

# Directory

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## ACCOMMODATION

The accommodation on Thailand's islands and beaches is astonishing both for its range of quality and design. From bare-bones bamboo shacks under swaying palms to vast resort complexes where every whim is taken into consideration, you won't need to look too hard to find a place to suit your sensibility and your budget.

### Beach Bungalows

Simple beach huts used to make up most of the accommodation on Thailand's islands and

## PRACTICALITIES

- Thailand uses an electrical current of 220V AC, 50Hz (cycles). Electrical plugs have two flat or two round pins; adapters and voltage converters are widely available.
- The main English-language daily newspapers are the reliable *Nation* ([www.nationmultimedia.com](http://www.nationmultimedia.com)) and *Bangkok Post* ([www.bangkokpost.net](http://www.bangkokpost.net)), which usually become available in beach destinations mid-morning.
- Thailand has five VHF TV networks based in Bangkok and broadcasting in Thai, but not all are available in the south. Most midrange and top-end hotels have satellite or cable TV. The Thai video system is PAL and Thailand is in DVD Zone 3.
- Thailand has more than 400AM and FM radio stations, some with hourly newscasts in English.
- Thailand uses the metric system of measurements, with exceptions: Gold and silver are weighed in *bàht* (15g), and land area is often measured in *rài* (equivalent to 1600 sq m).

beaches. But these old-style A-frame huts are quickly being replaced by sturdier concrete huts (if not full blown resorts) that are universally known as bungalows, no matter what they look like.

The cheapest huts are made of palm thatch and woven bamboo, with or without simple tiled bathrooms attached. These bungalows may contain nothing more than a basic bed or mattress, a bare light bulb, and (if you're lucky) a mosquito net and fan. However, there is often a small balcony where you can dry your beach towel and swing in your hammock. Bungalows generally house two people. Increasingly, resort owners are demolishing their wooden bungalows and replacing them with less appealing but smarter-looking tin-roofed concrete huts. Predictably, rates are two or three times higher than for wooden

bungalows and facilities may include air-con, TVs and tiled bathrooms with hot showers.

Nightly rates vary greatly according to the popularity of the beach, the quality of the bungalows and the season. In the high season, wooden bungalows on the cheapest beaches start from 150B per night with shared bathroom, and closer to 300B with private bathroom. Concrete bungalows usually have bathrooms and air-con, and cost from 400B in low season and 1000B in high season. Bungalows in upmarket resorts, such as Ko Samui's Hat Chaweng and Phuket's Hat Surin, can cost upwards of 2500B.

## National Parks Accommodation

Some national parks provide accommodation in bungalows (sleeping up to 10 people) and *reu-an tãa-ou* (longhouses), which consist of small rooms with mattresses on the floor for three or four people. Bungalows and longhouses usually have lights and fans, but electricity is often only available from 6pm to midnight or 6pm to 6am. Parks with bungalows often have a basic restaurant and many have a simple provisions shop. Rooms in longhouses cost between 400B and 600B, while bungalows vary from 1000B to 2000B, depending on their size and condition.

## ROOM RATES & SEASONS

In this book, accommodation is arranged by budget and listed from cheapest to most expensive. The categories, with high season rates, are:

**Budget** Up to 1000B.

**Midrange** 1000B to 3000B (4500B in Bangkok).

**Top End** More than 3000B (4500B in Bangkok).

Bangkok suffers from capital-city syndrome and while hotel quality is often higher, it comes at a significantly higher price; see the boxed text, p92 for details. Rates on the high-profile beaches on Ko Samui and Phuket are also much higher than elsewhere.

Be aware that, for some listings in this book, the cheapest price quoted for an establishment is often for a single cheap room, which is almost invariably booked out.

Thailand has a 7% value-added tax (VAT) on many goods and services. Many midrange lodgings and almost all top-end hotels (and restaurants) will add this and a 10% service tax to the bill. When the two are combined this becomes the 17% king hit known as 'plus plus', or '++'. Prices for listings in this book include the taxes.

Discounts of up to 50% can be found on the internet (see the boxed text, p382) and, in the case of guesthouses, by just turning up during the low season. In general, Thailand's tourist high season runs from November to April, with prices peaking between mid-December and mid-January, and around Songkran (mid-April). Low season runs from May to October, with the biggest discounts usually in May and early June, and mid-September until the beginning of November.

Let us reemphasise that these dates are fairly general, as local weather variations also impact on prices. See p12 and the destination chapters for more on the weather.

receipt as rangers randomly check visitors. Note also that securing a tent is obviously harder than locking a room.

### Guesthouses

Apart from in some provincial capitals and island commercial centres, rooms in a converted family home are not common in southern Thailand, though Bangkok has plenty. By and large, most people will refer to modest collections of beach bungalows as guesthouses, as a matter of habit in referring to places where backpackers stay.

Traditionally Thai guesthouses have featured tiny box rooms with a bed or mattress on the floor, a fan, and not much else, but competition is forcing standards up. In general, rooms with shared bathroom range from 100B to all the way up to 900B per night for trendier places in Bangkok. With a private bathroom, expect to pay from about 300B to 1200B. Many guesthouses are in old wooden Thai houses so remove your shoes before entering and expect creaking floorboards at night.

Once ubiquitous, squat toilets are rare as rocking horse–shit these days. Showers are often cold. Many guesthouses will have an attached restaurant serving simple Thai meals.

### Hotels

In provincial towns you can often find cheap hotels – often run by Thai–Chinese families – with basic box rooms, though in recent years many of these have been given a makeover. Expect to pay 300B for a room with a fan and shared bathroom, and 500B to 1000B for more privacy and cool air. The cheaper places can be grim, may be rented by the hour and are not great for women travelling alone. The midrange options are more wholesome and good value, with bathrooms, TVs, phones and air-con.

Larger towns and tourist resorts have bigger, tidier business- or tourist-class hotels, which offer air-con, satellite TV and bathrooms containing hot showers and Western-style toilets. Most also have attached restaurants or coffee shops. These hotels vary

dramatically – some are old, some are brand new, some have pools, some have business centres, some have views. Most are centrally located and room rates fall between 800B and 3000B per room.

At the top of the market are the genuine luxury hotels run by Thai and international chains. Rates start at around 3000B and climb to thousands of US dollars per night. These places typically have several restaurants and bars and at least one infinity pool, plus a spa and business centre. Bangkok, Ko Samui and Phuket have dozens of such hotels. There are also some very appealing independent ‘boutique’ hotels, particularly in Bangkok (see p96).

### Resorts

In most countries, ‘resort’ refers to hotels that offer substantial recreational facilities (eg tennis, golf, swimming, sailing, dive school, water sports) in addition to accommodation and dining. In Thai hotel lingo, however, the term simply refers to any hotel that isn’t in an urban area. Hence a few thatched beach huts or a cluster of bungalows in a forest may be called a ‘resort’.

However, in recent years many a beach-shack ‘resort’ has been transformed into the sort of genuine resort you dream of on wet winter’s days. Indeed, the islands and beaches of southern Thailand are the new Caribbean, boasting some of the most-luxurious resorts on earth, with plenty more on the way. While all resorts were not created equal many are simply stunning, with outlandish luxuries at rates that could go some way toward clearing the debts of small African nations. The better resorts have taken a refreshingly holistic approach to design, incorporating Thai themes to create a luxury experience that differs from international resorts elsewhere. Most of the major resorts are within striking distance of an airport, with Phuket, Ko Samui, Pattaya, Krabi and Ao Nang hosting the lion’s share.

Along with the top-end places there are plenty of more modest midrange affairs. You’ll find everything from the TVs to the single infinity pool – via the bar tabs – at these places is smaller, but when you’re paying just a couple of thousand baht a night such privations are bearable. Or as one traveller we met put it: ‘Is my \$70-dollar bungalow really 10 times worse than that resort?’

While researching this guide the authors gave the resorts a good looking over and we’ve highlighted some of our favourites, both for people seeking value and those for whom money is no object. More reviews of these places, with more detail, can be found in the Hotels & Hostels section of [www.lonelyplanet.com](http://www.lonelyplanet.com).

### ACTIVITIES

Thailand is Asia’s adventure capital and in the south, the focus is on the marine world. There are hundreds of places you can go snorkelling and scuba diving. Sea kayaking around islands and mangroves is becoming increasingly popular, and you can go sailboarding at many of the bigger resorts. Back on dry land, rock climbing is a major drawcard in the area around Krabi, while trekking is possible in some national parks and elephant trekking is widely available. Below are some of the details you’ll need to know before disappearing below the surface. For a full rundown of the diving and other active options, see the Diving & Other Activities chapter (p289).

### Diving Basics COURSES & TOURS

Most dive centres offer first-timers Open Water certification with PADI or SSI for around 9500B to 18,500B. Courses are three-and-a-half days and include several classroom sessions and four guided dives testing various skills. Ko Tao is the dive-school capital of the universe. For detailed information about choosing dive schools, see p230.

For experienced divers, most centres offer all-inclusive day trips featuring two dives, lunch, guides and taxi transfers for around 2000B to 4000B. Live-aboard tours are popular on the Andaman side, particularly around the Surin and Similan Islands. Most operators are based in Phuket.

For more details on dive sites, see p289.

### DIVE MEDICINE

For the amount of diving throughout Thailand, the kingdom has a surprisingly limited amount of medical facilities dedicated to diving accidents. Having said that, hyperbaric chambers can be found at most major hubs, including Ko Samui (p193), Ko Tao (p228), and Phuket (p288). Ask your dive centre about the best local facilities before hitting the waves.

### BOOKING ONLINE: JUST DO IT

‘You know,’ said the woman as she glanced conspiratorially around the reception of one of Bangkok’s top hotels, ‘if you book online the rates are much cheaper...about 30% usually.’ We were offered similar surprisingly honest advice several times while researching this guide, with the general message being that for many midrange and most top-end hotels booking ahead gets you discounts you can’t even contemplate when you walk in.

During the low season (see the boxed text, p381) rates can fall to less than half the listed tariff as hotels and resorts compete to fill rooms. The number of budget places bookable online is also rising, but for these and a lot of relatively cheaper midrange places that don’t have the same economies of scale, old-style bargaining at reception remains a good plan. Indeed, for budget places this is the best option except at the busiest times. And if you’re arriving by plane there is often a desk at the airport offering last-minute discounts; Phuket is particularly good for this.

So where should you look online? There are dozens of hotel booking websites but most allow the hotels to write their own reviews. As fellow LP scribe Karla Zimmerman discovered after arriving in Bangkok, the room of ‘luxurious comfort’ with ‘teakwood decorations and cable TV’ that she’d booked online was actually located in a de facto brothel. The website had conveniently neglected to mention that ‘easy access, 24 hours’ meant more than just being near to the Skytrain. As Karla put it: ‘Despite the distraction of drinking one’s beer and eating one’s *pât tai* in venues where most of the patrons were getting hand jobs, we appreciated our unplanned bite of this classic slice of Bangkok.’ Mind you, she also said that she’ll be more careful when booking online next time. Quite.

Fortunately there are websites that offer independent reviews rather than endless superlatives.

**Lonely Planet’s Hotels & Hostels** ([www.lonelyplanet.com](http://www.lonelyplanet.com)) features thorough reviews of more places than listed in this book from authors, and traveller feedback. The website also has a booking facility. For a one-stop look at the sort of discounts available, the independent website **Travelfish** ([www.travelfish.org](http://www.travelfish.org)) has a handy list of nothing more than the hotel name and current online price for the relevant island or beach.

**DIVING PACKING LIST**

If you're planning to dive, organising the following items in advance will greatly ease your ability to hop right in and explore the deep.

**Diving insurance** Check whether your travel-insurance provider offers extra insurance for divers. If not, check out [www.daneurope.org](http://www.daneurope.org) for more information.

**Doctor's note** Divers with any medical problem (including mild asthma) must have a doctor sign off on their ability to dive safely. Skip the unnecessary (and sometimes costly) trip to a local clinic and take care of this before you leave.

**Dive log & certification** You must bring proof of your previous experience, especially for deep dives and night dives.

**Non-drowsy motion sickness pills** It is technically illegal for dive operators to give out medicine, and purchasing your own in your native country will better assure unwanted side effects.

**DIVE SEASONS**

Generally speaking, the Gulf of Thailand has a year-round dive season, although tropical storms sometimes temporarily blow out visibility. The southwestern monsoon seems to affect the Ko Chang archipelago more than other eastern gulf coast dive sites; hence, November to early May is the ideal season for these islands.

Off the Andaman coast the best diving conditions (calm surf and good visibility) fall between December and April; from May to November monsoon conditions prevail and visibility is often poor. Dive centres at Ko Lanta and the islands further south close down, but diving is still possible out of Phuket, Ao Nang and Ko Phi-Phi.

Whale sharks and manta rays can often be seen in the Andaman Sea and Gulf of Thailand (particularly on dives at submerged pinnacles) during the annual planktonic blooms from February to March. For more details on choosing between these waters, see p291.

**RESPONSIBLE DIVING & SNORKELLING**

'Over-diving' has become a common problem in Thailand. Many reefs see hundreds of divers per day, which puts a great strain on the environment. Corals wilt and die and marine life leaves to seek new feeding grounds. Many dive operators actively participate in reef rehabilitation programs; however every diver should do their part to keep the sites pristine. Before diving, make sure that you are properly weighted; buoyancy control is essential in ensuring that you don't bang against outcroppings and sea walls. Never stand on coral – if you must secure yourself to the reef, only hold fast to exposed rock or dead coral. Fin kicks

often disturb reefs as well; heavy strokes can create tiny eddies and displace sand over delicate organisms. The rest is quite logical: don't bully the marine creatures and don't loot the sea. If you see unscrupulous activity underwater, report it when you get back to shore.

**Hiking**

For ideas of where to hike in southern Thailand, see p295.

When hiking in Thailand, take some basic precautions:

- Don't go hiking alone and let someone in the local community know where you are going and for how long
- Always take plenty of water and insect repellent
- Take your rubbish back with you
- Walk in sturdy shoes and long pants in case of leeches and snakes

**Meditation & Thai Massage**

The region offers many opportunities to relax with some meditation or a Thai massage. Places to try include Ko Chang (p144), Ko Tao (p232), Ko Samui (p197), Ko Pha-Ngan (p217) and Phuket (p298). Massages are also available in Bangkok (p87).

For information on courses, see p386.

**BUSINESS HOURS**

Most government offices are open from 8.30am to 4.30pm, Monday to Friday, though the wheels grind almost to a halt during the noon to 1pm lunch hour. Banks are generally open from 8.30am to 3.30pm Monday to Friday, sometimes until 4.30pm (usually on Friday). Many banks run foreign-exchange booths in Bangkok and at tourist resorts, and

they are open from around 8am to 8pm daily. Note that government offices and banks are closed on public holidays (see p393).

Commercial businesses usually operate between 8.30am and 5pm on weekdays and sometimes Saturday morning as well. Larger shops usually open from 10am to 6.30pm or 7pm, but the big Bangkok malls are open later (until 9pm or 10pm) and smaller shops may open earlier and close later. Hours for restaurants and cafés vary greatly. Some local Thai places open as early as 7am, while bigger places usually open around 11am and still others are open in the evenings only. Some places close as early as 9pm, many open until 10pm or 11pm, while others stay open all night. Bars, by law, can't open before 4pm and must close by 1am. This law has been enforced with renewed vigour by the new government. Do note that shops operated by Muslims might close on Friday, the Islamic holy day.

**CHILDREN**

Thailand is a surprisingly easy place to travel with children and many former solo backpackers are returning to Thailand with their own families. Thais love children and in many instances will shower attention on your offspring, who will find ready playmates among their Thai counterparts.

Of course, travel with children in Thailand is still subject to the same obstacles that are faced by parents travelling with children anywhere, ie keeping the little 'uns healthy and entertained. Lonely Planet's *Travel with Children* contains advice on how to cope with kids on the road, with special attention to travel in the developing world.

**Practicalities**

Transport is an important consideration for parents, as children will get bored quickly on long bus or boat rides so if you're heading to the far south consider flying. There are cheap, direct flights from Bangkok to Ko Samui, Phuket, Krabi, Trang and Trat. Though not as fast, the train does offer sleeping compartments and room to explore and runs to Surat Thani (for boat transfer to Ko Samui), Trang and Hat Yai.

Bus companies charge full fare for children using a seat, but it's free for those who ride on their parent's lap. On the train children under 12 pay half, while under-threes travel free if they don't take up a seat.

Thailand is one of the few tropical countries that doesn't require specific jabs, and malaria prophylaxis usually isn't necessary. Having said that, the incidence of dengue fever is on the rise so protecting against mosquito bites (at any time of day) is very important – BYO good repellent. The biggest problem for children is keeping them hydrated and free of the bellyache. The Health chapter (p422) has details of good practices for keeping adults and children healthy.

A high-factor sunscreen is essential. Warn your children not to play with dogs and cats; pets in Thailand are typically more the guard dog or trash-eating variety than Mr Snuggles. Rabies is also a concern. Be particularly wary of aggressive monkeys.

Only in the best hotels will you find high chairs, and strollers are rarely seen outside top resort areas. Most Thais just carry their children in their arms and hold them at the dinner table. While strollers might be convenient on some of the more popular resort islands, Thai pavements are such that elsewhere it will feel more like off-roading than strolling. International-style beach resorts and upmarket hotels usually provide childcare facilities and crèches. Thai food is often a little too spicy for young palates, but fried rice, roti, pasta and especially fried noodles are widely available. Big supermarkets in large cities sell Western staples.

If you are travelling with very young children, public breast-feeding is far less frowned upon than in the West, but it's always done discreetly. However, breast-feeding is losing ground amongst Thais due to the relentless marketing of powdered milk formula, which is portrayed as a miracle tonic that will transform children into academically brilliant prodigies. It's widely available from shops and pharmacies.

**Sights & Activities**

Bangkok has plenty of attractions for kids, from shimmering gold and giant statues at Bangkok's wát (temples) to a world-class oceanarium (see p90). However, warn your children about touching religious objects such as shrines, offerings and spirit houses (which can look a lot like dolls' houses to a child). Hotels with swimming pools help work off city claustrophobia.

