virtually every other house has opened its doors to tourists

in the form of home stays. These can range from little more than a mattress on the floor and a mosquito net to upscale guesthouse-style accommodation. **Baan Song Thai Plai Pong Pang** (☎ 0 3475 7333; Amphawa) organises home stays and has been recognised for ecotourism excellence. Most of these places are best reached by boat, though some have road access; call ahead or get your driver to call for directions.

Reorn Pae Amphawa (☎ 0 3475 1333; 139-145 Rim Khlong Amphawa; d 800B; ☞) A good upper-budget option is this generations-old wooden home with basic but tidy rooms.

Baan Ku Pu (☎ 0 3472 5920; Th Rim Khlong, Amphawa; d 1000B; ☞) For something more upscale Baan Ku Pu is a self-styled 'resort' featuring wooden bungalows.

Baan Tai Had Resort (☎ 0 3476 7220; www.baantaihad.com; 1 Moo 2, Th Tai Had, Samut Songkhram; r 1750-5000B; ☞ ☞) This new riverside resort is more worthy of the description, with bright and comfortable rooms and several activities to choose from.

Baan Amphawa Resort & Spa (☎ 22 034-752 222; 22 Bangkokom-kaewfah, Amphawa; r from 3500B; ☞ ☞ ☞) At the top of the heap is delightful Baan Amphawa, set among the paddies and khlong and built in traditional Thai style – plus luxuries like a spa and wi-fi internet.

PHETBURI (PHETCHABURI)

เพชรบุรี

Phetburi (sometimes referred to as Phetchaburi, the 'City of Diamonds') has a bit of everything – history, nature, good eats and beaches. Given buses take only a couple of hours it can be done in a long day, though is more enjoyable as an overnight excursion. The trip down to Phetburi is stereotypical central Thailand – flat plains punctuated by shaggy sugar palms and the occasional unexpected limestone outcroppings. As you get closer to Phetburi you'll see a surprising number of wooden homes, many with the characteristically peaked roof that has all but died out elsewhere in Thailand. The town itself is a repository of traditional central Thai culture, and a walk along the town's twisting back lanes, a peek at the vivid morning market and a tour of the fabled temples provide a glimpse of a traditional lifestyle that has changed little for decades.

TRANSPORT: PHETBURI

Distance from Bangkok 166km

Direction South

Travel Time Two hours by bus; three to four hours by train

Bus There are frequent air-con bus services to/from Bangkok's Southern bus station (112B; two hours). The bus terminal for air-con buses to/from Bangkok is across from the night market.

Train Trains are less convenient than buses, unless you factor in the time taken to get to or from Bangkok's bus terminals. There are frequent services from Bangkok's Hualamphong train station, and fares vary depending on the train and class (2nd class, around 200B; 3rd class, around 100B; three hours). Getting back to Bangkok by train is a bit tougher as there are only two daytime departures, a 3rd class train at 3pm (34B; four hours) and an air-con departure at 4.40pm (358B; three hours).

Getting Around *Sāamlāw* and motorcycle taxis go anywhere in the town centre for 30B; you can also charter them for the whole day (from 300B). *Sāwngthāew* cost 10B to 20B around town. Rabieng Rimnum Guest House (p241) rents out motorcycles (per day 250B).

Phetburi lives in the shadow of **Khao Wang**, a looming hill studded with wat and topped by various components of King Mongkut's 1860 palace, **Phra Nakhon Khiri** (☎ 0 3240 1006; admission 40B; ☞ 8.30am-4.30pm). You can make the strenuous upward climb or head to the west side of the hill and take a funicular straight up to the peak (return adult/child 70/40B). The views from here are fantastic, especially at sunset, and the entire hill teems with meandering monkeys looking for attention. The ticket office will sell you an information pamphlet (5B) that includes a map of the palace grounds.

Phetburi is known throughout Thailand for its varied collection of wat. The first temple you're likely to notice is **Wat Mahathat** with its imposing late Ayuthaya-early Ratanakosin adaptation of the *prang* of Lopburi and Phimai. The beautiful murals inside the *wihāan* illustrate the *Jataka* (stories from the Buddha's lives) and also show vivid snippets of everyday Thai life during the 19th century. The roof of the adjacent *bòt* (ordination hall) holds fine examples of stucco work, a characteristic of the Phetburi school of art that can be seen on many of the city's temples. One of the earliest surviving examples of this art form, known in Thai as *poon pān*, can be seen on the crumbling Ayuthaya-era *wihāan* of **Wat Phai Lom**.

Somewhat unusually for a Thai temple, contemporary stucco work portraying the violent political unrest of 1973 can be viewed at **Wat Chi Prasoot**.

Wat Yai Suwannaram was originally built during the 17th century and renovated during the reign of King Rama V (r 1868-1910). Legend

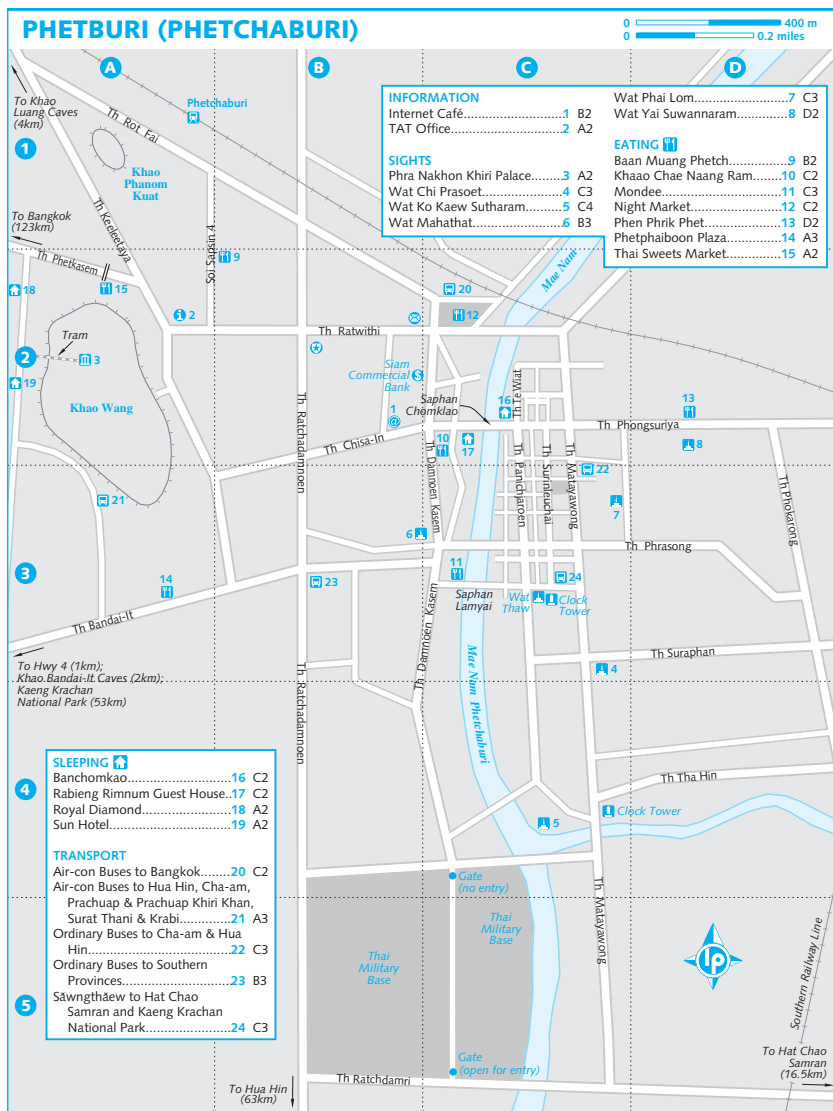
has it that the gash in the ornately carved wooden doors of the lengthy wooden *sālaa* dates to the Burmese attack of Ayuthaya. The faded murals inside the *bòt* (central sanctuary) date back to the 1730s. Next to the *bòt*, set on a murky pond, is a beautifully designed old *hāw trai* (Tripitaka library).

Wat Ko Kaew Sutharam (Wat *Ko*) dates back to the Ayuthaya era, and the *bòt* features early-18th-century murals that are among the oldest and most beautiful in Thailand. One panel depicts what appears to be a Jesuit priest wearing the robes of a Buddhist monk, while another shows other foreigners undergoing Buddhist conversions.

If you've got time to make a short trip outside town, there are two cave sanctuaries worth visiting. **Khao Luang** (donation encouraged; ☞ 8am-6pm) is 5km north of Phetburi, and the caverns here are filled with ageing Buddha images in various stances, many of them originally placed by King Rama IV. The best time to visit is around 5pm, when evening light pierces the ceiling, surrounding artefacts below with an ethereal glow. **Khao Bandai-It** (donation encouraged; ☞ 9am-4pm), 2km west of town, has English-speaking guides who can lead you through the caves and answer your questions. A *sāamlāw* from the city centre to either site costs about 55B; a motorcycle taxi is 40B.

INFORMATION

TAT office (☎ 0 3240 2220; Th Ratwithi; ☞ 8.30am-4.30pm) Set in a wat-like structure with random baroque chandeliers, this tourism branch doesn't have loads of brochures, but the smiley staff can point you in the direction of cheap food,



lodging and temples. There's an **internet café** (Th Chisa-In; per hr 20B; ☎ 10am-9pm) in the centre of town, not far from Rabieng Rimnum Guest House.

EATING

Phetburi is known across Thailand for its deserts, many of which claim a royal pedigree and get their sweet taste from the fruit of the

sugar palms that dot the countryside. Two of the most famous sweets include *máw kaeng* (an egg and coconut milk-based custard) and *khànm taan* (bright-yellow steamed buns sweetened with sugar palm kernels). The best place to sample these and others is along the **Thai sweets market** directly north of Khao Wang.

The town features two lively night markets, one at **Phetphaiboon Plaza** (Th Bandai-It; dishes 20-60B;

HAT CHAO SAMRAN

หาดเจ้าสำราญ

Lying just 18km east of Phetburi, Hat Chao Samran is one of Thailand's oldest beach resorts, dating back to Rama VI (r 1910-1925). While the Thailand of today certainly has nicer beaches, it's a pleasant enough place to laze your way through a day or two, punctuating your naps with cheap seafood binges. The area has seen a recent resurgence in popularity that has brought with it new 'boutique'-style bungalow accommodation. Typical of the lot, **Blue Sky** (☎ 0 3244 1399; www.blueskyresort.com; 5 Moo 2, Hat Chao Samran; bungalows 1800-5000B; 🏠) offers ridiculously cute bungalows and rooms overlooking the garden or the sea. When you can relax no more, stumble next door to **Jaa Plak** (☎ 0 3247 8496; dishes 50-280B; ☎ 9am-9pm), which serves up all your shelled favourites, including a mean horseshoe crab egg salad (*yam khài maengdaa tháleh*).

To reach Hat Chao Samran, hop on a *sáwngtháew* (35 minutes; 20B) across from the clock tower near Wat Thaw.

☎ 5-11pm), and the **night market** (Th Rot Fai; dishes 20-60B;

☎ 5-11pm) near the Bangkok-bound bus stop.

Baan Muang Petch (☎ 0 81694 5031; 20/2-3 Soi Sapsin 4; dishes 25-60B; ☎ 10.30am-8pm) This well-situated coffee shop is an excellent place to refill on caffeine and sweets between temple visits. Simple dishes and a great sunset view of Khao Wang are also available.