The vast majority of Thai beaches are well-suited to swimmers, sand-castle builders and

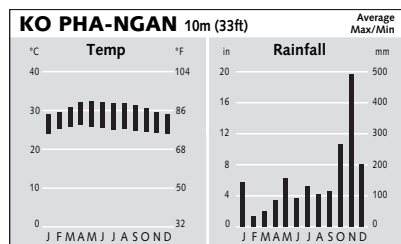
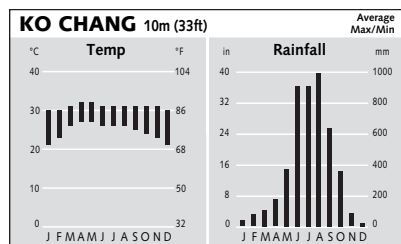
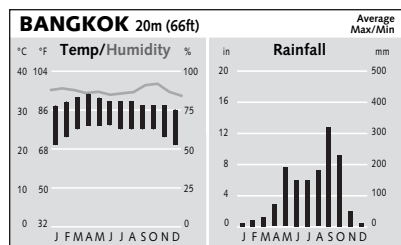


fish spotters, though be aware of seasonal strong currents off Phuket. Pattaya (p121), Phuket (p299) and Ko Samui (p198) have plenty of non-beach diversions that don't involve prostitutes or vodka shots.

Many of the fantastic range of activities available in Krabi (p328), including rock-climbing and sea-kayaking tours, are open to children. For more on outdoor activities see the chapter, p289.

## CLIMATE CHARTS

The climate charts below give you a reasonable idea of what are the hottest and wettest months in the region. For more information on the best times to visit Thailand's islands and beaches, see p12. And for even more detail on when it's likely to rain where, and for how long, see the excellent interactive map on the website [www.travelfish.org/weather\\_fish.php](http://www.travelfish.org/weather_fish.php).



## COURSES

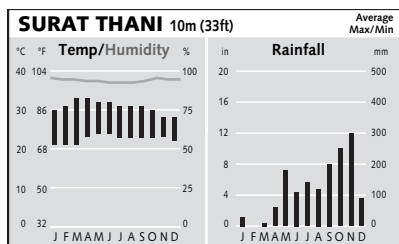
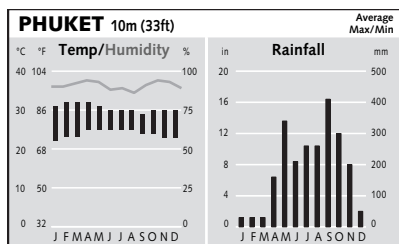
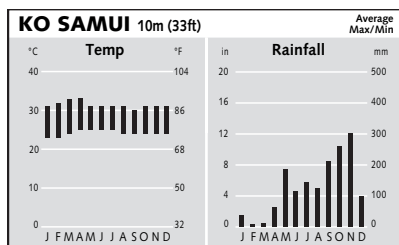
If you'll be staying in Thailand for a while, there are some good courses on offer. You can learn to speak Thai or study meditation, learn Thai cooking or Thai massage, or train as a scuba-diver or Thai boxer. For cooking courses, see p51; for dive courses, see p291.

## Language

Bangkok has the largest concentration of formal language schools and tuition rates, see p89. But there are plenty of informal language schools in most places where foreigners congregate. The best way to find them is on notice boards (often outside grocery stores) and by just asking around.

## Meditation

Thailand has long been a popular place for Western students of Buddhism, particularly



those interested in meditation. Two basic systems of meditation, *samatha* (calm) and *vipassana* (insight), are taught. Most places specialise in *vipassana*, which focuses on concentration to achieve personal insight – it's sometimes called 'mindfulness' meditation.

Foreigners who come to Thailand can choose from dozens of temples and meditation centres (*sām-nák wí-Bàt-sà-nah*) and there is usually no charge, but you must attend daily prayers and make a daily contribution between 50B and 100B towards expenses. Most places teach in Thai, but there are a few English-speaking instructors. Contact the centres in advance before turning up on the doorstep. For even a brief visit, wear clean and neat clothing (ie long trousers or skirt, and sleeves that cover the shoulders).

A two-month tourist visa is ample for most courses. If you formally ordain as a Buddhist monk or nun, you will be allowed to stay in Thailand as long as you remain in robes.

English-language meditation instruction is available in Bangkok; see p90. Elsewhere, meditation courses are available in Ko Si Chang (p118); Ko Chang (p144); outside Surat Thani (see boxed text, p242); on Ko Pha-Ngan (p216); and at these places, among others, on Ko Samui (p195 and p205).

For a detailed if a little dated look at *vipassana* study in Thailand, read *A Guide to Buddhist Monasteries and Meditation Centres in Thailand*, by Bill Weir, distributed by the World Fellowship of Buddhists in Thailand.

Useful online resources include:

**Dharma Thai** ([www.dhammathai.org](http://www.dhammathai.org))

**House of Dhamma** ([www.houseofdhamma.com](http://www.houseofdhamma.com))

**World Fellowship of Buddhists** ([www.wfb-hq.org](http://www.wfb-hq.org))

## Moo-ay Tai (Thai Boxing)

The martial art of *moo-ay tai* (often spelt as *muay thai*; Thai boxing) is legendary around the world, but you'll need to be tough to last long at a traditional Thai *moo-ay tai* camp. As well as a rigorous training regimen, you may also have to adopt a special (often rudimentary) diet and learn the Thai language. Unlike most East Asian martial arts, *moo-ay tai* training features full-contact sparring.

As the sport's popularity has exploded, however, several schools have adapted their programs to better suit Westerners. Bangkok has several of these, with English-speaking trainers and better equipment but which charge higher tuition fees; see p90.

Training periods can range from a one-day course to multiweek sessions. Do be aware that the potential for some camps to be interested only in tuition fees is a concern and it pays to do your research.

The website [www.muaythai.com](http://www.muaythai.com) contains useful information including the addresses of training camps. For more on *moo-ay tai*, see boxed text, p178.

## Thai Massage

Described as a 'brutally pleasant experience', this ancient form of healing has been practised in Thailand for over 1000 years and was modified from ancient Indian meditation techniques. Unlike Western massage techniques, Thai massage (*nōo-at pāan boh-rahñ*) uses the elbows, forearms, knees and feet as well as the fingers and palms to apply pressure to traditional pressure points along various *sén* (meridians – lines of energy in the human body) in order to distribute energies evenly through the nervous system.

If you want to study Thai massage, Wat Pho in Bangkok (see p83) is the national authority on traditional healing and offers massage training courses; see also p90.

## CUSTOMS

The white-uniformed officers of Thai customs prohibit the import or export of the usual goods – porn, weapons and drugs. If you're caught with drugs, in particular, expect life never to be the same again. Otherwise, customs regulations are quite reasonable. The usual 200 cigarettes or 250g of tobacco are allowed in without duty, along with 1L of wine or spirits. Ditto for electronic goods as long as you don't look like you're planning to sell them – best to leave your third and fourth laptops at home.

There is no limit to the amount of Thai or foreign currency you can bring into the country, but you can only take out 50,000B per person without special authorisation. If you're going to one of Thailand's neighbouring countries, you can take as much as 500,000B per person. The exportation of foreign currencies is unrestricted.

Thailand has strict regulations on the export of antiques and some religious items (see p388). For hours of fun reading other customs details, check out [www.customs.go.th/Customs-Eng/indexEng.jsp](http://www.customs.go.th/Customs-Eng/indexEng.jsp).

## Claiming Back VAT

Visitors to Thailand who depart by air and who haven't spent more than 180 days in Thailand during the previous calendar year can apply for a VAT refund on purchases made at approved stores; look for the blue and white VAT Refund sticker in store windows. Minimum purchases must add up to 2000B per store in a single day, with a minimum total of 5000B. You must get a VAT Refund form and tax invoice from the shop. In Bangkok the major malls will probably direct you to a desk dealing with VAT refunds, but elsewhere you might need to ask.

At the airport, take the items (preferably in original packaging) to the customs desk, which will issue the paperwork. You can then check larger items in, but smaller items (such as watches and jewellery) must be carried by hand as they will need to be reinspected once past immigration. Either way, you actually get your money at a VAT Refund Tourist Office once you've passed through immigration. For all the details, see [www.rd.go.th/vrt](http://www.rd.go.th/vrt).

## Exporting Antiques, Art & Buddha Images

After centuries of being plundered for foreign antique and art collectors, the Thais have introduced strict regulations governing the export of antiques, *objets d'art* and images of Buddha or other Buddhist deities. To carry any of these out of the country, you'll need a permit from the Fine Arts Department, which can take several days to arrange. The Thai definition of an antique is fairly broad. If in doubt, contact the Fine Arts Department at the **Office of Archaeology & National Museums** (Map pp72-3; ☎ 0 2226 1661) at the Fine Arts Department.

## DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Although Thailand is generally a pretty safe place to visit, it's easy to get taken for a ride. It's wise to be a little cautious, particularly if you're travelling alone. For information on diseases and environmental dangers such as jellyfish stings, see p423. The following might help you stay out of trouble.

### Drugging

It doesn't happen as much as it used to, but beware of friendly strangers offering cigarettes, drinks or sweets, especially in hostess bars or other houses of dubious repute. In some cases the food is drugged and the victim wakes up hours later without a wallet or valuables.

### Drugs

Despite Thailand's party reputation, it is illegal to buy, sell or possess all of the good-times drugs in any quantity and there are severe penalties – they don't get much more severe than death – if caught. Even more than in most countries, drugs are a huge political issue in Thailand. The government of Thaksin Shinawatra was notoriously hardline on drugs (see boxed text, opposite) and popular for it, and the successor Peoples Power Party is following a similar line.

This means police raids on tourist areas have returned and police themselves are under pressure to deliver convictions; attempting to bribe your way out of trouble will likely be futile. If you're lucky, you will be fined 50,000B (at least) and asked to leave the country; if you're not, you could end up in Bangkok's infamous Bang Khwang Prison (aka the Bangkok Hilton).

With such a hardline stance (we're talking raiding bars, saunas and nightclubs, particularly in Bangkok, and holding everyone until they've been photographed and submitted a urine sample), it makes you wonder how every mind-altering substance known to man can be available at the full-moon parties (see boxed text, p215) on Ko Pha-Ngan; and this is despite regular spot searches of people and vehicles heading to Hat Rin for the full moon.

As well as manufactured drugs, the ban extends to so-called 'natural' drugs, such as *grà-tôrm* (a leaf of the *Mitragyna speciosa* tree) and hallucinogenic 'magic mushrooms'. 'Special omelettes' containing magic mushrooms are a long-running tradition at Ko Pha-Ngan, but these have always been a risky proposition and hundreds of foreigners have ended up with severe mental-health problems over the years after taking hallucinogenic drugs in Thailand. A hallucinogenic plant called *đôn lam-pong*, which can cause permanent psychosis, has recently appeared on the scene at Ko Pha-Ngan.

### Insurgent Activity

The far south of Thailand continues to be troubled by separatist violence, and travel in Yala, Pattani and Narathiwat Provinces can be dangerous. Many governments advise against nonessential travel to Thailand's deep south and it is worth checking your government's travel advisory before hitting the road. Having

## ADDICTED TO THE WAR ON DRUGS

In January 2003, as the world's attention was focused on the impending advance of the 'War on Terror' into Iraq, the Thai police embarked on a crackdown on drug dealers and users with the stated aim of declaring Thailand 'drug-free' within months. In announcing the move, the words of former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra were ominous: 'Because drug traders are ruthless to our children, so being ruthless back to them is not a bad thing... It may be necessary to have casualties... If there are deaths among traders, it's normal.'

Thailand's 'War on Drugs' was initially met with broad support from the public, which had become understandably frightened of the impact of growing methamphetamine use. But what followed was criticised by the UN Commission on Human Rights. In just three months more than 50,000 people were arrested and at least 2275 killed (the police figure). The government claimed most of the killings were carried out by rival drug gangs. But many of the dead had been summarily executed by the police themselves. The dead included many who had some involvement in the drug trade, but a government report states that over a thousand probably had nothing to do with drugs whatsoever. Three months after the campaign began Shinawatra hastily declared 'mission accomplished'. Five years later and the dead are still dead, most of the police are still police and the drugs trade shows no sign of having disappeared.

Not surprisingly, new kingpins rose up to meet the demand and the battle against methamphetamine (*yah báh*; crazy-medicine) continues in a more conventional manner. The Thai government's attempts to coordinate with poorly funded and poorly motivated police in Myanmar, Laos and Cambodia have resulted in some high-profile busts, but no killer blow. Because of this, and despite the public-relations disaster of the 2003 War on Drugs, the government declared a second War on Drugs in early 2008. We can only hope it doesn't descend into the sort of festival of death seen in 2003.

said that, a steady trickle of travellers passes through these provinces en route to or from Malaysia and most report no trouble.

For more on the long history of trouble between Muslims and Buddhists in the south, see boxed text, p28. For details on travelling there, see boxed text, p252. If you are thinking of heading to this part of Thailand be sure to check online for fresh information; the Thorn Tree bulletin board at [www.lonelyplanet.com](http://www.lonelyplanet.com) is a good place to start.

### Physical Safety

Violent crime is rare in Thailand, but not unheard of. During the last few years several women travellers have been raped – and some murdered – on remote beaches, and in early 2008 a man was stabbed to death while trying to break up a fight at a Hat Rin full moon party. For beach safety precautions for women, see p403.

Wherever you are in Thailand it makes sense to exercise the same street smarts you would anywhere else. These include the obvious, like ensuring your room is securely locked and bolted and avoiding quiet, dark places at night. Women should also inspect cheap, thin-walled rooms for strategic peepholes.

Motorbikes, however, pose the greatest risk. Tourist motorcyclists are killed fairly regularly, and many others end up with a 'Thai tattoo' – burned inner right calf – or worse. See boxed text, p414, for more on motorcycle safety.

### Scams

Well, just where do we start? Thailand has its fair share of scams that have been consistently separating tourists from their cash for years. Bangkok is the centre of Thai scamming, but islands such as Ko Samui and Phuket are doing their best to claim the title. Of the various scams, the gem scam (see boxed text, p390) and the transit and lodging scams are those you're most likely to come across.

### TRANSIT & LODGING SCAMS

In terms of infrastructure, it is a breeze getting from point A to point B in Thailand. But there are still the taxi and tuk-tuk drivers and bogus travel agents to dodge – nearly an Olympic event. Several well-established scams exist – see boxed text, p412 for details.

Don't believe anyone who tells you that a hotel or guesthouse is 'closed', 'full', 'dirty',

**THE WORLD-FAMOUS BANGKOK GEM SCAM!** *Andrew Burke*

'Hello sir, where are you going?' asked the well-dressed man in his early 50s, 'Where are you from?' When I told him 'Australia' I could almost see the memory whirring into action. 'Ah, Australia! Sydney or Melbourne? My daughter is studying at university in Melbourne.' My new friend, acquired as I walked along a touristy Bangkok street, went on to correctly answer questions about Melbourne universities (he knew all the main schools) and Australian holiday holidays. It was only when he asked 'How long have you been in Bangkok?', and I told him 'two years', that his interest suddenly and dramatically waned.

My 'friend' was a scammer, a con artist expert in inveigling unsuspecting new arrivals into his trust and then subtly bullying them into buying something for way more than its real worth – usually gems. Every question or statement was a leading question designed to push emotional buttons. My 'friend' told me how expensive Australian universities were and how hard it was to pay for his daughter's education, and rising inflation was making it so hard to keep paying for the school she needed so she could have a better life.

So what should you do? The truth is that Thais don't usually act this way so, as much as it pains us to say this, if you're in a touristy area (not just in Bangkok) treat anyone who approaches you from out of the blue with suspicion. And look for the signs. Assume the scam is in gear when your new friend asks if you have a map (a major clue since most Thais can't be bothered with maps) and/or a túk-túk magically arrives. Don't believe people who claim major tourist sites are closed for renovations or government holidays unless you see it for yourself.

'haunted' or 'burnt down' (we're not making this up) until you see if for yourself. Sähm-lór and túk-túk drivers often offer free or low-cost rides to the place they're touting but you'll be paying for the ride later on, either in terms of cash or discomfort; see boxed text, above, for one likely outcome.

**Theft & Fraud**

People seem so friendly in Thailand that a visitor can forget to follow the basic precautions of travelling abroad.

While violent crime is rare, there are plenty of stories of bags being snatched and pockets picked, particularly in Bangkok's crowded markets; Chatuchak is probably the worst. Use your common sense, however, and you should be fine; keep your bags in front of you and in sight at all times. On the islands, don't put your bag in the front basket of rented bicycles or motorbikes, as you might as well just put out a sign saying 'rob me'.

The best way to keep your money safe is to split the risk. Bring a mixture of cash and travellers cheques, and keep an emergency stash of money separate from your main finances. Credit cards are very useful in Thailand but keep them safe and have the emergency cancellation phone number

on hand. If you have two cards, keep them in separate places. Money belts or pouches worn under clothing are much safer than wallets or purses.

We'd say keep your valuables, including credit cards, cash or travellers cheques, with you at all times, but clearly that's going to be a problem when you're lounging around the beach all day. At these times it's best to store them in the safety box at your hotel or guesthouse. In cheaper places, this means a locked drawer or a mysterious place behind the counter.

It also pays to seal your valuables before you hand them over. A taped-up envelope with a signature over the top is the best way. If you can't do this, then at least make a show of counting and noting your money before you hand it over. This works for both parties as while most staff are trustworthy, there are exceptions and the same applies to foreigners. In the case of an alleged theft, the staff have as much reason to suspect you of fraud as you do them.

Never let vendors take your credit card out of sight to run it through the machine. Unscrupulous merchants have been known to run off multiple receipts with one credit-card purchase, forging your signature on the blanks after you have left the shop.

It's just a ploy to give them an excuse to take you somewhere else – somewhere you don't want to go.

If I'd allowed it, my 'friend' would probably have taken me to a local wát (temple) or some other mildly interesting attraction as a means of building trust. We'd end up taking a convenient túk-túk (everyone in the scam gets a cut) to a gem shop where the scammers might tell me about a 'government gem sale' that will soon end, or some other unlikely scheme. The government doesn't do 'gem sales', nor does it have schemes for students to sell gems to raise money for education. Eventually I'd be talked into buying large amounts of gems either for cash or on my credit card, with assurances that I can resell the stones for a huge profit at home. At home I'd find the gems were real, but worth a fraction of the price paid in Bangkok. In a worst-case scenario my credit card would also be billed for extra items using forged credit-card imprints.