Khao Chae Naang Ram (☎ 0 84801 8395; Th Damnoen Kasem; dishes 15-20B; ☎ 8am-5pm) *Khào chàe* (camphor-scented chilled rice served with sweet/savoury tidbits) is a dish associated with Phetburi, and a good place to sample it is at this renowned roadside stall in front of a noodle restaurant.

Mondee (☎ 0 81697 1768; Saphan Lamyai; dishes 25-100B; ☎ 10.30am-4.30pm & 5.30-midnight) During the day, this cosy wooden shack serves *khànm jeen* (fresh rice noodles served with a variety of curries). At night Mondee takes full advantage of the breezes and river view and serves decent central Thai fare with an emphasis on seafood.

Phen Phrik Phet (☎ 0 3241 2990; 173/1 Th Phongsuriya; dishes 25B; ☎ 9am-3pm Wed-Mon) Located directly across from Wat Yai Suwannaram, this local noodle legend makes tasty *küay tiaw müu*

nám daeng (pork noodles in a fragrant dark broth).

SLEEPING

For a town its size with so many attractions, Phetburi is lacking in the accommodation department.

Royal Diamond (☎ 0 3241 1061; www.royaldiamond hotel.com; 555 Th Phetkasem; r 1200-2000B; 🏠) Ostensibly the best in town, though the characterless hotel ambience doesn't compare with the Sun.

Sun Hotel (☎ 0 3240 0000; 43/33 Th Phetkasem 1; r 590-890B, ste 1090B; 🏠) The vast, bright rooms and cheery boutique feel make this place a veritable bargain. It's a top choice.

Rabieng Rimnum Guest House (☎ 0 3242 5707; 1 Th Shesrain; s/d 120/240B) This is one of several uninspiring budget guesthouses, you can look forward to rooms that are little more than a wooden closet with a mattress. If you aren't impressed with the rooms, the owner will point across the bridge to the **Banchomkiao** (☎ 0 3242; Th Thewet; s/d 170/250), which is same price, but here your closet is concrete. They are, however, very cheap.

KAENG KRACHAN NATIONAL PARK

อุทยานแห่งชาติแก่งกระจาน

The largest national park in Thailand and home to the gorgeous Pala-U waterfalls, **Kaeng Krachan National Park** (☎ 0 3245 9291; adult/child 400/200B) is easily reached from Phetburi. There are caves to explore, mountains, a huge lake and excellent bird-watching opportunities in the evergreen forest that blankets the park. Kaeng Krachan has fantastic trekking, and it is one of the few places to see Asian elephants roaming wild (if you're lucky). Intermittent *sáwngtháew* (50B) depart from near Wat Thaw and stop at the park headquarters. To get to some of the higher campgrounds you'll have to charter a vehicle from the headquarters (900B) or hitch. Rabieng Rimnum Guest House (above) arranges overnight visits (2400B per person, minimum four people).

KANCHANABURI

อ.เมืองกาญจนบุรี

Less than two hours from Bangkok, Kanchanaburi (pronounced 'kan-cha-na-buri') is a convenient and refreshing retreat from city life. Framed by limestone mountains and fields of sugarcane, the city offers ample riverside accommodation options that specialise in the art of relaxing after a day of sightseeing in the scenic countryside.

But don't be fooled by Kanchanaburi's sleepy daytime demeanour. After the sun sets the river boom-booms its way through the night with disco and karaoke barges packed with Bangkokians looking to let their hair down, especially at weekends. Out-of-tune crooners and shoddy stereo systems disrupt the calm that many travellers are hoping to find in their riverside rooms. If this is you, it won't take long before you're thinking that sometimes Asia needs a mute button. An hour or so later you might be fantasising about bazookas.

The city was originally established by Rama I (King Buddha Yodfa; r 1782–1809) as a first line of defence against the Burmese who, it was commonly believed, might use the old invasion route through the Three Pagodas Pass on the Thai–Burmese border to the west. Crumbling buildings that reflect the town's age can be found on the side streets that run off and parallel to Th Song Khwae.

Despite its unspectacular appearance (it's an iron bridge), the **Death Railway Bridge** across Mae Nam Khwae is one of Kanchanaburi's most popular attractions. The bridge is 2km north of town and best visited by bicycle. It's possible to walk across. A railway line travels

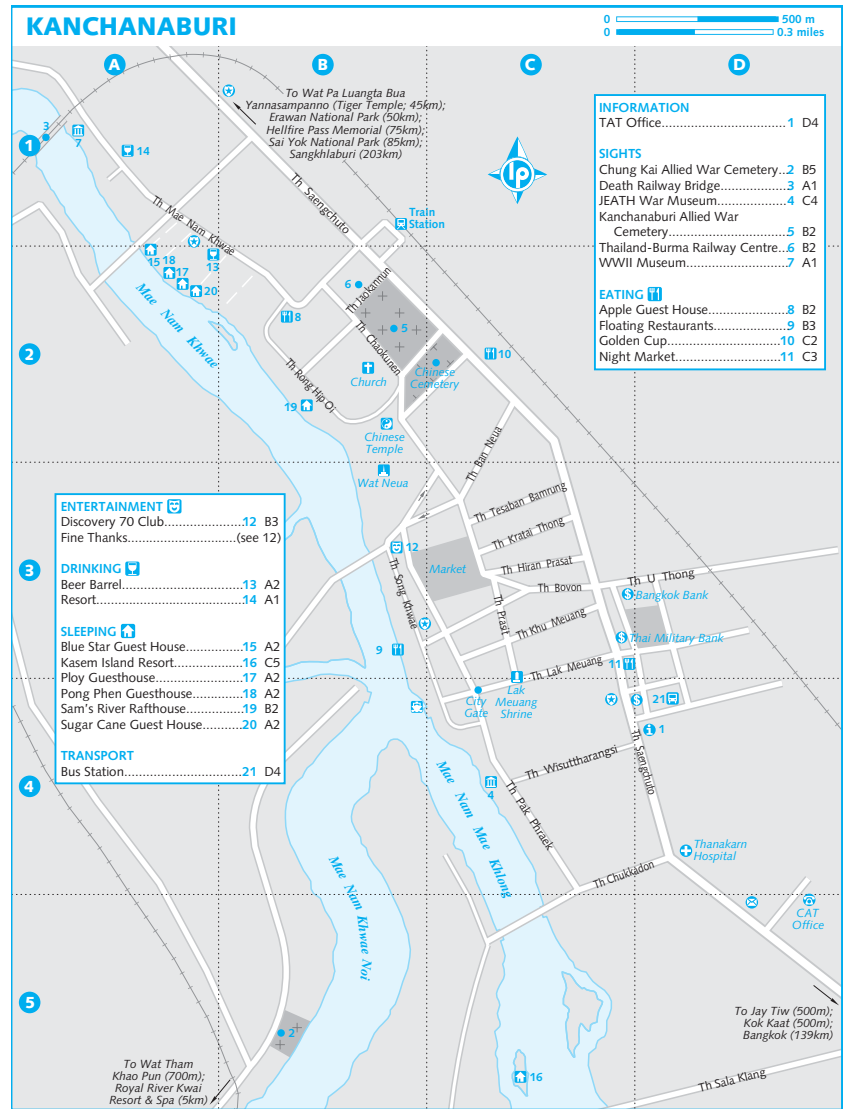
part of the original Death Railway route from Kanchanaburi west to the village of Nam Tok, across Mae Nam Khwae. Trains depart Kanchanaburi at 5.57am, 10.24am and 4.19pm for the two-hour scenic trip to Nam Tok, where you'll have a short layover before the last departure back to Kanchanaburi. Foreigners are charged 100B.

There are several other war-related sights. The **WWII Museum** (Th Mae Nam Khwae; admission 40B; ☎ 9am–6pm) beside the bridge has a picture-postcard view and an eclectic assortment of war and peace memorabilia, though you wouldn't call it a must-see.

Better is the **Thailand-Burma Railway Centre** (☎ 0 3451 0067; 73 Th Jaokannun; adult/child 80/40B; ☎ 9am–5pm), where exhibits outline Japanese aggression in Southeast Asia and detail their plans for the railway. Occasionally foreign guides, sometimes relatives of those interned, lead moving tours through the museum.

The centre stands opposite the **Kanchanaburi Allied War Cemetery** (Th Saengchuto; admission free; ☎ 7am–6pm), the final resting place of about 7000 prisoners who died while working on the railway. The cemetery is meticulously maintained by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (www.cwgc.org), and the rows of headstones are identical except for the names and short epitaphs. It's just around the corner from the riverside guesthouses, or you could catch a *sáwngtháew* anywhere along Th Saengchuto going north.

Less visited is the **Chung Kai Allied War Cemetery** (admission free; ☎ 7am–6pm), where about 1700 graves are kept a short and scenic bike ride from central Kanchanaburi. From Th Lak Meuang, take the bridge across the river



through picturesque corn and sugarcane fields until you reach the cemetery on your left.

The **JEATH War Museum** (Th Pak Phraek; admission 40B; ☎ 8.30am–6pm) is arguably the pick of the memorials and is a moving testament to war's atrocities. The museum operates in the grounds of a local temple and has reconstructions of the bamboo huts used by the POWs as shelter. The long huts contain various photographs taken during the war, draw-

ings and paintings by POWs, maps, weapons and other war memorabilia. The acronym JEATH represents the fated meeting of Japan, England, Australia/America, Thailand and Holland at Kanchanaburi during WWII. The war museum is at the end of Th Wisuttharangsi (Visuttrangsi), near the TAT office. The common Thai name for this museum is *Phiphithápham Songkham Wát Tái* (Wat Tai War Museum).

TRANSPORT: KANCHANABURI

Distance from Bangkok 130km

Direction West

Travel Time Two to three hours

Bus Regular buses leave from the Southern Bus Terminal (Map pp124–5) in Thonburi (1st class/2nd class 103/80B; every 30 minutes until 9pm) to Kanchanaburi's bus station off Th Saengchuto.

Train Kanchanaburi is a stop on the scenic but slow Bangkok Noi–Nam Tok line. The train leaves from Bangkok Noi station (Map p56) in Thonburi twice a day (7.45am and 1.35pm; 100B) and stops at Kanchanaburi's train station, just off Th Saengchuto. To return to Bangkok, there is one morning and one afternoon departure.

Getting Around Kanchanaburi is very accessible by bicycle; you can hire bikes along Th Mae Nam Khwae (per day 40B). For areas outside town, rent a motorcycle (per day 150B to 200B) from the Suzuki dealer near the bus terminal. *Sáamláw* within the city cost 30B a trip. Regular *sáwngtháew* (SB) cruise Th Saengchuto, but be careful you don't accidentally charter one all for yourself.

THE DEATH RAILWAY

Kanchanaburi's history includes a brutal cameo (later promoted to starring) role in WWII. The town was home to a Japanese-run prisoner of war camp, from which Allied soldiers and others were used to build the notorious Death Railway, linking Bangkok to Burma (now Myanmar). Carving a rail bed out of the 415km stretch of rugged terrain was a brutally ambitious plan intended to meet an equally remarkable goal of providing an alternative supply route for the Japanese conquest of Burma and other countries to the west. Japanese engineers estimated that the task would take five years. But the railway was completed in a mere 16 months, entirely by forced labour that had little access to machines or nutrition. A Japanese brothel train inaugurated the line.