If you find yourself in any of these scenarios, remember that you can stop it at any time. A good countermeasure is to ask for a photo with your 'friend' – and as many of the maybe-scammers as possible – if they refuse, it's a scam. Even better, don't allow yourself to be tempted. The scammer will often play on your greed – don't be greedy.

That scams like this have been going on for years, by the same operators, is a sad indictment on the Thai government's legislative ability and on the credit-card companies that continue to do business with dodgy dealers. The names of the culprits are all over the internet – why can't they be stopped? For more on the gem scam (including lists of known operators) or to seek solace from the scammed, check out [www.bangkokscams.com](http://www.bangkokscams.com), [www.geocities.com/thaigemscamgroup](http://www.geocities.com/thaigemscamgroup) and [www.2bangkok.com](http://www.2bangkok.com), which has an anti-scam campaign.

Finally, remember that a padlock on a bag doesn't turn it into Fort Knox, particularly on long-distance bus trips. See p412 for bus theft horror stories.

**DISCOUNT CARDS**

Apart from airlines and travel agents, youth discounts are rarely offered in Thailand, and discounts for seniors are almost unheard of. The cost of living is so low that this isn't really an issue. **Hostelling International (HI)**; [www.tyha.org](http://www.tyha.org) issues a membership card that will allow you to stay at the country's handful of associated hostels without having to pay the additional surcharge for nonmembers; membership can be bought for 200B at the relevant hostels.

**Student & Youth Cards**

The International Student Identity Card (ISIC) can be used for the student discount offered at some museums in Thailand, but is most useful for getting discount airfares from travel agents and airlines. Some travel agents will give student discounts even if you don't have a student card. For a list of agents that issue ISIC cards, visit the International Student Travelling Confederation's website, [www.istc.org](http://www.istc.org). The phoney ISIC cards produced on Th Khao San may fool museum staff, but probably won't fool the airlines.

**EMBASSIES & CONSULATES**  
**Thai Embassies & Consulates**

Most nationalities can obtain a free one-month tourist visa on arrival in Thailand, but if your country is exempt or you want more time in Thailand, contact the Thai embassy (or consulate) in your home country. For a full and regularly updated list of Thai embassies and consulates see the website of the **Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs** ([www.mfa.go.th/web/12.php](http://www.mfa.go.th/web/12.php)) and click through to About the Ministry. Or look it up in the phone book.

**Embassies & Consulates in Thailand**

Bangkok is an excellent place to collect visas for onward travel. The visa sections of most embassies and consulates are open from 9am to noon Monday to Friday, but call first to be sure. Some Bangkok embassies are listed here. For a full and regularly updated list, go to [www.mfa.go.th/web/12.php](http://www.mfa.go.th/web/12.php) and click through to Foreign Missions in Thailand.

**Australia** (Map pp72-3; ☎ 0 2344 6300; [www.austembassy.or.th](http://www.austembassy.or.th); 37 Th Sathon Tai)

**Cambodia** (Map pp70-1; ☎ 0 2957 5851; 518/4 Th Pracha Uthit, Soi Ramkambaeng 39, Wangthonglang)

**Canada** (Map pp72-3; ☎ 0 2636 0540; [geo.international.gc.ca/asia/bangkok](http://geo.international.gc.ca/asia/bangkok); 15th fl, Abdulrahim Bldg, 990 Th Phra Ram IV, Lumpini)



**China** (Map pp70-1; ☎ 0 2245 0088; www.chinaembassy.or.th; 57 Th Ratchadaphisek, Din Daeng)

**European Union** (Map pp80-1; ☎ 0 2305 2600; www.deltha.ec.europa.eu; 19th fl, Kian Gwan House II, 1410/1 Th Withayu)

**France** Embassy (Map pp78-9; ☎ 0 2266 8250-6; www.ambafrance-th.org; 35 Soi 36, Th Charoen Krung); Consulate (Map pp72-3; ☎ 0 2287 1592; 29 Th Sathon Tai)

**Germany** (Map pp72-3; ☎ 0 2287 9000; www.bangkok.diplo.de; 9 Th Sathon Tai)

**India** Embassy (p82; ☎ 0 2258 0300-6; http://indianembassy.gov.in/bangkok; 46 Soi 23, Th Sukhumvit);

Consulate (p82; ☎ 0 2665 2968; www.ivac-th.com; 15th fl, Glas Haus Bldg, Soi 25, Th Sukhumvit)

**Israel** (Map p82; ☎ 0 2204 9200; http://bangkok.mfa.gov.il; 25th fl, Ocean Tower II, 75 Soi 19, Th Sukhumvit)

**Indonesia** (Map pp80-1; ☎ 0 2252 3135; 600-602 Th Phetburi, Ratchathewi)

**Japan** (Map pp72-3; ☎ 0 2207 8500; www.th.emb-japan.go.jp; 177 Th Withayu, Lumpini)

**Laos** (Map pp70-1; ☎ 0 2539 6667; www.bkklaembassy.com; 520/1-3 Soi Sahakampromoon, Th Pracha Uthit, Wangthonglong)

**Malaysia** (Map pp72-3; ☎ 0 2679 2190-9; 33-35 Th Sathon Tai)

**Myanmar** (Map pp78-9; ☎ 0 2234 0278; 132 Th Sathon Neua)

**Netherlands** (Map pp80-1; ☎ 0 2309 5200; www.netherlandsembassy.in.th; 15 Soi Tonson, Ploenchit)

**New Zealand** (Map pp80-1; ☎ 0 2254 2530-3; www.nzembassy.com; 19th fl, M Thai Tower, All Seasons Place, 87 Th Withayu)

**South Africa** (Map pp80-1; ☎ 0 2659 2900; www.sambangkok.com; 12h fl, M-Thai Tower, All Seasons Place, Th Withayu)

**Sweden** (Map p82; ☎ 2263 7200; www.sweden.abroad.com; 20th fl, One Pacific Place, 140 Th Sukhumvit)

**UK** (Map pp80-1; ☎ 0 2305 8333; www.britishembassy.gov.uk; 1031 Th Withayu, Ploenchit)

**USA** (Map pp80-1; ☎ 0 2205 4000; http://bangkok.usembassy.gov; 120-122 Th Withayu, Lumpini)

**Vietnam** (Map pp80-1; ☎ 0 2251 5836-8; 83/1 Th Withayu, Ploenchit)

## FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Festivals that generally occur on set months are shown on p19. Many festivals are organised around a fixed lunar year so, like Easter, exact dates vary each year. For example, dates for the Chinese Lunar New Year are: 26 January 2009, 14 February 2010 and 4 February 2011.

Thailand's Muslim community has its own festivals, which are celebrated throughout the south. These are all linked to a lunar calendar in a way that the dates come forward usually by 11 or 12 days every year. For example, the fasting month of Ramadan starts on about (it depends when the moon is sighted) 22 August 2009, 11 August 2010 and 1 August 2011. During Ramadan, which lasts one month, celebrants are barred from eating, drinking or smoking between sunrise and sunset. The end of Ramadan is Eid al-Fitr, probably the biggest party of the Islamic year.

For details of holidays, see opposite.

## FOOD

Thai food is legendary around the world for its chilli heat and exotic spices. There is a huge variety of food on offer, and you can pay as much or as little as you like and still get a fantastic meal. Places to eat in this book have been arranged by location and then price.

The budget category includes street food, food courts, night markets and cheap local restaurants, with prices ranging up to 150B. Midrange eateries are mainly sit-down restaurants – most restaurants in this book fall into this bracket, except in Bangkok, which is amply stocked with upmarket restaurants. In midrange restaurants, you can expect to pay 150B to 500B, while meals at top-end restaurants start at about 500B and climb far beyond.

Prices given in the regional chapters are typically for meals or main courses. Side orders, such as rice, salads and vegetables, cost extra, with prices reflecting the quality of the establishment. For the low-down on food in Thailand, see p44.

## GAY & LESBIAN TRAVELLERS

While Thai culture may seem very tolerant of homosexuality, both male and female, there is a difference between tolerance and acceptance. Although there is little risk of being verbally or physically abused, the Thais are quite conservative and it wasn't until early 2003 that the Department of Mental Health formally accepted that homosexuality was not a psychiatric disease.

The reasons for this ambiguous stance are rooted in the importance of the family in Thai society. Gays are often seen as being immature

## GÀ-TEU-I CULTURE

Thailand has a long-established transgender tradition. Transvestites appear in some of Thailand's earliest folk operas and *gà-teu-i* (also spelt *kàthoey*; transgender males) are a visible part of Thai society – far more so than in the West. Almost all *gà-teu-i* are male-to-female transsexuals and most adopt a feminine persona from a very early age. Many take female sex hormones later in life to reduce male characteristics or undergo sexual reassignment surgery. Although foreigners tend to see *gà-teu-i* as either cultural curiosities or sexual objects, in Thailand they are usually simply regarded as a third sex.

Many *gà-teu-i* have high-profile jobs as entertainers, actors, game-show hosts and business owners. Performers in *gà-teu-i* cabarets, such as Calypso in Bangkok (p105), Tiffany's in Pattaya (p127) and Phuket Simon Cabaret in Hat Patong (Phuket; p317), often become big stars. Most of the time, you may not even know you are meeting *gà-teu-i*. The female persona adopted by *gà-teu-i* can be very convincing to a Westerner, but a Thai knows that too much swish isn't the genuine dish. *The Third Sex*, by Richard Totman, is an interesting and sensitive exploration of this phenomenon.

and selfish for refusing to get married and have children. As a result, many gay men live a double life: raising a family by day and having clandestine meetings by night. As in the West, people with a high-profile public life rarely admit they are gay, while entertainers and comedians often make a living out of their sexuality.

Bangkok is the undisputed gay capital of Southeast Asia – probably the whole of Asia – with several streets dedicated to gay bars and clubs (see boxed text, p104). There is a well-established scene, but prostitution is endemic in bars where foreign gays hang out. On top of this, a Western boyfriend is perceived by many as an easy route to money or emigration, so it can be very hard to meet Thai gays on an even footing. As is the case with straight relationships, many Thais are openly offended by Western gays who come to Thailand to pick up Thai boyfriends.

After Bangkok, the other main gay areas are Phuket and Pattaya. The scene is most relaxed and least commercial in Phuket, which has a huge and colourful **gay pride festival** (www.phuketgaypridefestival.com). Bangkok and Pattaya hold gay festivals every November or December (visit www.bangkokpride.org and www.pattayagayfestival.com).

For an idea of what's going on in the GLBT scene, see these sites:

**Dreaded Ned** (www.dreadedned.com) Listings, forums, personal ads.

**Gay Guide in Thailand** (www.gayguideinthailand.com) What it says on the (six)-pack.

**Lesbian Adventures Thailand** (www.lathailand.com) Travel company owned and operated by women, for women.

**Lesbian Guide to Bangkok** (www.bangkoklesbian.com)

Active site run by a *faràng* lesbian, with helpful forums and news on venues. Mainly in English.

**Lesla** (www.lesla.com) The most-established group for Thai and *faràng* lesbians, particularly younger women.

**Long Yang Club** (www.longyangclub.org/thailand) A 'multicultural social group for male-oriented men who want to meet outside the gay scene', with branches all over the world. The Thailand chapter hosts events in Bangkok.

**Utopia** (www.utopia-asia.com/thaihang.htm) Long-running and well-respected gay and lesbian website with lots of Bangkok information and member reviews.

## HOLIDAYS

Chinese New Year (held in February or early March) and Songkran (mid-April) are the two holiday periods that most affect Thailand. For up to a week before and after these holidays public transport is packed full of people heading for their home towns to celebrate with family. This means all transport from Bangkok is full before the date but seats are available afterwards, when people are heading back to Bangkok and work. See p19 for more on individual festivals and holidays.

## Public Holidays

Government offices and banks close down on the following public holidays. For the exact dates of lunar holidays, see the website of TAT (www.tourismthailand.org/travel-information).

<b>New Year's Day</b>	1 January
<b>Magha Puja Day</b> (mah-ká boo-chah)	February/March (lunar)
<b>Chakri Day</b>	6 April
<b>Songkran</b>	13-15 April

<b>Labour Day</b>	1 May
<b>Coronation Day</b>	5 May
<b>Visakha Puja Day</b>	May/June (lunar)
<b>(wí-sǎh-ká boo-chah)</b>	
<b>Khao Phansa</b>	July/August (lunar)
<b>Queen's Birthday</b>	12 August
<b>King Chulalongkorn Day</b>	23 October
<b>Ok Phansa</b>	October/November (lunar)
<b>King's Birthday</b>	5 December
<b>Constitution Day</b>	10 December
<b>New Year's Eve</b>	31 December

## School Holidays

As well as the main public holidays, children and staff get a day off every 16 January for Teachers' Day. The main school vacations fall during March and April and the end of May; exact dates vary from school to school.

## INSURANCE

With travel anywhere, the golden rule about travel insurance is 'get some!'. While Thailand is generally a safe country to travel in, sickness, accidents and theft are not uncommon. A travel-insurance policy covering theft, loss and medical problems is an integral part of travel. If you can't afford to pay for travel insurance, you certainly can't afford to cover the costs of theft or medical expenses if the worst happens. There is a wide variety of policies, all with varying prices, inclusions, terms and conditions. Your travel agent will be able to advise you or you can shop around on the Web.

Always check the small print to see if the policy covers potentially dangerous sporting activities, such as diving, rock climbing, trekking and riding motorbikes (they often don't). Premiums tend to vary depending on the level of cover for theft (where most claims come from). But the most important factor is health cover. We know of travellers who have died or had limbs amputated because they weren't insured (though not in Thailand), so even if it's just a policy that covers emergency health (these are relatively cheap) be sure to have one. For more information, see p420.

Worldwide cover for travellers is available online at [www.lonelyplanet.com/travel\\_services](http://www.lonelyplanet.com/travel_services).

## INTERNET ACCESS

Thailand is pretty well wired. In all but the most remote locales you'll find at least one internet café, and this includes many islands off the Thai coast. Connections are dependent on

the local phone lines and how many computers are networked to the same connection.

Internet cafés usually charge 1B to 2B per minute in towns and 3B to 4B per minute on the islands and more remote beaches. There are also internet stations in shopping malls, at most airports and in an ever-growing number of hotels and guesthouses, where connections range from free to more than 700B an hour. Because internet cafés are so ubiquitous, in this book we've mainly provided directions to where they congregate rather than to individual businesses.

On any shared computer be sure to be careful with your personal information. If you're banking online, always delete the cache (or 'cookies') and history on the Web browser when you finish so no-one can access your account.

Laptops are becoming almost as common as backpacks on Thai islands and beaches, and the price you need to pay for a room that has internet is steadily falling. In Bangkok, almost all midrange and top-end lodgings have wi-fi and/or hard-wired connections, and several budget places have joined the party.

If you can't find a hot spot and need to plug in, Thailand uses RJ11 phone jacks; and prepaid dial-up accounts are available from 7-Elevens and internet cafés. They come with a list of dial-up numbers for towns around the country, a user name and password, plus a number of free hours – a 20-hour card costs about 200B.

## LEGAL MATTERS

In general Thai police don't hassle foreigners, especially tourists. The one major exception involves drugs, which are public enemy number one. With the outbreak of the second War on Drugs (see boxed text, p389) the Thai police have begun sweeping bars and clubs

### ARE YOU OLD ENOUGH?

Thailand has legal minimum ages for many activities:

- Drinking – 18 years to buy alcohol (hello 7-Eleven!), or 21 to enter a bar
- Driving – 21 years (for car hire)
- Sexual consent – 18 years for heterosexual and gay sex
- Voting – 18 years

## FINDING ADDRESSES

The Thai word *thanōn* means road, street or avenue (it's shortened to 'Th' in this book). Hence Ratchadamnoen Rd or Ave is called *Thanon Ratchadamnoen* in Thai.

A soi is a small street or lane that runs off a larger street. An address referred to as 48/3-5 Soi 1, Th Sukhumvit will be located off Th Sukhumvit on Soi 1. The same address may be written as 48/3-5 Th Sukhumvit Soi 1, or even just 48/3-5 Sukhumvit 1.

Smaller than a soi is a *drōrk* (often spelt *trawk* or *trok*) or alley.

Many street addresses show a string of numbers divided by slashes and dashes; for example, 48/3-5 Soi 1, Th Sukhumvit. The number before the slash is the original lot number; the numbers after the slash indicate buildings (or entrances) within that lot. These lot numbers are often useless, as they usually don't run sequentially. But don't worry, if you can find the main number (in this case 3-5), then you'll be fine.

In rural areas, along beaches and on most islands, addresses sometimes consist of a house number followed by a village number. For example, 34 Mōo 7 would be house 34 in village 7 (*mōo*, also spelt as *muu*, is short for '*mōo bāhn*, Thai for 'village'). Villagers almost never display this address anywhere on their houses, as it is really only used by postal workers and other officials. Places such as guesthouses do sometimes display such an address, though you're more likely to spot a sign with the name of the guesthouse before you see the address. Further complicating matters, street and town names usually have variant spellings as there is no standard convention for transliterating Thai into English.

If it gets too confusing just ask a local, showing or telling them the address you're after. As most Thais have grown up in a world devoid of maps, asking for directions on a map will often lead to confusion.

in search of offenders. If the music suddenly stops and men in brown shirts begin filing into the room, expect to be there until you've been searched and tested (usually a urine test) for drugs. Resistance is futile – unless you know someone powerful.

If you are arrested for any offence, the police will allow you to make a phone call – if you don't know that powerful person then your embassy or consulate in Thailand is probably the best place to start. Once arrested, the time you can be held without charge depends on the police officers and how much respect you show the arresting officers. Thai law does not presume an indicted detainee to be either 'guilty' or 'innocent' but rather a 'suspect' whose guilt or innocence will be decided in court. Trials are usually speedy and Thailand has plenty of private attorneys (preferable to the state-appointed counsels).