Close to 100,000 labourers died as a result of the hard labour, torture or starvation; 13,000 of them POWs, mainly from Britain, Australia, the Netherlands, New Zealand and America. The POWs' story was chronicled in Pierre Boulle's book *The Bridge on the River Kwai* and later popularised by the movie of the same name. Many visitors come here specifically to pay their respects to the fallen POWs at the Allied cemeteries, and you can set your watch by the arrival of the tour buses carrying Chinese or Japanese tourists who rush through the major war sites.

The original bridge was used by the Japanese for 20 months before it was bombed by Allied planes in 1945. Of what you see today, the curved spans are original and the square sections were rebuilt after the war. As for the Death Railway, only a small portion remains. Much of the original track was carted off by Karen and Mon tribespeople for use in the construction of local buildings and bridges, and other parts were used to reconstruct other Thai railways after the war.

Viewing the bridge and museums doesn't quite communicate the immense task of bending the landscape with human muscle. A better understanding comes from a visit to the **Hellfire Pass Memorial** (Rte 323; ☞ sunrise-sunset), an Australian-Thai Chamber of Commerce memorial dedicated to the POW labourers, 75km north of Kanchanaburi. A crew of 1000 prisoners worked for 12 weeks to cut a pass through the mountainous area dubbed Hellfire Pass. Nearly 70% of the crew died in the process. A memorial museum and walking trail remember their work and lives.

The limestone hills surrounding Kanchanaburi are famous for their temple caves, an underground communion of animistic spirit worship and traditional Buddhism. Winding arteries burrow into the guts of the caves past bulbous calcium deposits and altars for reclining or meditating Buddhas, surrounded by offerings from pilgrims. **Wat Tham Khao Pun** (admission by donation; ☞ 7am-4pm) is one of the closest cave temples, and is best reached by bicycle. The temple is about 4km from the TAT office and 1km southwest of the Chung Kai cemetery across the railroad tracks and midway up the hill.

One of Kanchanaburi's more bizarre tourist destinations is **Wat Pa Luangta Bua Yanasampanno** (www.tigertemple.org; admission 400฿; ☞ 8.30am-noon & 1.30-5pm), known colloquially as the Tiger Temple. After gaining a reputation as a refuge for wounded animals, the temple received its first tiger cub in 1999 and has accumulated 17 more since. During visiting hours, the cats are led around a

quarry by the monks, and for a fee, will pose for photos with tourists. Although the efforts are undeniably the result of goodwill, there's something disconcerting (not to mention surreal) about seeing monks leading full-grown tigers around on leashes and tourists posing for pictures (for extra money) with said huge cats lying in their laps. The tigers do look sedated, though the monks deny this. Either way, it's an oft-debated issue in the guesthouses of Kanchanaburi. The temple is located 45km outside town, and is part of many local tour itineraries. Detailed directions are on the website.

Northwest of Kanchanaburi town is the area's natural playground. **Erawan National Park** (☞ 0 3457 4222; admission 400฿; ☞ 8am-4pm) sports a watery mane of waterfalls visited by locals and tourists for a day trip of photographs, picnics and swimming. **Sai Yok National Park** (admission 400฿) has more variety: waterfalls, limestone caves, hot springs and accommodation. Tour organisers in Kanchanaburi arrange day outings to these parks on various expeditions: river kayaking, elephant trekking, waterfall spotting and bamboo rafting – Kanchanaburi has it all, plus people persuading you to do it (for some of your baht, of course).

INFORMATION

TAT office (☞ 0 3451 1200; Th Saengchuto; ☞ 8.30am-4.30pm) Provides a great provincial map with information about trips outside Kanchanaburi, as well as bus and train schedules. It's near the bus station.

DRINKING

Beer Barrel (Th Mae Nam Khwae; ☞ 6pm-midnight) Deep in a thicket of trees, this mazelike bar of gigantic wooden tables is a soothing elixir after a day of doing nothing.

Resort (☞ 0 81847 9227; 318/2 Th Mae Nam Khwae; ☞ 6pm-midnight) This faux colonial-era veranda boasts a nightly live band and attractive outdoor seating.

EATING

Apple Guest House (☞ 0 3451 2017; Th Rong Hip Oi; dishes 50-120฿; ☞ 8am-10pm) This guesthouse restaurant introduces newcomers to Thai food without being condescending. Both the *kaeng mât-sâmàn* (Muslim-style curry) and *phât thai* are highly recommended.

Floating restaurants (Th Song Khwae; dishes 80-200฿; ☞ 6-11pm) Down on the river are several large floating restaurants where the quality of the food varies, but it's hard not to enjoy the atmosphere. Most cater to Thais out for a night of drinking and snacking.

Golden Cup (☞ 0 3451 3505; 284/53 Th Saengchuto; dishes 30-50฿; ☞ 8am-5pm) When only real coffee and air-conditioning will do, head to this tiny café. To bring you back to Thailand, try the shop's signature *thawng múan*, known here as 'crispy rolls', a Thai sweet associated with Kanchanaburi.

Night market (Th Saengchuto; dishes 30-60฿; ☞ 6-11pm) An expansive market featuring everything from Thai-Muslim nosh to *phât thai* unfolds every night in front of the bus station.

One of the culinary trademarks of Kanchanaburi are the **curry restaurants** that sell a huge variety of local-style curries, soups and fried dishes – simply check under the lids and choose what looks good. Two that we found particularly good:

Kok Kaat (☞ 0 3451 2481; 211/1 Th Saengchuto; dishes 20-30฿; ☞ 7am-3pm) Stocks an astounding 39

KANCHANABURI KNOWLEDGE

Try as you might, you will find few Thais who have ever heard of the River Kwai. The river over which the Death Railway trundled is pronounced much like 'quack' without the '-ck'. If spelled phonetically, 'Kwai' should be 'Khwae'. In the mispronounced river live *plaa yíisók*, the most common edible fish in this area and the model for the city's attractive fish-shaped street signs.

dishes, displayed in rows of stainless-steels pots out front.