## Tourist Police Hotline

If you get into any kind of trouble, immediately contact the Tourist Police, who specialise in dealing with foreigners. The 24-hour Tourist Police hotline is ☎ 1155. The Tourist Police don't have all the powers of the regular police, but they can help with translation or with contacting your embassy.

## MAPS

Periplus Travel Maps publishes a reliable map of *Thailand* (1:2,000,000), plus more detailed maps of Bangkok, Phuket and Ko Samui. The *Phuket Southern Thailand* and *Ko Samui Southern Thailand* maps have useful insets for places along the Andaman and gulf coasts respectively. **ThinkNet** ([www.thinknet.co.th](http://www.thinknet.co.th)) produces a high-quality city and country series, including the large-scale *Bilingual Map of Southern Thailand* (1:500,000), which is widely available for 120B.

Popular resort destinations, including Ko Samui, Phuket and Pattaya, are well served by free maps and for most travellers these will be all you'll need; they're usually available at airports and tourist offices.

Anyone planning to drive should buy the Roads Association of Thailand's large-format, bilingual road atlas called *Thailand Highway Map*.

## MONEY

Most travellers rely on credit or debit cards to access cash in Bangkok, where ATMs are everywhere. The basic unit of Thai currency is the baht. There are 100 satang in one baht – though almost the only place you'll be able to spend them is in the ubiquitous 7-Elevens. Coins



come in denominations of 25 satang, 50 satang, 1B, 5B and 10B. Paper currency comes in denominations of 20B (green), 50B (blue), 100B (red), 500B (purple) and 1000B (brown).

Cash machines and currency exchanges typically dispense funds in 1000B notes, which can be difficult for the average vendor or taxi driver to change. It is not advisable to pull out a big note to pay a small bar tab; sometimes the change returned doesn't agree with both parties. Break big bills at 7-Elevens or when paying for a room, so you have small notes for everyday purchases. See the inside cover of this book for exchange rates, or check the web or the *Bangkok Post* or the *Nation* newspapers.

### ATMs

In most towns in Thailand you won't need a map to find an ATM – they're everywhere. Most bank ATMs accept major international credit cards and many will also cough up cash (Thai baht only) if your savings/current account from home has a card affiliated with the Cirrus or Plus networks. You can withdraw up to 20,000B at a time from most ATMs; home banks will charge a fee for every international transaction.

### Credit Cards

International credit cards such as Visa and MasterCard (and bank debit cards backed by these companies) can be used to withdraw local currency from ATMs. You can also use credit cards to purchase currency over the counter at many foreign exchange booths; however, the commission can be astronomical, so ask first.

Credit cards and debit cards can also be used almost anywhere you'll spend enough to need one. The most commonly accepted cards are Visa and MasterCard, followed by Amex and JCB. Credit-card fraud is widespread, particularly in shops that use the old-fashioned card imprint system. See p390 for more on avoiding scams.

If your card is lost or stolen, contact the Tourist Police for a police report. To report a lost or stolen card, call the following telephone hotlines:

**Amex** (☎ 0 2273 5544)

**MasterCard** (☎ 001 800 11 887 0663)

**Visa** (☎ 001 800 441 3485)

### Moneychangers

There is no black market for baht. Banks or legal moneychangers offer the best exchange

rates. US dollars and euros are the most readily accepted currencies, followed by British pounds and Australian dollars. Travellers cheques get better exchange rates than cash, and large banknotes are often worth more than small bills. There are exchange facilities at many branches of Bangkok Bank, Krung Thai Bank, Siam City Bank, Siam Commercial Bank and Kasikorn Bank; look for the 'Exchange' signs. Standard banking hours are 8.30am to 3.30pm Monday to Friday, though they will often stay open until 4.30pm Fridays. Some banks in popular tourist areas maintain foreign exchange booths, which are usually open daily from around 10am until 8pm.

Many Thai banks refuse to exchange Malaysian ringgit, Indonesian rupiah, Nepali rupees, Cambodian riel, Lao kip, Vietnamese dong or Myanmar kyat – in other words, it's best to change your money at the border and bargain hard when you do it. If you need to buy or sell any of these currencies in Thailand the moneychangers along Th Charoen Krung and Th Silom in Bangkok are your best bet, though rates won't be great.

### Money Transfers

International money-transfer companies such as **Western Union** ([www.westernunion.com](http://www.westernunion.com)) and **Moneygram** ([www.moneygram.com](http://www.moneygram.com)) have operations in Thailand. Western Union has offices worldwide where friends or family can transfer money to you instantly. Within Thailand, you can receive Western Union transfers at the Bank of Ayuthaya, Siam City Bank and Thailand Post offices. Moneygram offers similar services through branches of Siam Commercial Bank. The downside of these services is the cost, which is typically 5% to 10% of the value transferred.

### Tipping

Tipping is uncommon in Thailand, except in big hotels and posh restaurants. Having said that, in tourist areas such as Bangkok and the islands and beaches of the south Thais are becoming increasingly familiar with tipping. Taxi drivers will automatically round the price up to the nearest 10B. For most places, however, tips remain appreciated rather than expected.

### Travellers Cheques

All banks with foreign exchange facilities and private foreign exchange desks accept travellers cheques backed by Visa, MasterCard, Thomas Cook and American Express. Commonly

accepted currencies of cheque include the euro; British pound; Swedish, Danish and Norwegian Kroner; the Swiss franc; and the US, Canadian, New Zealand and Australian dollar. In practice, US dollars, UK pounds and euros are most useful. Banks charge a standard commission for each travellers cheque cashed, so you can save on commissions by using large denomination cheques. Some banks partner with certain providers of travellers cheques in commission-free exchanges. Remember to keep the receipts for your cheques separate from your main finances, so you can have the cheques replaced if they are stolen.

### PHOTOGRAPHY & VIDEO

Thailand is a photographer's dream and there are myriad opportunities for still and video photography. The usual rules apply: ask permission before photographing or filming local people, particularly at religious sites. Thai Buddhists may be flattered to have their portraits taken, but this is less true with Thai Muslims. Either way, engaging your potential subject in even the briefest conversation before asking them, with a smile, will greatly improve your chances of an affirmative answer – it's also the polite thing to do. Never agree or promise to send a photo to your subject if you won't actually do that.

Thailand is humid (understatement alert!), so pack some silica gel with your lenses and camera to keep the mould away. A polarising filter is useful for cutting down tropical glare, particularly when taking photos around water and the shimmering gold at wát. In these conditions, bracketing (ie taking extra shots that are one stop overexposed and one stop underexposed) is also a good idea.

Thais have eagerly embraced digital photography and all but the common 100, 200 and 400ASA print film is hard to find outside of Bangkok. On the plus side, photo labs can print your digi shots fast and cheap, and most internet cafés can burn your memories onto CDs and/or DVDs. Camera batteries and Mini-DV tapes are widely available in Bangkok and tourist areas.

### POST

**Thailand Post** (☎ call centre 1545; [www.thailandpost.com](http://www.thailandpost.com)) runs a reliable and highly efficient postal service and staff at Thai post offices almost always speak some English. Aside from Bangkok's main post office (p68), most post offices open

from 8.30am to 4.30pm Monday to Friday and 9am to noon on Saturday; some open Sunday mornings, too. Some larger offices often have phone offices and offer poste restante, and most offer parcel services, with cardboard boxes for sale and tape and string provided free. Don't send valuables or money through the mail.

For courier packages, Thai Post EMS (available at post offices) is a good option and usually less than half the price of private courier companies. **DHL** ([www.dhl.co.th](http://www.dhl.co.th)) and **Fedex** ([www.fedex.com/th](http://www.fedex.com/th)) have offices in Bangkok and the major tourist centres.

### Postal Rates

The rates for internal and international postage are very reasonable. Postcards to anywhere in the world cost 12B or 15B, depending on size. Airmail letters weighing 10g cost 12B to 20B to Western countries. Aerograms cost 15B regardless of the destination. Letters sent by registered mail cost 25B in addition to regular airmail postage.

By airmail, a parcel weighing one/two/five kilograms will cost about 880/1230/2280B to Europe and take about two weeks. Sea mail takes about three months to Europe or the US and is about 60% cheaper than airmail. Surface-air-lifted mail (by air and sea) takes about one month to most places and costs about double the sea mail rate. Rates vary slightly by country; ask to see the post office's magic folder for every variable you can imagine.

You can insure a package's contents for 7B per US\$20 of the goods' value.

### Receiving Mail

You can receive mail in Thailand through the poste-restante service at most post offices, including the main post office in Bangkok: Your Name (surname first), Poste Restante, General Post Office, Charoen Krung Rd, Bangrak, Bangkok, 10501.

### SHOPPING

Thailand is a shopper's paradise and many travellers come home with their bags bulging with wooden carvings, sarongs, jewellery and clothes. Bangkok has the best selection of goods, from knock-offs to the real McCoy; see p106.

Surely you know a friend who had a fabulous outfit made in Thailand. While there

are more tailors than public garbage cans in Thailand, you're better off having something made in Bangkok where some tailor shops rely on repeat business from the diplomatic corps and expat community instead of tourist shops who don't depend on satisfied customers. Do some research before you leave home about fabric quality and styles so that you're an educated shopper.

Genuine brand-name clothes are also a good buy for some. Bangkok has the most fashion-conscious stores and foreign sizes are available. Bangkok's high-end malls stock the real deal, while markets and the Mahboonkrong (MBK) shopping centre have the not-so-real deal.

Dive gear is super-cheap in southern Thailand (if they have your size), and most dive centres have shops where you can buy scuba gear and prescription masks.

Almost all visitors to Thailand bring home some handicrafts. Silver jewellery is extremely popular and portable, but unless you own a shop, do not get talked into buying bulk jewellery to sell back home. Gemstones are a particularly hazardous buy (see boxed text, p390). As a general rule, anything made from shells or endangered animals should be avoided. Lots of shops sell ivory, tortoiseshell and sea-shells poached from marine national parks.

Antiques and convincing reproductions of antiques are widely available, but note that genuine antiques and Buddha images may

not be taken out of the kingdom without a permit – see p388.

Basketware is light to carry and is available all over the south, as is traditional Thai clothing, such as Thai fishermen's pants, sarongs and the like. Other popular handicrafts include hill tribe jewellery, wooden chopsticks (sold only to the tourists), Thai axe pillows, Thai and Lao silk, lacquerware, stainless steel Thai cutlery, wooden bowls and vases, and woodcarvings. The cheapest markets are those provincial markets off the tourist trail, such as in Trang. If you don't want to carry stuff around, most of these items can be obtained more cheaply in Bangkok before your flight home.

All over Thailand you'll find OTOP outlets. OTOP is the sanctioned local crafts centre.

## SOLO TRAVELLERS

Thailand is one of the easiest countries in the world for solo travellers. Even the most timid traveller should be able to meet people in the guesthouses and beach-bars of southern Thailand, though resorts heavy with couples or sex workers can get lonely. In Bangkok, Th Khao San is the world's greatest concentration of travellers, though oddly it can be such a fashion show that it's not as easy to meet people here as elsewhere; hanging around your guesthouse is the best idea. Wherever you meet your fellow wanderers, there's a pretty good chance you'll meet them again on

the well-defined tourist circuit of Thailand's islands and beaches.

Thais might be a little bewildered that you would want to go out and about without friends, a reflection of their social nature. But many are impressed by Westerners', especially solo women's, courage to venture into the unknown. For more on women travellers, see p403.

## TELEPHONE

The Thai telephone system is efficient enough that you should be able to direct-dial most major centres without trouble. Thailand's country code is 66.

Inside Thailand you must dial the area code no matter where you are. In effect, that means all numbers are nine digits; in Bangkok they begin with 02 then a seven-digit number. The only time you drop the initial 0 is when you're calling from outside Thailand. Calling the provinces will usually involve a three-digit code beginning with 0, then a six-digit number. Mobile phone numbers all have 10 digits, beginning with 08.

To direct-dial an international number first dial 001 or, if available, 007, 008 or 009, which are significantly cheaper. For operator-assisted international calls, dial 100. For free local directory assistance in English call 1133. Tell the operator the name of the province you are trying to reach, before giving the name of the person or business. If the line goes quiet be patient, they're finding an English-speaker.

When calling long-distance or to mobile phones within Thailand from private phones or payphones (not mobiles), call 1234 before the number to reduce per-minute costs to less than 2B.

## International Calls

The cheapest way to call internationally is via the internet, and many internet cafés and travel agents are set up for phone calls. Some have Skype loaded and (assuming there's a working headset) you can use that for just the regular per-hour internet fee. Others might have their own VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) service at cheap international rates. Usually such a call is made at a desk beside a clerk, so if you need privacy you might want to get a phone card and a room. Getting someone at home to call back (Skype to Thailand costs US\$6c a minute calling Bangkok land

lines, and 11c for land lines outside Bangkok and mobiles) is often a good idea.

Two Home Country Direct services exist, providing an easy connection to international operators in countries around the world. The original is provided by the Communications Authority of Thailand (CAT) and is available from dedicated phones in CAT offices or other government phone offices, or by dialling 001 999 followed by the appropriate number from any private land line or mobile phone (most hotel phones won't work). Your home phone service operator should have the appropriate number, though note that this service is often more expensive than calling direct from a mobile. Another agency run by the government, Telecom of Thailand (TOT), runs a similar but cheaper service from TOT offices.

## Mobile Phones

Travelling with a mobile (cell) phone has largely eclipsed older forms of telephone communication. Thailand's network is well developed and service plans are flexible. If you have a GSM 900MHz or GSM 1800MHz phone (or a dual-/tri-/quad-band phone) it should roam in Thailand, provided you have activated international roaming on your phone. If you have endless cash, or you only want to send text messages, you might be happy to do that. Otherwise, think about buying a local SIM card.

Buying a prepaid SIM is as easy as finding the nearest 7-Eleven store. The market is super-competitive and deals vary so check websites first, but expect to get a SIM, with 100 or 300 minutes talk time, for between 99B and 300B. Per-minute rates start at less than 50 satang. Recharge cards are sold at the same stores. Calling internationally, the network will have a promotional code (eg 009 instead of 001) that affords big discounts on the standard international rates, though you might have to go into a phone company office to get the full list of rates. The three main networks are:

**AIS** (www.one-2-call.com) Wide coverage across Thailand; One-2-Call is the prepaid option.

**DTAC** (www.dtac.co.th) Lots of options, including Happy (www.happy.co.th) for prepaid SIM.

**True Move** (www.truemove.com) Offers a Welcome SIM package for visitors, with domestic calls for 2B a minute and cheap international rates. Network not as good outside Bangkok.

## WHAT A BARGAIN!

As a general rule, if you have to ask the price then you can bargain. As a general rule; markets are bargaining-friendly and shopping centres are bargaining-free. If you don't like to bargain, then shop at the shopping centres. On the other hand, for souvenir-type products, suits, jewellery and unmetered taxis, bargaining is essential.

Bargaining can be tough if you're not used to it, so here are a couple of pointers. First, when you find something you like be sure not to show too much interest. Vendors can smell desperation a mile away. Second, don't buy the first one you see; subtly check out a few alternatives to get an idea of the price and quality. With this knowledge, casually enquire as to the price and then make a counter-offer (usually half or less), thus beginning the bargaining process. The vendor will often beseech you to make a better offer: 'This is my first sale for the day' or 'I must feed my six children'. However, having looked at the competition you know the fair price so only edge up slowly. As you volley numbers back and forth remember to keep it good-natured; your smile is your best weapon and getting angry or upset while bargaining causes everyone to lose face.

Remember that bargaining is not a life and death battle. A good bargain is when *both* parties are happy and doesn't necessarily require you to screw every last baht from the vendor. If you paid more than your travelling companion, don't worry. As long as you're happy, it was a good deal. Remember too that no-one is forcing you to buy anything. Your money will stay in your pocket until you decide to take it out.

If your phone is locked, head down to Mahboonkrong (MBK) shopping centre (p107) to get it unlocked, or to shop for a new or cheap used phone (they start at less than 2000B). If you are using your home account remember to carry the emergency number for your phone company, in case your phone is stolen.

### Payphones & Phone Cards

There are three types of public payphone. For international calls, you have a choice of yellow (for international and domestic Lenso calling cards), blue (operated by CAT for local coin calls) and green (for TOT local calls or regional calls to Malaysia, Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos at semi-local rates). Don't rely on public payphones being in working order, even in Bangkok.

Local calls from coin-operated blue phones cost 1B for the first three minutes, then 1B per additional minute; calls to mobile phones cost more.

Yellow public phones use Lenso phone cards, which come in denominations of 250B and 500B and can be purchased in 7-Eleven stores. CAT offers the Thaicard, which involves dialling an access number and then a passcode. You can use this card from any CAT phone (including those at provincial post offices) and most private phones, and calls are priced at standard ISD rates. Cards come in 300B, 500B, 1000B and 3000B denominations. Various private companies also offer international calling cards, often undercutting CAT's rates.

CAT also offers the PhoneNet card in denominations of 300B, 500B and 1000B. It allows you to call overseas via VoIP for a 40% to 86% saving over regular rates. The difference with PhoneNet is that you can call from any phone; land line, your mobile, payphones etc. Quality is good and rates represent excellent value. Cards are available from any CAT office or online at [www.thaitelephone.com](http://www.thaitelephone.com), from which you get the necessary codes and numbers immediately. See <http://thaitelephone.com/EN/RateTable/for rates>.

Some green TOT payphones take dedicated phone cards in units of 50B, 100B, 200B and 500B, available from 7-Eleven stores.

### TIME

Thailand is seven hours ahead of GMT/UTC. Thus, noon in Bangkok is 9pm the previous day in Los Angeles, midnight the same day in New York, 5am in London, 6am

in Paris, 1pm in Perth, and 3pm in Sydney and Melbourne. Thailand does not use daylight saving time. See also the World Time Zones map, p462.

The official year in Thailand is reckoned from the Western calendar year 543 BC, the beginning of the Buddhist Era, so that AD 2009 is 2552 BE, AD 2010 is 2553 BE etc. All dates in this book refer to the Western calendar.