Jay Tiw (☞ 0 81526 4487; Th Saengchuto; dishes 20-30฿; ☞ 7am-3pm) A block away from Kok Kaat, towards the city centre, Jay Tiw boasts only 19 dishes, but emphasises quality over quantity. To reach both restaurants, hop on any *sáwngtháew* heading south along Th Saengchuto and ask to get off at *sáalaa klaang jang-wát* (City Hall). The restaurants are more or less across the street – just look for the rows of stainless steel pots.

ENTERTAINMENT

If boat-bound karaoke is not your thing, head to the northern end of the floating restaurant strip where clubs with names like Discovery 70 Club and Fine Thanks have brought a whiff of urban sophistication to Kanchanaburi.

SLEEPING

The most scenic places to stay are the floating guesthouses along the river, but these are also the loudest, thanks to the nightly disco and karaoke barges. A pair of good earplugs and a night of imbibing will help to block out the bass. A *sáamláw* (three-wheeled pedicab) or motorcycle taxi from the bus or train stations to the river area and most guesthouses should cost from 20฿ to 30฿, although many guesthouses and hotels also offer a pick-up service.

Royal River Kwai Resort & Spa (☞ 0 3465 3297; www.riverkwairort.com; Th Kanchanaburi-Sai Yok; d from 1900฿; ☞ ☞) Catching the design bug, Royal River sports the global Zen look and a river-side pool amid landscaped grounds about 3km from town.

Kasem Island Resort (☞ 0 3451 3359, in Bangkok 0 2255 3604; d 1050-1700฿; ☞ ☞) Sitting on an island in the middle of Mae Nam Mae Khlong, about 200m from Th Chukkadon, Kasem Island Resort has tastefully designed thatched cottages and house rafts. There are facilities for swimming, fishing and rafting, as well as an outdoor bar and restaurant. The resort has an office near Th Chukkadon where you can arrange a free shuttle boat out to the island.

Ploy Guesthouse (☞ 0 3451 5804; www.ploygh.com; 79/2 Th Mae Nam Khwae; d 650-850฿; ☞) Although views of the river are slim, Ploy more than makes up for it with modern rooms and a unique garden atmosphere, and all this for half the price you'd pay back in Bangkok.

Pong Phen Guesthouse (☞ 0 3451 2981; www.pongpen.com; 5 Soi Bangladesh, off Th Mae Nam Khwae; d 330-800฿;

☎) These modern rooms set in a lush garden have more creature comforts than most budget options.

Sam's River Rafthouse (☎ 0 3462 4231; www.sams.guesthouse.com; 48 Th Rong Hip Oi; d 300-400B; ☎) Two aged but well-kept rafts sit on the river, while cheaper rooms inland escape the noise.

Blue Star Guest House (☎ 0 3451 2161; www.blue-star-guesthouse.com; 241 Th Mae Nam Khwae; d 150-650B; ☎) From the inside these rooms have a funky feel with faux stone walls and more-than-spartan furnishings. Step outside and the rows of A-frame stilted wooden houses are divided by a walkway; throw in some furry midgets, Luke and Leia and you could be in an Ewok village.

Sugar Cane Guest House (☎ 0 3462 4520; www.sugarcane-guesthouse.com; 22 Soi Pakistan, off Th Mae Nam Khwae; d 150-550B; ☎) Sugar Cane boasts some of the better raft-style accommodation, with rooms on a raft with a wide communal balcony, as well as landlocked bungalows and a social riverside restaurant.

KHAO YAI NATIONAL PARK

อุทยานแห่งชาติเขาใหญ่

Cool and lush, Khao Yai National Park is an easy escape into the primordial jungle. The 2168 sq km park, part of a Unesco World Heritage Site, spans five forest types, from rainforest to monsoon, and is the primary residence of tigers, elephants, gibbons, tropical birds and audible, yet invisible, insects. Like a diligent baker, the jungle wakes up with the dawn, making a different kind of morning noise from the city sounds: chirping insects, hooting monkeys, whooping macaques and anonymous shrieks and trills. Khao Yai is a major birding destination with large flocks of hornbills and several migrators, including the flycatcher from Europe. Caves in the park are the preferred resting place for wrinkle-lipped bats. In the grasslands, batik-printed butterflies dissect flowers with their surgical tongues.

The park has several accessible trails for self-tours, but birds or animal trackers should consider hiring a jungle guide to increase their appreciation of the environment and to spot more than the tree-swinging gibbons and blood-sucking leeches (the rainy season is the worst time for the latter). In total, there are 12 maintained trails criss-crossing

the entire park; not ideal if you want to walk end to end. Access to transport is another reason why a tour might be more convenient, although Thai visitors with cars are usually happy to pick up pedestrians.

A two-hour walk from the park headquarters leads to the **Nong Pak Chee observation tower**, which is a good early-morning spot for seeing insect-feeding birds, thirsty elephants and sambar deer. Reservations need to be made at the visitors' centre. Spotting the park's reclusive tigers and elephants isn't as common as adoring the frothy waterfalls that drain the peaks of the Big Mountain. The park's centrepiece is **Nam Tok Haew Suwat** (Haew Suwat Falls), a 25m-high cascade that is a roaring artery in the rainy season. **Nam Tok Haew Narok** (Haew Narok Falls) is its larger cousin with three pooling tiers and a towering 150m drop.

The cool highlands around Khao Yai are also home to a nascent wine industry. These have been dubbed the 'New Latitude' wines because grapes are not normally grown between the 14th and 18th parallels. **PB Valley Khao Yai Winery** (☎ 0 3622 7328; www.khaoyaiwinery.com; 102 Moo 5, Phaya Yen, Pak Chong; tastings 150B, winery day tour incl meal 700B; ☎ 7.30am-4.30pm) and **GranMonte** (☎ 0 3622 7334; www.granmonte.com; 52 Th Phansuk-Kud Khala) are among the wine makers managing to coax shiraz and chenin blanc grapes from the relatively tropical climate.

The best time to visit the park is in the dry season (December to June), but during the rainy season river rafting and waterfall spotting will be more dramatic. Most guest-

TRANSPORT: KHAO YAI NATIONAL PARK

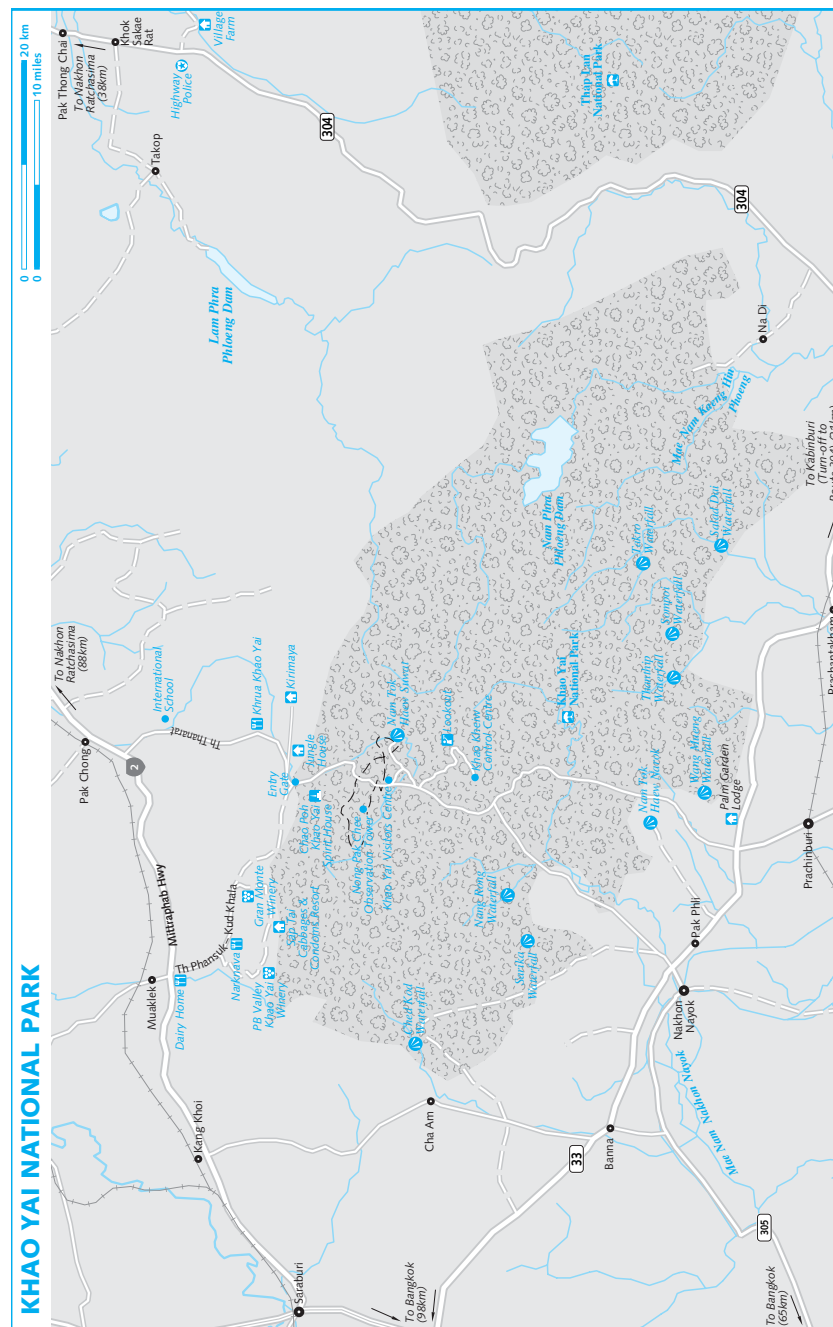
Distance from Bangkok 196km

Direction Northeast

Travel Time Three hours

Bus From Bangkok's Northern & Northeastern Bus Terminal (Mo Chit; ☎ 0 2936 2841-8; [Map pp124-5](#)), take a bus to Pak Chong (ordinary/air-con 95/160B, every 30 minutes from 5am to 10pm). From Pak Chong, take a *sǎwngthǎew* (15B, from 6am to 5pm) to the entrance gate of the park.

Getting Around From the entrance gate it's possible to charter a vehicle (400B) or flag a passing car for a ride to the visitors' centre. Chartered transportation within the park is available via the visitors centre; however, hitchhiking not an uncommon way to get around here..



houses and lodges arrange jungle treks and rafting tours.

INFORMATION

The National Park, Wildlife & Plant Conservation Department website (www.dnp.go.th) has plenty of detail about the park, as does www.thaibirding.com.

Khao Yai Visitors Centre (☎ 0 81877 3127; admission 400B; 🕒 8am-6pm) Topographical maps, hiking advice, and jungle guides can be arranged at this centre within the park.

Sarika Nature Trips (☎ 0 81643 6317) This small outfit based in Nakorn Nayok offers nature and wildlife-based tours of the national park and surrounding areas.

TAT Central Region Office 8 (☎ 0 3731 2282; tatnayok@tat.or.th; 182/88 Moo 1, Th Suwannason, Nakhon Nayok) Information on guides and tours in Khao Yai.

EATING

In recent years, the area surrounding Khao Yai has become something of a minor culinary destination, with cuisines ranging from upscale Italian to Thai-Muslim. If you're with-

out wheels, there are restaurants within the park, and the towns surrounding the park have lively night markets.