### TOILETS

Public toilets can be found at bus and train stations, in shopping malls and in fast-food restaurants. There is often an entrance charge of between 1B and 3B, and sometimes there are machines dispensing tissue paper (don't flush the paper, put it in the bin). In tourist areas, Western-style thrones are ubiquitous, but at cheaper guesthouses and at bus and train stations you can expect to squat. In the vast majority of squat toilets you'll need to BYO paper (widely available in convenience stores) or embrace another option. The most obvious of these is to go local and use the hose or jug and tap in your stall, which will result in you getting wet until you've acquired the skills. If you must have paper and don't have a stash, you could always use this page – though we won't vouch for its softness.

### TOURIST INFORMATION

Tourism contributes a huge amount to the Thai economy so it's little surprise that the government-run **Tourism Authority of Thailand** (TAT; ☎ tourist information line 1672, ☎ 8am-8pm; [www.tourismthailand.org](http://www.tourismthailand.org)) is highly organised and has offices around the country and 20 offices overseas; for the full list see [www.tourismthailand.org/tat-oversea-office](http://www.tourismthailand.org/tat-oversea-office). TAT is also the main regulatory body for tourism in Thailand, and issues licences to businesses that pass its exacting standards. It produces a huge range of pamphlets and booklets, which are available at the offices listed in the relevant chapters of this book. TAT also has handy information counters in the international and domestic terminals of Suvarnabhumi International Airport.

Bangkok Metropolitan Administration runs the excellent **Bangkok Tourist Bureau** (☎ 0 225 7612-4; [www.bangkoktourist.com](http://www.bangkoktourist.com)), which covers Bangkok and its environs in detail. Other private information organisations can be found

in many provincial centres – see the regional chapters for details.

### TOURS

Even if you're short on time, most of southern Thailand can be visited independently. Once you have reached your destination, there are plenty of local tour operators who will shuttle you to secluded beaches, on snorkelling tours, to visit waterfalls, ride elephants and whatever else you can imagine, all for less than you'd pay for an organised tour.

Most travellers do sign up for a jungle tour of Khao Sok National Park (p244), though, as reaching it via public transport is very time-consuming and touring is enhanced with a guide. On-the-ground recommendations for Khao Sok tour guides will be more accurate than a print endorsement. Elsewhere, the following tour operators are worth an investigation:

**Barefoot Traveller** ([www.barefoot-traveller.com](http://www.barefoot-traveller.com))

Beaches and diving trips, including live-aboards.

**Intrepid Travel** ([www.intrepidtravel.com](http://www.intrepidtravel.com)) Big adventure tour company offering small, down-to-earth trips.

**JYSK Rejsebureau** ([www.jysk-rejsebureau.dk](http://www.jysk-rejsebureau.dk)) Low-budget trips with strong backpacker clientele; Ko Chang Archipelago by boat a highlight.

**Paddle Asia** ([www.paddleasia.com](http://www.paddleasia.com)) Kayaking tours to various southern Thailand destinations. Good choice.

**Spice Roads** ([www.spiceroads.com](http://www.spiceroads.com)) Cycling trips to southern Thailand and elsewhere.

### TRAVELLERS WITH DISABILITIES

Travelling in Thailand can be challenging for the disabled. The government makes few infrastructure provisions and footpaths are often cracked and uneven, making them difficult to manoeuvre if you're in a wheelchair. But Thais are used to doing things for themselves in these matters and most people will lend a hand without fear or embarrassment.

Large international hotel chains usually have handicapped access to their properties, and home-grown luxury hotels use their high employee-to-guest ratios to help accommodate the mobility impaired. Elsewhere, you are pretty much left to your own resources.

Consider hiring a private car and driver for transport. Disabled travellers have reported that tük-tük can carry two people and a wheelchair. Many activities in Thailand are open to the disabled, including snorkelling trips and elephant riding.

For a developing country without a sophisticated social safety net, Thailand is pretty creative at incorporating the disabled into society. The disabled in poor families typically rely on family members for mobility as wheelchairs and other aides are prohibitively expensive. The blind are considered auspicious lottery ticket sellers and regarded as adept at traditional massage because their sense of touch is more refined than the sighted. In Bangkok, an association of deaf vendors sells souvenirs in tourist areas.

However, it's not all positive. Many disabled people without family support migrate to Bangkok for marginal jobs as itinerant troubadours or beggars. Some of these beggars might be pocketing whatever meagre coinage comes their way, but many others – particularly Cambodian land-mine and burn victims – are little more than slaves to a callous begging mafia.

### Organisations

**Help & Care Travel Company Ltd** (☎ 0 2720 5395; [www.wheelchairtours.com](http://www.wheelchairtours.com)) specialises in tours of Thailand for wheelchair users, the aged and deaf travellers using modified vehicles and trained guides. *Exotic Destinations for Wheelchair Travelers* by Ed Hansen and Bruce Gordon contains a useful chapter on Thailand. Other books of value include *Rough Guides' Able to Travel: True Stories by and for People with Disabilities*.

Other companies and resources worth checking out for travel to Thailand include:

**Access-Able Travel Source** ([www.access-able.com](http://www.access-able.com))

**Access Foundation** ([www.accessibility.com.au](http://www.accessibility.com.au))

**Accessible Journeys** ([www.disabilitytravel.com](http://www.disabilitytravel.com))

**Asia Pacific Development Centre on Disability** ([www.apcdproject.org](http://www.apcdproject.org))

**Routes International** ([www.routesinternational.com](http://www.routesinternational.com))

**Society for Accessible Travel & Hospitality** ([www.sath.org](http://www.sath.org))

**Travelability Ltd** ([www.accessibletravel.co.uk](http://www.accessibletravel.co.uk))

**Worldwide Dive & Sail** ([www.worldwidediveandsail.com](http://www.worldwidediveandsail.com))

### VISAS

Thailand has been much stricter in enforcing its visa laws since the coup d'état of 2006, but the citizens of 42 countries, including most Western European countries, Australia, Canada, Hong Kong, Japan, New Zealand, Singapore and USA, can still enter Thailand



without a visa and stay for up to 30 days. Citizens of Brazil, Republic of Korea and Peru may enter without a visa for 90 days. For a list of eligible countries and other visa matters, see the Royal Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs website [www.mfa.go.th/web/12.php](http://www.mfa.go.th/web/12.php).

The crackdown, apparently designed to get rid of illegal workers and 'bad influences' such as sex tourists, has seen the once-ignored requirement of an onward ticket being more strictly enforced, usually by airline staff in the departing city. We've heard of several people who have been forced to buy an onward ticket (which they have later refunded, for a fee). One possible way around this is to already have a visa to your next country. It should go without saying that the better you are dressed when you check in, the less likely you are to be hassled.

If you're planning to stay longer than 30 days it's best to get a 60-day tourist visa (about US\$35, depending on the country) before you arrive. This can then be extended by 30 days at any visa office in the country; see right.

### Other Visas

Thai embassies and consulates issue a variety of other visas for people on business, students or those with employment in Thailand. The non-immigrant visa comes in several classifications (eg non-immigrant B for people planning to do business or work) and is good for 90 days. If you plan to apply for a Thai work permit and stay in the kingdom longer-term, you'll need to possess a non-immigrant visa first before you can start the process of getting the permit. Getting a non-immigrant visa with the intention of working in Thailand can be difficult and involves a tedious amount of paperwork. If you get one, usually with the support of an employer, you'll likely end up at the **One-Stop Service Centre** (Map pp70-1; ☎ 0 2937 1155; 16th fl, Rasa Tower, 555 Th Phahonyothin, Bangkok) for several hours of paper pushing – get there early! For more information on all things visa see the **Ministry of Foreign Affairs** ([www.mfa.go.th/web/12.php](http://www.mfa.go.th/web/12.php)) and **Bureau of Immigration** ([www.immigration.go.th](http://www.immigration.go.th)) websites; if you still have questions, seek help on [www.thaivisa.com](http://www.thaivisa.com).

Citizens from a list of 14 nations, including the People's Republic of China, Taiwan and several countries in Central and South Asia, can obtain a 15-day transit visa (800B). You might be required to show you have 10,000B per person or 20,000B per family to obtain this visa.

### Visa Extensions & Visa Runs

Without a long-term visa you cannot stay in Thailand for more than 90 days out of 180, and there must be a 90-day gap before you return. Assuming you're within these limits, extensions are pretty straightforward. All extensions cost 1900B and you'll need the usual mug shots and photocopies of face and visa pages from your passport. It pays to forgo the flip-flops and board shorts and dress up a little. In Bangkok, the **Immigration Bureau** (Map pp72-3; ☎ 0 2287 3101; Soi Suan Phlu, Th Sathon Tai) does the deed. Elsewhere any immigration office will do; all border provinces have at least one, usually in the provincial capital.

The 60-day tourist visa can be extended by up to 30 days at the discretion of Thai immigration authorities. The 30-day, no-visa stay (the stamp you get on arrival at the airport) can be extended for a maximum of seven days. The 15-day transit visa can be extended for seven days only if you hold a passport from a country that has no Thai embassy.

The 1900B fee is pretty steep, so it's well worth planning your itinerary so you can leave the country on a 'visa run' when your visa expires and return immediately on a fresh, free 30-day visa (if you are eligible). Handy borders are Hat Lek (see boxed text, p162) to Cambodia, Victoria Point (see boxed text, p268) to Myanmar, and via Satun (p371) to Malaysia. The visa run has been a well-used tool of travellers (and in the past, residents) for years, and several companies exist just to cater to this market. Of course, the 90 days within 180 rule means it's not the endless ticket to life in Thailand it used to be.

If you overstay your visa the usual penalty is a fine of 500B for each extra day, with a 20,000B limit (after that, more trouble awaits). Fines can be paid at international airports and border crossings, or at an Immigration Bureau office in advance. Children under 14 travelling with a parent do not have to pay the penalty.

### VOLUNTEERING

Volunteering seems to be all the rage at the moment and Thailand is a favourite destination. Working in some capacity with disadvantaged people can make a difference and be rewarding both to you and them. But it's not all sweetness and light, and it's important to understand what you're getting yourself into. Unless you know the country, speak the language and have the skills needed in a particu-

lar field (computing, health and teaching, for example), what you can offer in a short period will largely be limited to manual labour – a commodity not in short supply in Thailand. Having said that, if you can match your skills to a project that needs them, this can be a great way to spend time in Thailand.

There are two main forms of volunteering. For those interested in a long-term commitment, typically two or three years, there are a few long-established organisations that will help you learn the language, place you in a position that will, hopefully, be appropriate to your skills, and pay you (just barely). Such organisations include:

**Australian Volunteers International** ([www.australianvolunteers.com](http://www.australianvolunteers.com))

**US Peace Corps** ([www.peacecorps.gov](http://www.peacecorps.gov))

**Voluntary Service Overseas** (VSO Canada; [www.vso.org](http://www.vso.org))

**VSO UK** ([www.vso.org.uk](http://www.vso.org.uk))

**Volunteer Service Abroad** (VSO NZ; [www.vsa.org.nz](http://www.vsa.org.nz))

The more popular form of volunteering, sometimes called 'voluntourism', is something you actually pay to do. This is a fast-growing market, and a quick web search for 'Thailand volunteering' will turn up pages of companies offering to place you in a project in return for your hard-earned. With these companies you can be a volunteer for as little as a single week up to six months or longer. Fees vary, but start at about €500 for four weeks. The projects can be very good, ongoing affairs with a solid chance of success. But some are not. The list below is a starting point and should not be read as a recommendation. Do your own research and check out all the options before making a decision.

For details on volunteering for environmental groups, see p64.

Locally focused organisations include **Volunthai** ([www.volunthai.com](http://www.volunthai.com)) and **Thai Experience** ([www.thai-experience.org](http://www.thai-experience.org)). Other general volunteering sites worth looking at are **Global Volunteer Network** ([www.volunteer.org.nz](http://www.volunteer.org.nz)), **Idealist** ([www.idealist.org](http://www.idealist.org)) and **Volunteer Abroad** ([www.volunteerabroad.com](http://www.volunteerabroad.com)), which lists available positions with a variety of companies.

Multicountry organisations that sell volunteering trips include:

**Cross Cultural Solutions** ([www.crossculturalsolutions.org](http://www.crossculturalsolutions.org))

**Cultural Embrace** ([www.culturalembrace.com](http://www.culturalembrace.com))

**Global Crossroad** ([www.globalcrossroad.com](http://www.globalcrossroad.com))

**Global Service Corps** ([www.globalservicecorps.org](http://www.globalservicecorps.org))

**Institute for Field Research Expeditions** ([www.ifrevolunteers.org](http://www.ifrevolunteers.org))

**Open Mind Projects** ([www.openmindprojects.org](http://www.openmindprojects.org))

**Starfish Ventures** ([www.starfishventures.co.uk](http://www.starfishventures.co.uk))

**Transitions Abroad** ([www.transitionsabroad.com](http://www.transitionsabroad.com))

**Travel to Teach** ([www.travel-to-teach.org](http://www.travel-to-teach.org))

**Youth International** ([www.youthinternational.org](http://www.youthinternational.org))

### WOMEN TRAVELLERS

Women travellers generally face few problems in Thailand, a fact that has made Thailand Asia's most popular destination for women independent travellers. But like anywhere, there are cultural differences that need to be respected, both to keep you safe and because it's the right thing to do.

In the provincial towns, it is advisable to dress conservatively, covering shoulders, knees and belly buttons. Outside Bangkok, most Thai women cover up in the sun to avoid unnecessary exposure since white skin is considered more beautiful. That Westerners believe the opposite is an endless source of amusement and confusion.

This isn't as much of an issue in Bangkok or in beach resorts where dress codes are looser. However, topless sunbathing is frowned upon by Thais (except the men who stare hungrily). In recent years such men have attacked and killed more than one foreign woman who has been sunbathing topless on a remote beach. Going topless is actually banned under the government guidelines for many national parks.

Codes of conduct are more conservative in the Muslim south, where local women cover their heads and bodies. You should also refrain from public displays of affection with the opposite sex.

Attacks and rapes are less common in Thailand than in many Western countries, but incidents do occur, especially when an attacker observes a vulnerable target, a drunk or solo woman. Perhaps you went to the bar to find someone, but if you do return alone, be sure to have your wits about you. Full moon parties at Ko Pha-Ngan are another trouble hot spot and we have heard from several women who were sexually assaulted during these parties. Avoid taking dodgy gypsy cabs or accepting rides from strangers late at night – common sense stuff that might escape your notice in a new environment filled with hospitable people. And remember there is safety in numbers – if you're going to collapse, do

it near some friends. In cases of rape or other assault, the Thai police will investigate and prosecute the crime, but offer little in the way of counselling. If you need to talk with someone, try **Community Services of Bangkok** (Map p82; ☎ 0 2258 4998; 15 Soi 33, Th Sukhumvit), which offers a range of counselling services to foreign residents and newcomers to Thailand.

While Bangkok might be a men's paradise, foreign women are finding their own Romeos on Thai beaches. Women who aren't interested in romantic encounters should not presume that Thai men have equally platonic motives. Often, Thai men ignore their own culture's strictures when it comes to dealing with a foreign woman. There's usually no threat, rather misconceptions – the same sort of stuff that happens back home.

There aren't a lot of places in Thailand that foreign women will feel threatened. But if your gut tells you no, then heed it and move on. The hotels around the lower end of Th Sukhumvit in Bangkok, or on Patong Beach in Phuket, are the centres of Bangkok's sex tourism and are filled with what can be construed as demeaning attitudes towards women. Sex tourists can act nervously when a reminder from home encroaches on their naughty playground.

Sanitary napkins (*pâh à-nah-mai*) are widely available at minimarts and supermarkets throughout Thailand. Thai women generally don't use tampons (*taam-porn*) but minimarts and pharmacies in tourist areas usually stock a few local and imported brands. Bring your own supplies if you're heading to any of the more remote islands.

## WORK

Thailand's steady economic growth has provided a variety of work opportunities for foreigners, but obtaining permission to work in Thailand is harder than you might expect. Thailand is increasingly refusing to issue work permits if a Thai citizen can be found for the job (as is the norm in most Western nations). One prominent exception is English teaching.

All work, whether paid or voluntary, officially requires a Thai work permit. Work permits must be obtained through an employer, who can apply before you enter Thailand, but the permit itself is not issued until you physically enter Thailand on a valid non-immigrant visa. For information about work permits, contact any Thai embassy abroad or check the **Ministry of Foreign Affairs** ([www.mfa.go.th/web/12.php](http://www.mfa.go.th/web/12.php)) website. No joy? Seek solace and advice on the message boards of [www.thaivisa.com](http://www.thaivisa.com).

For information on doing business in Thailand, see the Thai Board of Investment website [www.boi.go.th/english/](http://www.boi.go.th/english/).

## Scuba Diving

PADI instructors and qualified dive masters often find work at major dive resorts, such as Ko Tao, Phuket, Ko Phi-Phi, Hat Khao Lak, Ao Nang and, increasingly, Ko Chang. A second language apart from English is an advantage. Some schools offer subsidised training to dive-master level, if you'll work for them when you complete your training. Technically, you must have a work permit for all these jobs.

## Teaching English

Many foreigners come to Thailand to teach English, but generally you need academic credentials, such as a TEFL (Teachers of English as a Foreign Language) certificate, to get the decent jobs. There may also be opportunities for private tutoring in the larger cities. Private language academies across Thailand sometimes hire nonqualified teachers by the hour. A work permit is almost always required.

A website maintained by a Bangkok-based English teacher, [www.ajarn.com](http://www.ajarn.com), has tips on finding jobs and pretty much everything else you need to know about getting into the teaching game in Thailand. If you're more dedicated (or desperate) the **Yellow Pages** ([www.yellow.co.th/Bangkok](http://www.yellow.co.th/Bangkok)) has contact details for hundreds of schools, universities and also language schools.

# Transport

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## GETTING THERE & AWAY

### ENTERING THE COUNTRY

Entry procedures for Thailand, by air or by land, are straightforward. You'll have to show your passport, with at least six months validity remaining, and any visa you may have obtained beforehand. You'll also need to present completed arrival and departure cards. These are usually distributed on the incoming flight or, if arriving by land, can be picked up at the immigration counter. You do not have to fill in a customs form on arrival unless you have imported goods to declare. In that case you can get the proper form from Thai customs officials at the point of entry (look for the white suits).

An immigration crackdown has seen some airlines refuse to allow passengers to board flights to Thailand unless they have an onward ticket; see p401 for details on this and other visa requirements.