Dairy Home (☎ 0 4432 2230; www.dairyhome.co.th; Km 144, Th Mitraphap, Muak Lek; mains 50-70B; 🕒 9am-8pm) If a weekend of intense jungle exploring or wine tasting has left you with a need for Western eats, stop by this organic dairy for a country breakfast of homemade sausages, farm-fresh eggs and good coffee.

Khrua Khao Yai (☎ 0 4429 7138; Km 13.5, Th Thanarat, Pak Chong; mains 50-150B; 🕒 9am-8pm Sun-Thu, 9am-10pm Fri & Sat) Exceedingly popular with visitors from Bangkok, this informal but delicious kitchen puts out an inspired repertoire of Thai and *faràng* dishes including home-cured ham and marinated mushrooms so meat-like you'll wonder what animal they came from.

Narknava (☎ 0 81924 7091; www.narknavafarm.net; Km 8, Th Phansuk-Kud Khala, Pak Chong; mains 50-150B; 🕒 8am-7pm Tue-Sun) Muslim and Middle Eastern fare are indeed unexpected cuisines in this neck of the woods, but Narknava is an established favourite for Thai visitors seeking out its infamous chicken biryani – infamous, because at 100B it's super-expensive by Thai standards.

THEME PARKS

Just outside Bangkok are theme park playgrounds delivering everything from pachyderm dances to modern amusement parks. With or without kids some of these can be quite a lot of fun. Tour operators service all of these places, but it's just as easy and cheaper to get your hotel to write the name and flag down one of Bangkok's cheap taxis, or check their websites for other options.

Ancient City (Muang Boran; ☎ 0 2709 1644; www.ancientcity.com; 296/1 Th Sukhumvit, Samut Prakan; adult/child 300/200B; 🕒 8am-5pm) Billed as the world's largest open-air museum, the Ancient City covers more than 80 hectares of peaceful countryside scattered with 109 scaled-down facsimiles of many of the kingdom's most famous monuments. Visions of Las Vegas and its corny replicas of world treasures might spring to mind, but the Ancient City has architectural integrity and is a preservation site for classical buildings and art forms. It's a great place for long, undistracted bicycle rides (rental from the admission office is 50B), as it's usually quiet and never crowded.

Dream World (☎ 0 2533 1152; www.dreamworld-th.com; Km 7 Rangsit-Nakorn Nayok, Thanya Buri; combination ticket 1000B; 🕒 10am-5pm Mon-Fri, 10am-7pm public holidays) No-excuses fun park with roller coasters, paddle boats, stunt shows, go-carts and an artificial snow world.

Samphran Elephant Ground & Zoo (☎ 0 2295 2938; www.elephantshow.com; Km 30 Th Phetkasem, Nakhorn Pathom; adult/child 450/250B; 🕒 8.30am-6pm) Samphran is a nine-hectare zoo with elephant roundups, crocodile shows and an orchid nursery. On Labour Day (1 May), the annual Elephant Queen Parade is held for heavy-set women who can display the girth and the elegance of the elephant.

Samut Prakan Crocodile Farm & Zoo (☎ 0 2703 4891; Samut Prakan; adult/child 300/200B; 🕒 7am-6pm) More than 30,000 crocs who spend their time wallowing in mud. It also harbours elephants, monkeys and snakes. The farm has trained-animal shows, including croc wrestling and elephant performances, and the reptiles get their dinner between 4pm and 5pm.

Siam Park City (☎ 0 2919 7200; www.siamparkcity.com; 99 Th Serithai, Khannayao; water park 100-200B, combination ticket 500B; 🕒 10am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-7pm Sat & Sun) A water park with artificial waves, giant water slides and a flow pool. There is also an amusement park, small zoo and playground.

SLEEPING

Golf courses and upscale resorts ring the perimeter of the park. Pak Chong is the primary base-camp town, but Nakhon Nayok and Prachinburi are beginning to develop more low-key options. Most accommodation can arrange jungle tours and transport to the park.

Jungle House (☎ 0 4429 7183; www.junglehousehotel.com; 21/5 Th Thanarat, Km 19.5, Pak Chong; d 600-1200B; 🕒) An old favourite with lots of extras to keep kids entertained. Loft rooms encourage monkeylike agility.

Palm Garden Lodge (☎ 0 9989 4470; www.palmgalo.com; Prachinburi; r 400-1200B; 🕒) Woodsy gardens and rustic bungalows keep you in touch with nature. The lodge is 7km south of the park's southern entrance, near Ban Kon Khuang on Hwy 33, and arranges park tours.

Park Lodging (☎ 0 2562 0760; Khao Yai Visitors Centre) Within the park, there are three types of accommodation: villas sleeping 12 people (2400B), cabins for two (800B) and camp-

ing (150B per person with tents and bedding included).

Sap Tai Cabbages & Condoms Resort (☎ 0 3622 7065; www.pda.or.th/saptai/; 98 Moo 6, Th Phaya Yen, Pak Chong; d 1000-2200B; 🕒) This resort, with a city hotel ambience, is the sister facility of the Bangkok restaurant (p167) with the same name that supports a great cause: HIV/AIDS education and prevention.

Village Farm (☎ 0 4422 8407-8; www.villagefarm.co.th; 103 Moo 7, Tambon Thaisamakee, Wan Nam Kheo, Nakhon Ratchasima; d 2200-9000B; 🕒) This micro-winery is the closest thing Thailand has to a French village. Restored teak villas are cradled in 32 hectares of farmland, and the resort includes a spa and restaurant.

Kirimaya (☎ 0 4442 6099; www.kirimaya.com; 1/3 Moo 6, Th Thanarat, Pak Chong; r 9000-33,000B; 🕒) A stunning setting and amenities including tented villas with a private indoor pool and personal golf cart have seen Kirimaya recently make a *Conde Nast Traveler* list of top 10 new hotels of the world.

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