### AIR

Bangkok is a major regional air hub and Thailand is well served by airlines from Europe, Australia, North America, the Middle East and pretty much every major airport in Asia. There is a 700B departure tax on all international flights, which is now included in the ticket price.

### THINGS CHANGE...

The information in this chapter is particularly vulnerable to change. Check directly with the airline or a travel agent to make sure you understand how a fare (and the ticket you may buy) works and be aware of the security requirements for international travel. Shop carefully. The details given in this chapter should be regarded as pointers and are not a substitute for your own careful, up-to-date research.

### Airports & Airlines

Most international flights arrive in Bangkok and have connecting domestic services to Phuket, Krabi, Ko Samui, Hat Yai and other southern towns. Phuket and Ko Samui both receive some international flights from elsewhere in Asia and, in Phuket, charter flights from Europe. For details on Suvarnabhumi International Airport in Bangkok and transport into the city, see p109.

Thailand's national carrier is **Thai Airways International** (THAI; [www.thaiair.com](http://www.thaiair.com)), which also operates a number of domestic air routes. Some of the other airlines flying to Bangkok at the time of writing are listed below, and the four airlines that fly Thai domestic routes, including those linking Bangkok to the south, are listed with their destinations on p409. Speak to a travel agent or search online for the latest information or take a look at the Suvarnabhumi airport Wikipedia page, which has a fairly up-to-date and complete list. Details here include Bangkok phone numbers.

**Air Asia** (code AK; ☎ 0 2515 9999; [www.airasia.com](http://www.airasia.com)); hub Kuala Lumpur

**Air Canada** (code AC; ☎ 0 2670 0400; [www.aircanada.ca](http://www.aircanada.ca)); hub Toronto

**Air France** (code AF; ☎ 0 2635 1191; [www.airfrance.com](http://www.airfrance.com)); hub Charles de Gaulle airport, Paris

**Air India** (code AI; ☎ 0 2653 2288; [www.airindia.com](http://www.airindia.com)); hub New Delhi/Mumbai

**Air New Zealand** (code NZ; ☎ 0 2235 8280; [www.airnewzealand.com](http://www.airnewzealand.com)); hub Auckland

**Bangkok Airways** (code PG; ☎ 1771 or 0 2265 5555; [www.bangkokair.com](http://www.bangkokair.com), [www.bangkokair.com](http://www.bangkokair.com)); hub Bangkok



**Bangladesh Biman Airlines** (code BG; ☎ 0 2233 3640; www.bimanair.com; hub Dhaka)

**British Airways** (code BA; ☎ 0 2236 2800; www.ba.com; hub Heathrow Airport, London)

**Cathay Pacific Airways** (code CX; ☎ 0 2263 0606; www.cathaypacific.com; hub Hong Kong)

**China Airlines** (code CI; ☎ 0 2250 9898; www.china-airlines.com; hub Taipei)

**China Southern Airlines** (code CZ; ☎ 0 2677 7388; www.flychinasouthern.com; hub Guangzhou)

**Dragonair** (code KA; ☎ 0 2263 0606, in Phuket 1 800 700 707; www.dragonair.com; hub Hong Kong)

**Emirates** (code EK; ☎ 0 2664 1040; www.emirates.com; hub Dubai)

**EVA Airways** (code BR; ☎ 0 2269 6300; www.evaair.com; hub Taipei)

**Finnair** (code AY; ☎ 0 2634 0238; www.finnair.com; hub Helsinki)

**Garuda Indonesia** (code GA; ☎ 0 2679 7371-2; www.garuda-indonesia.com; hub Jakarta)

**Indian Airlines** (code IC; ☎ 0 2231 0555; www.indianairlines.in; hub New Delhi/Mumbai)

**Japan Airlines** (code JL; ☎ 0 2649 9500; www.jal.co.jp/en/; hub Narita Airport, Tokyo)

**Jetstar** (code 3K; ☎ 0 2267 5125; www.jetstar.com; hub Singapore)

**KLM Royal Dutch Airlines** (code KL; ☎ 0 2635 2400; www.klm.com; hub Amsterdam)

**Korean Airlines** (code KE; ☎ 0 2635 0465; www.koreanair.com; hub Seoul)

**Lao Airlines** (code VQ; ☎ 0 2664 0661; www.laoairlines.com; hub Vientiane)

**Lufthansa Airlines** (code LH; ☎ 0 2264 2400; www.lufthansa.com; hub Frankfurt)

**Philippine Airlines** (code PR; ☎ 0 2633 5713/4; www.philippineairlines.com; hub Manila)

**Malaysia Airlines** (code MH; ☎ 0 2263 0565; www.malaysiaairlines.com; hub Kuala Lumpur)

**Qantas** (code QF; ☎ 0 2627 1701; www.qantas.com.au; hub Sydney)

**Scandinavian Airlines System** (SAS; code SK; ☎ 0 2645 8200; www.scandinavianairlines.net; hub Copenhagen)

**Siem Reap Airways International** (code FT; ☎ 1771 or 0 2265 5555; www.siemreapairways.com; hub Siem Reap)

**Singapore Airlines** (code SQ; ☎ 0 2353 6000; www.singaporeair.com; hub Singapore)

**Sri Lankan Airlines** (code UL; ☎ 0 2236 8450; www.srilankan.lk; hub Colombo)

**Swiss** (code LX; ☎ 0 2204 7744; www.swiss.com; hub Geneva)

**Thai Airways International** (THAI; code TG; ☎ 0 2232 8000; www.thaiair.com; hub Bangkok)

**Tiger Airways** (code TR; ☎ 0 2351 8333; www.tigerairways.com; hub Singapore)

**United Airlines** (code UA; ☎ 0 2253 0558; www.unitedairlines.co.th; hubs San Francisco/Washington-Dulles)

**Vietnam Airlines** (code VN; ☎ 0 2655 4137/40; www.vietnamairlines.com; hub Ho Chi Minh City)

## Tickets

Tickets can be purchased cheaply on the internet through booking and airline websites. Online ticket sales work well if you are doing a simple one-way or return trip on specified dates. However, online fare generators are no substitute for a travel agent who knows the special deals, has strategies for avoiding layovers, and can offer advice on everything from picking the airline with great vegetarian food to the best travel insurance to bundle with your ticket.

When you're looking for tickets, it's worth remembering that the more circuitous the route, the cheaper it will probably be. For example, if you spend 24 hours flying from Europe to Bangkok via Dhaka in Bangladesh, you'll almost certainly pay less than a direct flight with THAI or your national carrier. However, it's also worth remembering that your carbon footprint becomes bigger every time you take off and land; see opposite for more on climate change.

In Thailand, domestic routes are increasingly booked online, with budget airlines including Air Asia and Nok Air (p409) dealing almost exclusively with online and phone bookings. Travel agents can book these flights for you, but they will just make an online booking and charge you 50B for it. Most international flights are booked through an agent. Most firms are honest and solvent, but there are some fly-by-night outfits around, particularly in the Th Khao San area. Paying by credit card generally offers protection, as most card issuers provide refunds if you can prove you didn't get what you paid for. Agents who accept only cash should hand over the tickets straight away and not tell you to 'come back tomorrow'. After you've made a booking or paid your deposit, call the airline and confirm that the booking was made.

Booking flights in and out of Bangkok during the high season (December to March) can be difficult and expensive. For air travel during these months you should make your bookings as far in advance as possible. Some airlines require you to reconfirm return or ongoing tickets.

## CLIMATE CHANGE & TRAVEL

Climate change is a serious threat to the ecosystems that humans rely upon, and air travel is the fastest-growing contributor to the problem. Lonely Planet regards travel, overall, as a global benefit, but believes we all have a responsibility to limit our personal impact on global warming.

### Flying & Climate Change

Pretty much every form of motorised travel generates CO<sub>2</sub> (the main cause of human-induced climate change) but planes are far and away the worst offenders, not just because of the sheer distances they allow us to travel, but because they release greenhouse gases high into the atmosphere. The statistics are frightening: two people taking a return flight between Europe and the US will contribute as much to climate change as an average household's gas and electricity consumption over a whole year.

### Carbon Offset Schemes

Climatecare.org and other websites use 'carbon calculators' that allow travellers to offset the level of greenhouse gases they are responsible for with financial contributions to sustainable travel schemes that reduce global warming, including projects in India, Honduras, Kazakhstan and Uganda.

Lonely Planet, together with Rough Guides and other concerned partners in the travel industry, supports the carbon offset scheme run by climatecare.org. Lonely Planet offsets all of its staff and author travel. For more information, check out our website: www.lonelyplanet.com.

Flights, tours and rail tickets can all be booked online at [www.lonelyplanet.com/travel\\_services](http://www.lonelyplanet.com/travel_services).

### ROUND-THE-WORLD (RTW) TICKETS

If you're travelling to multiple countries, then a round-the-world (RTW) ticket – where you pay a single discounted price for several connections – may be the most economical way to go.

Here are a few online companies to try:

**Airstop & Go** (www.airstop.be)

**Airtreks** (www.airtreks.com)

**Air Brokers International** (www.airbrokers.com)

**Around the Worlds** (www.aroundtheworlds.com)

### Asia

There are regular flights to Suvarnabhumi International Airport from almost every major city in Asia. With the emergence of budget airlines, quick hops from, say, Bangkok to Kuala Lumpur, Singapore or Hong Kong are part of the Asian yuppie's weekend budget. Air Asia, Tiger Air and Jetstar are discount carriers that run frequent promotions. It's also worth asking your agent about cheap seats on airlines you might not expect, such as Emirates, Ethiopian or China Airlines between Bangkok and Hong Kong. Bangkok Airways flies direct to Ko Samui from Hong Kong and Singapore, and Air Asia links Phuket directly to Kuala Lumpur and Singapore.

Recommended booking agencies for reserving flights from Asia include **STA Travel** (www.statravel.com), which has offices in Bangkok, Hong Kong, Japan and Singapore. Another resource in Japan is **No1 Travel** (www.no1-travel.com); in Hong Kong try **Four Seas Tours** (www.fourseastravel.com). For India, try **STIC Travel** (www.stictravel.com), which has offices in dozens of Indian cities.

### Australia

THAI, Qantas, British Airways, Jetstar and Emirates, among others, have direct flights to Bangkok, and Jetstar flies directly between Phuket and Melbourne. Garuda Indonesia, Singapore Airlines, Philippine Airlines, Malaysia Airlines and Royal Brunei Airlines also have frequent flights with stopovers to Bangkok.

Shop for cheap tickets from **STA Travel** (☎ 134 782; www.statravel.com.au) and **Flight Centre** (☎ 133 133; www.flightcentre.com.au), both of which have offices throughout Australia.

### Canada

Air Canada, THAI, Cathay Pacific and several US-based airlines fly from different Canadian cities to Bangkok. **Travel Cuts** (☎ 800-667-2887; www.travelcuts.com) is Canada's national student travel agency. For online bookings try [www.xpeditia.ca](http://www.xpeditia.ca) and [www.travelocity.ca](http://www.travelocity.ca).

## Continental Europe

Following are some recommended agencies across Europe.

### France

**Anyway** (☎ 08 92 3023 01; www.anyway.fr)  
**Lastminute** (☎ 08 99 78 50 00; www.lastminute.fr)  
**Nouvelles Frontières** (☎ 08 25 00 07 47; www.nouvelles-frontieres.fr)  
**OTU Voyages** (www.otu.fr) Specialising in student and youth travellers.  
**Voyageurs du Monde** (www.vdm.com)

### Germany

**Expedia** (www.expedia.de)  
**Just Travel** (☎ 089 747 3330; www.justtravel.de)  
**Lastminute** (☎ 0 180 528 4366; www.lastminute.de)  
**STA Travel** (☎ 0 697 430 3292; www.statravel.de) Good choice for travellers under the age of 26.

### Italy

**CTS Viaggi** (☎ 06 462 0431; www.cts.it) Specialises in student and youth travel.

### Netherlands

**Airfair** (☎ 0 900 7717 717; www.airfair.nl)

### Spain

**Barcelo Viajes** (☎ 902 116 226; www.barceloviajes.com)

### Middle East

Some recommended agencies include the following:

**Egypt Panorama Tours** (☎ 2-359 0200; www.eptours.com) In Cairo.  
**Orion-Tour** (www.oriontour.com) In Istanbul.

### New Zealand

Air New Zealand, British Airways, THAI and Australian-based airlines have direct flights to Bangkok. Malaysian Airlines, Qantas and Garuda International also have flights to Bangkok, with stopovers.

Both **Flight Centre** (☎ 0800 243 544; www.flightcentre.co.nz) and **STA Travel** (☎ 0800 474 400; www.statravel.co.nz) have branches throughout the country. The site www.goholidays.co.nz is recommended for online bookings.

### South America

Some recommended agencies include the following:

**Asatej** (www.asatej.com) In Argentina, Mexico and Uruguay.  
**Student Travel Bureau** (☎ 3038 1555; www.stb.com.br) In Brazil.

## UK

At least two dozen airlines fly between London and Bangkok, although only three of them – British Airways, Qantas and THAI – fly nonstop. Discount air-travel ads appear in *Time Out*, the *Evening Standard* and in the free magazine *TNT*.

Recommended travel agencies include the following:

**Bridge the World** (☎ 0800 082 5000; www.b-t-w.co.uk)  
**Flight Centre** (☎ 0870 499 0040; flightcentre.co.uk)  
**Flightbookers** (☎ 0800 082 3000; www.ebookers.com)  
**North South Travel** (www.northsouthtravel.com) Part of this company's profit is donated to projects in the developing world.  
**Quest Travel** (☎ 0871 423 0135; www.questtravel.com)  
**STA Travel** (☎ 0871 230 0040; www.statravel.co.uk) Popular with travellers under 26, sells tickets to all. Has branches throughout the UK.  
**Trailfinders** (☎ 0845 058 5858; www.trailfinders.co.uk)  
**Travel Bag** (☎ 0800 082 5000; www.travelbag.co.uk)

## USA

It's cheaper to fly to Bangkok from West Coast cities than from the East Coast.

The airlines that generally offer the lowest fares include China Airlines, EVA Airways and Korean Air. EVA Airways (Taiwan) offers the 'Evergreen Deluxe' class between the USA and Bangkok, via Taipei, which has business-class-sized seats and personal movie screens for about the same cost as regular economy fares on most other airlines.

One of the most reliable discounters is **Avia Travel** (☎ 800 950 2842, 510 558 2150; www.aviatravel.com), which specialises in custom-designed RTW fares.

The following agencies are recommended for online bookings:

- www.cheaptickets.com
- www.expedia.com
- www.itn.net
- www.lowestfare.com
- www.orbitz.com
- www.sta.com (for travellers under the age of 26)
- www.travelocity.com.

## BORDER CROSSINGS

Thailand has borders with Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia and Malaysia and you can enter all these countries by land, or by crossing a river. The borders listed here assume you are coming from Bangkok or the south. Border details are prone to unexpected change so ask around be-

fore you set off, or check Lonely Planet's Thorn Tree bulletin board at www.lonelyplanet.com, or the dedicated border pages on **Travelfish** (www.travelfish.org/board/topic/visabordercrossings).

## Cambodia

There is a land border crossing between Thailand and Cambodia at Poipet, the seedy frontier town 6km from the Thai town of Aranya Prathet. It is a long haul, but if you're going to Siem Reap and Angkor this is the route most people take.

Catch an air-con bus from Bangkok's Northern and Northeastern (Mo Chit) station to Aranya Prathet (220B), then take a tük-tük (pronounced dük dük; motorised, open-sided cab) to the border. You can purchase a Cambodian visa on arrival. You can also reach Aranya Prathet from Bangkok's Hualamphong station (54B, 3rd class). A tourist shuttle bus outside the Cambodian immigration office delivers passengers free of charge to Poipet's shark-tank-cum-taxi stand, where onward transport can be arranged to Siem Reap. The most important advice on this route is to steer clear of the agents on Th Khao San offering dirt-cheap trips; they're dodgy. And do some research on the Thorn Tree to be aware of the host of other scams. See Lonely Planet's *Cambodia* guidebook for details of less direct border crossings, and for a rundown of the scams.

More useful if you're coming from the coast is the crossing at Hat Lek, on the coast southeast of Trat. From here you can take direct buses to Sihanoukville or Phnom Penh – a trip you'll remember until you lose your mind or die. Taking the fast ferry from Ko Kong to Sihanoukville is more comfortable. For the details, see boxed text, p162.

## Malaysia

It is possible to cross by land from Thailand to Malaysia at several points but by far the most popular route is from Hat Yai to Alor Setar. Hat Yai can be reached from Bangkok by train or bus. Alternatively, you can book all the way from Bangkok to Butterworth (Malaysia) with a stop-off for border formalities. Entry permits for Thailand and Malaysia for most nationalities are available at the border crossings. See Hat Yai (p253) for more transport details.

South of Hat Yai, the train separates into two spurs: one headed to the west coast of the Malay Peninsula and the other to the

east coast. The border crossing in the east is at Sungai Kolok (p262). The border is 1km from the train station and most travellers walk across to the Malaysian side where they catch a train or share a taxi to Kota Bharu. This is also the most common route to Pulau Perhentian. Note that the Sungai Kolok train station has been targeted by bomb attacks in the past. Note too that Israeli passport-holders are prohibited from crossing from Thailand to Malaysia.

There are several ways of travelling between southern Thailand and Malaysia by sea. The easiest border crossing is from Satun to Kuala Perlis (Malaysia) or Pulau Langkawi (Malaysia); see p371 for details. Most nationalities can obtain an entry permit for either Thailand or Malaysia at the border.

## Myanmar

The land crossings into Myanmar have peculiar restrictions that often don't allow full access to the country. For information on the current status of border crossings into Myanmar, contact the Myanmar embassy in Bangkok (p391).

The only crossing open to foreigners in the south is a crossing by boat from Ranong to Kawthoung (aka Victoria Point) via the Gulf of Martaban and Pakchan estuary. Many people cross on a day trip to renew their Thai visas; for day passes, no Myanmar visa is required. See boxed text, p268, for details. If you plan to stay longer, or travel further, you'll need to arrange your visa in advance.

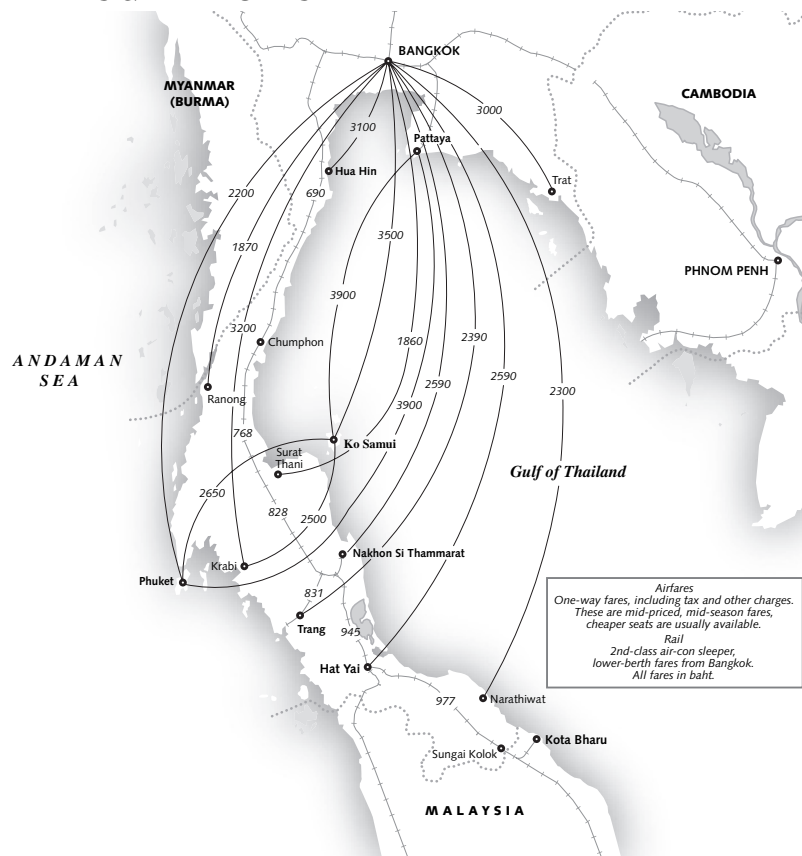
# GETTING AROUND

## AIR

Flying around Thailand is more affordable than ever and it's not unusual to find seats to cities in the south for less than 2000B, including extras (like, umm, fuel) that usually double the advertised fare. The exceptions are Ko Samui and Trat, where competition is less intense.

Bangkok is the primary hub for domestic flights, but you can also fly to some other Thai cities from Phuket and Ko Samui. If you are heading to northern Thailand from anywhere in the south, you'll usually have to connect through Bangkok. Remember that Bangkok has two airports and if you don't want to

## AIRFARES &amp; RAIL TICKETS



transfer then be sure to book your domestic connection through Suvarnabhumi; see p109 for more details.

Thailand has several airlines flying domestic routes. THAI is the full-service carrier with the most-expensive tickets; Bangkok Airways is a good mid-market option with airport lounges open to everyone and prices higher than the budget airlines, Air Asia and Nok Air, which are the cheapest. The Airfares & Rail Tickets map (p410) offers an idea of average fares, but they can vary enormously even on the same day. Most airlines deal only in e-tickets, so there's no reason to schlep out to their distant offices to book a fare; use a travel agent, the internet or the phone. For last-minute fares, shop at the departures level

in the relevant airport. If you have the choice, avoid flying out of Bangkok on a Friday or Sunday, when seats can cost double the weekday fares. Reliable airlines flying to destinations in the south include:

**Air Asia** (code AK; ☎ 0 2515 9999; www.airasia.com)

From Bangkok (Suvarnabhumi) to Hat Yai, Krabi, Phuket, Ranong, Surat Thani and Narathiwat. It also flies from Phuket to Kuala Lumpur and Singapore.

**Bangkok Airways** (code PG; ☎ 1771 or 0 2265 5555; www.bangkokair.com) From Bangkok (Suvarnabhumi) to Ko Samui, Krabi, Phuket and Trat; from Ko Samui to Chiang Mai, Krabi, Pattaya, Phuket, Hong Kong and Singapore; and from Phuket to Pattaya.

**Nok Air** (code OX; ☎ 1318; www.nokair.com) From Bangkok (Don Muang) to Hat Yai, Krabi, Nakhon Si Thammarat, Phuket and Trang. From Suvarnabhumi to Hua Hin.

**Thai Airways International** (☎ 0 2232 8000; www.thaiair.com) From Bangkok (Suvarnabhumi) to Ko Samui, Krabi, Phuket and from Bangkok (Don Muang) to those plus Hat Yai and Surat Thani. From Phuket to Hat Yai. Most domestic services from Don Muang.

If you don't fancy taking the ferry around the Andaman islands, Phuket-based **Destination Air** (☎ 0 7632 8638; www.destinationair.com) has scheduled seaplane services to Ko Phi-Phi (3000B from Patong) and charter flights to Ko Lanta, Ao Nang, Ko Yao (Noi and Yai), the Similan Islands and Khao Lak.

## Air Passes

Most air passes available aren't particularly valuable if you are just visiting southern Thailand as most flights have to go through Bangkok. THAI offers a three-city package for US\$199; three budget airline flights will probably cost less.

## BICYCLE

The quiet back roads in the low-lying south of Thailand are perfect for bicycle touring. Most roads are sealed and the hard shoulder is kept deliberately wide to accommodate two-wheeled vehicles. The road surface is generally pretty good but punctures are common. There is also plenty of opportunity for off-road pedalling.

You can take bicycles on the train for about what you'd pay for a 3rd-class ticket. Buses charge a nominal fee for bikes (if they charge at all). On ordinary buses, your bike will probably be put on the roof; on air-con buses it will go in the cargo hold. Locals routinely carry their bikes on long-tail boats, so getting between islands shouldn't be a problem.

Thais tend to use their bikes for short journeys, so long-distance cyclists are still something of a novelty – expect to see plenty of smiles and surprised stares. Established in 1959, the **Thailand Cycling Club** (☎ 081 555 2901; www.thaicycling.com; 849/53 Chulalongkorn 6, Th Bantadtong, Bangkok) serves as an information clearing house on bicycling tours and cycling clubs throughout the country; see also p401 for recommended companies.

## Hire

Bicycles can be hired in many locations, including guesthouses in the south, for about 50B to 100B per day. Take the bike for a quick

spin before you hire – there are some real boneshakers out there. Some historical sites also offer rental bikes.

## Purchase

Bangkok has a number of shops selling imported bicycles and their components. A good choice is **Velo Thailand** (Map pp74-5; ☎ 089 201 7782; www.velothailand.com; 88 Soi 2, Th Samsen, Banglamphu), which also rents and repairs bikes and runs cycling tours. Prices are comparable to Europe or the USA. Resale is possible, but you'll need to stick around long enough to find an interested traveller or expat. Bangkok and Phuket are the best places to sell your wheels; try putting up fliers in hostels and backpacker hotels.

## BOAT

Private boat operators link the various islands and ports of the Andaman Sea and the Gulf of Thailand. Your floating conveyance could be anything from a simple wooden fishing boat with open deck to an air-conditioned jetfoil with hot food and video entertainment. Life jackets are usually provided but many boats have inadequate emergency exits, so open-decked boats are often safer than superferries. See the regional chapters for information on specific ferry routes to and between the Thai islands.

The waters off many Thai islands are too shallow for large boats, so long-tail boats are used to transfer passengers to the shore. There is usually a per person charge for this service.

## BUS

The bus network in Thailand is prolific and reliable and is a great way to see the countryside and sit among the locals. The Thai government subsidises the **Transport Company** (bò-rì-sàt kôn sòng; ☎ 0 2936 2841; www.transport.co.th/Eng/HomeEnglish.htm), usually abbreviated to Baw Khaw Saw (BKS), and every city and town in Thailand linked by bus has a BKS station, even if it's just a patch of dirt by the side of the road. BKS buses are generally the safest and most reliable.

## Government (BKS) Bus

The cheapest and slowest of the BKS buses are the orange 'ordinary' or 2nd-class buses (*rót tam-má-dah*). These tend to run regularly but they have no air-con and stop in every little town and hamlet along the way –





based on residence, contact the **Department of Land Transport** (☎ 0 2272 5322).

### Fuel & Spare Parts

As well as modern petrol (gasoline) stations with electric pumps, Thailand has roadside stands selling petrol (*ben-sin* or *nám-man rôt yon*) from petrol drums and even smaller stalls selling petrol in recycled Coke bottles. All fuel is lead-free in Thailand.

Spare parts for the kinds of vehicles commonly hired out in Thailand are easy to come by in larger towns but can be hard to find in rural areas. If you get into mechanical trouble, it's best to let the hire company sort out the repairs. Be warned that many of the spare parts in motorcycle shops are pirate copies made from inferior materials. For news updates about fuel options and other car talk, see **BKK Auto** ([www.bkkautos.com](http://www.bkkautos.com)).

### Hire CAR

Big international car-hire companies, such as Avis and Budget, have offices in Bangkok and at large hotels and resorts around the country. All offer Japanese-made sedans, 12-seater minivans, miniature jeeps and luxury 4WD vehicles, usually with manual transmission. There are local car-hire companies in tourist centres such as Ko Lanta and Ko Samui that rent out small Suzuki jeeps for about 1000B a day. If you're heading south, fly or take a train or bus to your destination and hire a car on arrival. See regional chapters for details.

International company rates start at about 1500B per day and include unlimited mileage and tax with an extra 100B a day for insurance. Check the small print carefully to make sure you are fully insured. Drivers can usually be hired with a rental for an additional 500B to 800B per day. Several companies offer

cheap one-way rental between Bangkok and Phuket or Krabi.

### MOTORCYCLE

Touring around the countryside on a rented motorcycle has become almost a rite of passage for travellers in Thailand and at most of the beaches and islands you'll find someone (or many people) renting bikes. It's different in Bangkok, where renting is not a good idea unless you are an adrenaline junkie or just enjoy the taste of smog.

The standard rental bike in Thailand is the Honda Dream or something very similar no-frills 100cc to 150cc machines with automatic clutches and 'four down' gear configurations. The keys have a tendency to pop out of the ignition on bumpy roads so remember to use the string provided to secure them. In general, the 100cc and 110cc bikes are more comfortable than the 125cc wannabe racing bikes, as the rear pegs are much lower.

The going rate for a 100cc to 150cc bike is 150B to 300B for 24 hours. You'll be expected to leave your passport or driver's licence (no shit!) as a deposit and you should return with as much fuel as it had to start with. Insurance usually isn't provided, so drive with extra care. According to Thai law, all riders and passengers must wear a helmet, but not all hire companies provide them. This is a pain as traffic police routinely stop foreigners who aren't wearing helmets and extract bribes. Traffic cops may also ask to see your passport and charge a 'fine' if you can't provide it.

In some tourist centres, you can pick up larger imported bikes such as Harley Davidsons, Japanese road-bikes and 250cc dirt-bikes, though there's limited scope for touring on an island. Rates for these vary from 500B to 1500B and they are usually rented on a standard hire agreement, with insurance and a substantial credit-card deposit.

### Insurance

If it's available, ensure you are fully insured before signing a rental contract. With the exception of a few companies that rent out large, imported road-bikes, motorcycles are almost always rented without insurance. As most travel insurance policies do not cover motorcycling (some will if you have a dedicated motorcyclist's licence), that means you can have all the fun you like but you must also take all the responsibility, both to yourself and

anyone or anything you damage. Regardless of who actually caused the accident, foreigners are often forced to pay up for everything – if you do have an accident, get in contact with the **tourist police** (☎ 1155) immediately.

### Road Rules & Conditions

Thailand has some of the best-maintained roads in the region and the traffic isn't too bad once you get away from the main highways. Main roads are well signed, often in Thai and English, but on small country roads most signs are in Thai script only. Large four-lane highways carry most of the long-distance traffic between major towns, but accidents are horribly common. Back roads are quieter and safer, but carry a map as it's easy to get lost.

Size matters in the Darwinian world of Thai driving. And if you only remember two road rules, remember to give way to anyone bigger and to forget about lanes and drive with 180-degree vision. Cars share the road with buses, trucks, motorcycles, bicycles, bullock-carts and wandering buffalo and wildlife, and you never know when a young buffalo (or child!) is going to leap out in front of you. Expect the unexpected, especially at dusk when animals are heading home. Overtaking on hills or blind corners is common and the largest vehicle has the right of way in any situation.

Motorcycles are relegated to the hard shoulder, so watch out for them when you turn off any highways. Don't be too surprised if you see another vehicle coming towards you on the hard shoulder on your side of the road – it's the only way to get to some turn-offs.

Turn signals are often used to warn passing drivers about oncoming traffic. A left-turn signal means it's OK to pass, while a right-turn signal means someone is approaching from the other direction. However, do not rely entirely on these signals when making the decision to overtake.

The official maximum speed limits are 50km/h within city limits and 100km/h on most highways, though these are widely flouted. Military and police checkpoints are common and you should always slow down and behave courteously – the sentries will usually wave you through without any hassles.

### HITCHHIKING

Hitching is never entirely safe in any country in the world and we don't recommend it. Travellers who decide to hitch should

### STAYING SAFE ON TWO WHEELS

While motorcycle touring is undoubtedly one of the most liberating and exciting ways to see Thailand, dozens of travellers are injured or killed on Thai roads every year. Inexperience is the main cause, so if you don't have much experience, think twice before renting. If you go ahead, take heed of the following to maximise your chances of getting home in one piece. Check your rental bike thoroughly before you hire it – pay particular attention to the brakes and tyre tread, look for oil leaks and make sure the lights and horn work and the engine starts cleanly from the kick-starter.

- Get insurance with your rental if at all possible, and be extra careful if you can't. If you crash or the bike is stolen you will be responsible for the full cost. Make sure that your travel health insurance covers you for motorcycles before you ride (many do not).
- Always wear a helmet, even if you're riding a small scooter on an empty dirt road.
- Cover your arms and legs. As well as protecting yourself from sunburn, you'll save some skin if you come off.
- If you have an open-fronted helmet (pretty likely), wear sunglasses, glasses or goggles to keep the bugs and dust out of your eyes.
- When you get onto a bike, always do it from the left side to keep clear of the hot exhaust. Likewise, if you come off and are not already dead then make sure you get away from the bike as quickly as possible, lest you end up with the 'Thai tattoo' – a burned inner right calf – seen festering on beaches across the country.
- Keep your speed down. Thai roads are often full of potholes and there are loads of unfamiliar obstacles to watch out for.
- Try to avoid riding alone in remote areas at night. A number of farang bikers have been attacked while riding alone in rural areas.
- Motorcycles are always expected to give way to bigger vehicles. Do as local riders do and keep to the hard shoulder with your speed way down.
- Keep an eye on oil levels during long rides. For two-stroke bikes, add two-stroke engine oil in with the gasoline.

understand that they are taking a small but serious risk. On top of this, Thailand isn't a particularly easy place to hitch. Locals find it hard to comprehend why wealthy foreigners aren't willing to pay for public transport. Most of the vehicles that stop will be public buses or *sörnng-tāa-ou* (small pick-up trucks), which you could have caught from the bus station anyway and which will ask for a fare.

If you do decide to hitch, never hitch alone, let someone know where you are planning to go, don't hitch at night and don't get into a car if you can smell alcohol on the driver. Be doubly cautious in the deep south, where foreigners may be perceived as a target for Islamic militants.

## LOCAL TRANSPORT

### Boat

Boats are used for public transport between the various islands and coastal villages of southern Thailand. The workhorse of inter-island transport is the charismatic, deafeningly noisy long-tail boat (*reu-a hāhng yow*), which has a propeller mounted at the end of a 3m-long drive shaft. Passengers can get a drenching in rough seas (or heavy rain) so consider putting valuable items in plastic bags inside your rucksack. Long-tails either operate like *sörnng-tāa-ou*, leaving whenever there are enough passengers, or offer custom charters. The relevant destination chapters have more information.

Bangkok has its own network of urban boat transport, following the network of canals that radiate out from the Chao Phraya; see p111 for details.

### Local Bus

Most larger cities have a local bus system. Bangkok has a comprehensive service with several classes; in smaller towns local transport is usually provided by *sörnng-tāa-ou* rather than buses. Provincial airports often provide a bus service into town whenever a flight arrives; however, you usually have to take a taxi in the other direction.

### Motorcycle Taxi

Thais rely on motorcycle taxis for short journeys around town. Drivers wear coloured vests and hang around at bus stands and street corners waiting for passengers.

Within Bangkok, motorcycle taxis serve two purposes. Most commonly and popu-

larly they run from the corner of a main thoroughfare, such as Th Sukhumvit, to the far ends of soi (lanes) that run off that thoroughfare, usually charging about 20B for the trip. Their other purpose is as a means of beating the traffic. You tell your rider where you want to go, negotiate a price (from 20B for a short trip up to about 100B going across town), strap on the helmet (they will insist for longer trips) and say a prayer to whichever god you're into. Drivers range from responsible to kamikaze, but the average trip involves some time on the wrong side of the road and several near-death experiences. It's the sort of white-knuckle ride you'd pay good money for at Disneyland, but is all in a day's work for these riders. Comfort yourself with the knowledge that there are good hospitals nearby.

Women wearing skirts are expected to ride side-saddle; be sure to gather up loose material so that it doesn't get caught in the vehicle's drive chain.

### Sāhm-lór & Túk-Túk

Sāhm-lór means 'three wheels', and that's just what they are – three-wheeled vehicles, usually without a motor. The motorised version is known as *túk-túk* (pronounced *đúk đúk*) from the noise they make. Most are powered by noisy two-stroke engines, usually running on LPG (liquid petroleum gas), and have open-sided cabs that let in all the noise, dust and traffic fumes.

Both provide taxi services in provincial towns and villages. You can flag them down anywhere but the fare must be established before you start the journey. In Bangkok, *túk-túk* are no cheaper than metered taxis and are roving scam artists. Away from the capital, *túk-túk* are the taxis.

Nonmotorised *sāhm-lór* are basically bicycle rickshaws, of the kind seen all over Asia. The Thai version has the seat at the back, behind the driver, as in India. There are no bicycle *sāhm-lór* in Bangkok but they are fairly common elsewhere in the country. Bicycle *sāhm-lór* are cheaper than *túk-túk*, but far slower and can't go the same distances.

### Sörnng-tāa-ou

A *sörnng-tāa-ou* (literally two rows) is a usually small truck with a row of bench seats down each side, similar to an Indonesian *bemo* or a Filipino *jeepney*. *Sörnng-tāa-ou*

sometimes operate fixed routes, like buses, but can also be booked for special trips like a regular taxi. In rural towns, you can usually pick up *sörnng-tāa-ou* from the bus stand or main market to outlying villages and beaches. If you are the first passenger on an empty *sörnng-tāa-ou*, the driver may try and talk you into chartering the whole vehicle; stand firm if you want to wait for other passengers. *Sörnng-tāa-ou* are also used on the islands and on Phuket and Ko Samui, where they make a refreshingly cheap and local way to get between beaches and avoid the taxi mafia rip-off merchants. Fares are charged per person, with foreigners often charged a few baht more than Thais.

### Taxi

Western-style taxis are only really common in Bangkok, Pattaya and touristy islands like Phuket and Ko Samui. In most places, you have to rely on *túk-túk* and motorcycle taxis. Where you do find taxis in provincial towns, you'll have to establish the fare before you start your journey as the meter is rarely used.

Taxis operate between some towns on a share basis, with the fare split between passengers. Elsewhere pretty much any taxi can be persuaded to take a long-distance trip with enough notes. Taxis regularly run for fixed fares between Bangkok and centres such as Pattaya (1500B), Hua Hin (2300B), Ban Phe (for Ko Samet, 2300B) and Phetchaburi (1700B); see [www.taxiradio.co.th](http://www.taxiradio.co.th) for other fares. Fares back to Bangkok are often significantly cheaper – bargain.

### Train

The train system in Thailand is only used for inter-city travel. Bangkok has the Skytrain (see p113) and the underground Metro (see p112).

### TRAIN

The railway network in Thailand is run by the government-subsidised **State Railway of Thailand** (SRT; ☎ 1690; [www.railway.co.th](http://www.railway.co.th)). The standard of service is very good and this is certainly one of the most pleasant ways to get around the kingdom. Apart from being smoother, more social and spacious than buses, trains are also safer, both in terms of accidents and thefts from baggage. Some trains have dining cars and snack vendors

so you don't have to wait for meal stops, and the scenery is usually better than that beside the highway.

The rail network covers 4500km and there are four main rail lines within the country – the northern, southern, northeastern and eastern lines. The line most island-bound travellers use is the southern route with stops at Hua Hin, Chumphon (for transfers to Ko Tao), Surat Thani (for transfers to Ko Samui), Hat Yai and the border with Malaysia. There are also a handful of branch lines, including the useful side route between Tung Song (on the main southern line) and Trang, terminating at Kantang. The southern line splits at Hat Yai; one branch follows the east coast to Sungai Kolok on the Malaysian border and the other heads west to Padang Besar, then over the Malaysian border to Butterworth. Almost all the long-distance trains originate from Bangkok's Hualamphong train station.

Trains are slightly slower than buses. There are plans to upgrade the line so high-speed trains can run from Bangkok to Padang Besar on the Malaysian border, but completion remains a way off. A branch from Surat Thani to Phang-Nga (Tha Nun) is also planned, and will provide easy access to Phuket.

All train stations within Thailand offer baggage-storage services. Meals are available in dining cars on most trains, or at your seat if you travel 1st or 2nd class; quality varies widely, but is rarely great. Roving vendors also wander up and down some trains selling bottled water, soft drink and beer for significantly more than you'll pay in a 7-Eleven.

### Classes

There are three classes on SRT trains – 1st, 2nd and 3rd – but the standard of facilities in each varies considerably depending on whether you're on an ordinary, rapid or express train. Third-class seats are cheaper than ordinary buses, while 2nd class costs about the same as the equivalent journey by VIP or private bus. First class costs quite a lot more, but the extra luxury may be worth it on long journeys.

### FIRST CLASS

First-class cars have private double cabins with individually controlled air-con, an electric fan, a washbasin and mirror, a small table and a long bench seat that converts



into two beds. Drinking water and towels are provided free of charge. First-class cars are available only on express and special express trains.

### SECOND CLASS

There are two types of 2nd-class cars – seat cars and sleepers. Seat cars have two rows of padded seats, facing towards the front of the train, which recline back but aren't really comfortable enough for overnight trips. In a 2nd-class sleeper car a central aisle is flanked by a series of open compartments, each containing two facing padded seats that convert into berths. The lower berths cost a little more as they are roomier and cooler. When the berths are folded away, a table can be set up between the two seats for meals. Fresh linen is provided and each car has a toilet and basin. Second-class cars are found only on rapid and express trains and can either be fan-cooled, which gets hot once you've closed the curtains, or air-conditioned, which is usually so cold you'll be wondering if you're on the Trans-Siberian.

### THIRD CLASS

A typical 3rd-class carriage consists of two rows of bench seats divided into facing pairs. Each bench seat is designed to seat two or three passengers, but you can expect four or more. On ordinary trains, 3rd-class seats may have hard wooden benches, but on rapid trains there is usually some padding to keep your bottom from going numb. Express trains do not carry 3rd-class carriages at all.

### Costs

Ticket prices are very reasonable and you can check the latest on [www.thairailways.co.th](http://www.thairailways.co.th) or [www.thailandbytrain.com](http://www.thailandbytrain.com). Fares are calculated first by a base price then surcharges are added depending on the train type (special express, express, rapid, ordinary), class and distance. There is an 80B surcharge above the basic fare for *rót dào-an* (express trains) and 60B for *rót re-hou* (rapid trains). These trains are somewhat faster than the ordinary trains, as they make fewer stops. For the *rót dào-an pí-sèht* (special-express trains) that run between Bangkok and Padang Besar and between Bangkok and Chiang Mai there is a 100B to 120B surcharge. For distances under

500km, the base rate is 50B; over 500km, 70B to 80B.

Some 2nd- and 3rd-class services have air-con cars, in which case there is a 120B to 140B surcharge. Sleeping berths in 2nd class accrue another 100B to 240B surcharge. Upper berths are cheaper than lower – the difference being that there is a window next to the lower berth and more head room. No sleepers are available in 3rd class.

All 1st-class cabins come with individually controlled air-con. For a two-bed cabin the surcharge is 400B per person. Single 1st-class cabins are not available, so if you're travelling alone you may be paired with another passenger, although the SRT takes great care not to mix genders.

If all this surcharge stuff sounds confusing, the good news is that at most stations someone will be able to tell you in English when the train leaves, how long it takes and how much it costs – which is all you really need to know.

### Reservations

Advance bookings may be made one to 60 days before your intended date of departure. For holiday-period travel – especially the middle of April approaching the Songkran Festival, during Chinese New Year and during the peak tourist-season months of December and January – it is advised to book tickets as far in advance as possible, especially for popular routes such as Surat Thani and Hat Yai.

You can make bookings from any train station, where ticket offices are generally open 8.30am to 6pm on weekdays, and 8.30am to noon on weekends and public holidays. Tickets can also be purchased by telephone at ☎ 1690, or at travel agencies in Bangkok, which charge a 50B processing fee but save you the trip to the station.

Midweek departures are always easier to book than weekends; during some months you can easily book a sleeper even one day before departure, as long as it's on a Tuesday, Wednesday or Thursday. With the exception of those departing Surat Thani or Chiang Mai, booking trains back to Bangkok is generally not as difficult as booking trains out of Bangkok.

If you change your plans you can get an 80% refund up to three days before travel

and a 50% refund up to one hour after the train departs.

### Train Passes

If you plan on doing a lot of rail travel, the SRT offers a rail pass that allows unlimited 2nd- and 3rd-class travel on Thai trains for 20 days. They cost 1500B, or 3000B including all supplemental charges (air-con, rapid and express charges). Passes are only available in Thailand and may be purchased at the ad-

vance booking office at Hualamphong train station in Bangkok. If you're just travelling in southern Thailand, the rail pass probably won't save you much money, but it can be a good deal if you are also planning to visit the north.

Passes must be validated at a local station before boarding the first train and reservations are recommended for later journeys. The pass is valid for all trains leaving before midnight on the last day of the pass.

# Health

Dr Trish Batchelor

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Health issues and the quality of medical facilities vary enormously depending on where and how you travel in Thailand. Bangkok has excellent hospitals (p68) and major cities have well-developed healthcare facilities. However, travel to rural areas can expose you to a variety of health risks and inadequate medical care.

Travellers may worry about contracting infectious diseases, but these rarely cause serious illness or death in travellers. Pre-existing medical conditions and accidental injury, especially traffic accidents, account for most life-threatening problems. Becoming ill, however, is relatively common. Most common illnesses can be prevented with common-sense behaviour or be treated easily with a well-stocked medical kit.

The following advice is a general guide only and does not replace the advice of a doctor trained in travel medicine.

## BEFORE YOU GO

Pack medications in their original, clearly labelled containers. A signed and dated letter from your physician describing your medical conditions and medications, including generic names, is also a good idea. If carrying syringes or needles be sure to have a physician's letter documenting their medical necessity. If you

have a heart condition, bring a copy of your ECG taken just prior to travelling.

If you happen to take any regular medication, bring double your needs in case of loss or theft. In most of Thailand, you can buy many medications over the counter without a doctor's prescription, but it can be difficult to find some newer drugs, particularly the latest antidepressant drugs, blood pressure medications and contraceptive pills, outside of Bangkok.

## INSURANCE

Even if you are fit and healthy, don't travel without health insurance – accidents and illnesses do happen. If you are uninsured, emergency evacuation can be expensive; bills of over US\$100,000 are not uncommon. Declare any existing medical conditions you have – the insurance company *will* check whether your problem is pre-existing and will not cover you if it is undeclared. You may require extra cover for adventure activities such as rock climbing and inquire if the insurance covers accidents on a motorbike. If your health insurance doesn't cover you for medical expenses abroad, consider getting additional insurance.

Find out in advance if your insurance plan pays providers directly or reimburses you later for expenditures. Some providers offer various medical-expense options; the higher ones are generally for countries with extremely high medical costs, such as the USA. You may prefer a plan that pays hospitals directly rather than having you pay on the spot and claim later. If you have to claim later, keep all documentation. Some policies might ask you to call (reverse charges) a centre in your home country where an immediate assessment of your problem is made.

## VACCINATIONS

Specialised travel-medicine clinics are your best source of information; they stock all available vaccines and will be able to make recommendations tailored specifically for you and your trip. The doctors there will take into account factors such as your vaccination history, the length of your trip, activities you may be undertaking while away and underlying medical conditions, such as pregnancy.

## POSSIBLE VACCINATIONS

There are no required vaccines for entering Thailand. Proof of vaccination against yellow fever is required only if you have visited a country in a yellow-fever zone within the six days prior to entering the region. If you are travelling to Southeast Asia from Africa or South America you should check to see if you require proof of vaccination.

### Recommended Vaccinations

The World Health Organization recommends the following vaccinations for travellers heading to Thailand.

**Adult diphtheria & tetanus** Single booster recommended if not had in the previous 10 years. Side effects include sore arm and fever.

**Hepatitis A** Provides almost 100% protection for up to a year; a booster after 12 months provides at least another 20 years protection. Mild side effects such as headache and sore arm occur in 5% to 10% of people.

**Hepatitis B** Now considered routine for most travellers, it is given as three injections over six months. A rapid schedule is also available, as is a combined vaccination with Hepatitis A. Side effects are mild and uncommon, usually headache and sore arm. Lifetime protection occurs in 95% of people.

**Measles, mumps & rubella** Two doses of MMR required unless you have had the diseases. Occasionally a rash and flulike illness can develop a week after receiving the vaccine. Many young adults require a booster.

**Polio** In 2005 Thailand had no reported cases of polio. Only one booster required as an adult for lifetime protection. Inactivated polio vaccine is safe during pregnancy.

**Typhoid** Recommended unless your trip is less than a week and only to developed cities. The vaccine offers around 70% protection, lasts for two to three years and comes as a single injection. Tablets are also available, however the injection is usually recommended as it has fewer side effects. Sore arm and fever may occur.

**Varicella** If you haven't had chickenpox, discuss this vaccination with your doctor.

The following immunisations are recommended for long-term travellers (more than one month) or those at special risk.

**Japanese B Encephalitis** Three injections in all. Booster recommended after two years. Sore arm and headache are the most common side effects. Rarely will an allergic reaction comprising hives and swelling occur up to 10 days after any of the three doses.

**Meningitis** Single injection. There are two types of vaccination: the quadrivalent vaccine gives two to three years protection; meningitis group C vaccine gives around 10 years protection. Recommended for long-term backpackers aged under 25.

**Rabies** Three injections in all. A booster after one year will provide 10 years protection. Side effects are rare – occasionally headache and sore arm.

**Tuberculosis** Adult long-term travellers are usually recommended to have a TB skin test before and after travel, rather than a vaccination. Only one vaccine given in a lifetime.

Most vaccines don't produce immunity until at least two weeks after they're given, so visit a doctor four to eight weeks before departure. Ask your doctor for an International Certificate of Vaccination (otherwise known as the yellow booklet), which will list all the vaccinations you've received.

## MEDICAL CHECKLIST

Recommended items for a personal medical kit:

- Antibacterial cream, eg Muciprocin
- Antibiotic for skin infections, eg Amoxicillin (Clavulanate) or Cephalexin

- Antibiotics for diarrhoea, eg Norfloxacin or Ciprofloxacin; for bacterial diarrhoea Azithromycin; for giardiasis or amoebic dysentery Tinidazole
- Antifungal cream, eg Clotrimazole
- Antihistamine – there are many options, eg Cetirizine for daytime and Promethazine for night
- Antiseptic, eg Betadine
- Antispasmodic for stomach cramps, eg Buscopa
- Contraceptives
- Decongestant, eg Pseudoephedrine
- DEET-based insect repellent

- Diarrhoea relief – consider a diarrhoea ‘stopper’ (eg Loperamide), an antinausea medication (eg Prochlorperazine) and an oral rehydration solution (eg Gastrolyte)
- First-aid items such as scissors, Elastoplasts, bandages, gauze, safety pins and tweezers, thermometer (but not mercury), and sterile needles and syringes.
- Ibuprofen or another anti-inflammatory
- Indigestion medication, eg Quick Eze or Mylanta
- Iodine tablets (unless you are pregnant or have a thyroid problem) to purify water
- Laxative, eg Coloxyl
- Migraine medicine if prone to migraines
- Paracetamol
- Permethrin to impregnate clothing and mosquito nets
- Steroid cream for allergic/itchy rashes, eg 1% to 2% hydrocortisone
- Sunscreen and hat
- Throat lozenges
- Thrush (vaginal yeast infection) treatment, eg Clotrimazole pessaries or Diflucan tablet
- Ural or equivalent if you're prone to urine infections

## INTERNET RESOURCES

There is a wealth of travel health advice on the internet. For further information, **Lonely Planet** ([www.lonelyplanet.com](http://www.lonelyplanet.com)) is a good place to start. The **World Health Organization** (WHO; [www.who.int/ith/](http://www.who.int/ith/)) publishes a superb book, *International Travel & Health*, which is revised annually and is available free online. Another website of general interest is **MD Travel Health** ([www.mdtravelhealth.com](http://www.mdtravelhealth.com)), which provides complete travel health recommendations for every country and is updated daily. The **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention** (CDC; [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)) website also has good general information.

## FURTHER READING

Lonely Planet's *Healthy Travel – Asia & India* is a handy pocket-size book that is packed with useful information including pretrip planning, emergency first aid, immunisation and disease information, and what to do if you get sick on the road. Other recommended references include *Traveller's Health*, by Dr Richard Dawood, and *Travelling Well*, by Dr Deborah Mills – check out the website [www.travellingwell.com.au](http://www.travellingwell.com.au).

# IN TRANSIT

## DEEP VEIN THROMBOSIS (DVT)

Deep vein thrombosis (DVT) occurs when blood clots form in the legs during plane flights, chiefly due to prolonged immobility. The longer the flight, the greater the risk of developing deep vein thrombosis. While most clots are reabsorbed uneventfully, occasionally some clots break off and travel through blood vessels to the lungs, where they may result in life-threatening complications.

The chief symptom of DVT is swelling of or pain in the foot, ankle or calf, usually, but not always, on just one side. If a blood clot travels to the lungs it may cause chest pain and/or you could experience difficulty breathing. Travellers with any of these symptoms should immediately seek medical attention.

To prevent the development of DVT on long flights you should walk about the cabin, perform isometric compressions of the leg muscles (ie contract the leg muscles while sitting), drink plenty of fluids and avoid alcohol.

## JET LAG & MOTION SICKNESS

Jet lag is common when crossing more than five time zones; it results in insomnia, fatigue, malaise or nausea. To avoid jet lag, drink plenty of nonalcoholic fluids and eat light meals during the flight. Upon arrival, expose yourself to natural sunlight and re-adjust your schedule (for meals, sleep etc) to that of the country you have arrived in as soon as possible.

Antihistamines such as dimenhydrinate (Dramamine) and meclizine (Antivert, Bonine) are usually the first choice for treating motion sickness. Their main side effect is drowsiness. A herbal alternative to antihistamines is ginger, which works like a charm for some people.

# IN THAILAND

## AVAILABILITY OF HEALTH CARE

Bangkok has become a medical centre for foreigners seeking cosmetic, elective and primary care. Hospitals geared towards these clients have internationally trained doctors, English-speaking staff and top-notch service,

though, as in the whole of the country, over-prescription can be a problem. Other tourist areas, such as Phuket and Ko Samui, will have equally accessible hospital facilities. On the smaller islands, there will be rudimentary clinics for bumps, scrapes and minor infections. It is difficult to find reliable medical care in rural areas. Recommended hospitals in Bangkok are listed on p68. Your embassy and insurance company are also good contacts. Many pharmacies in Thailand are equipped to deal with minor health problems such as traveller's diarrhoea. If you think you may have a serious disease, especially malaria or dengue fever, do not waste time – travel to the nearest quality facility to receive attention. It is always better to be assessed by a doctor than to rely on self-treatment.

Do be aware that some medications in Thailand are either fake, poorly stored or out-of-date.

## INFECTIOUS DISEASES Cutaneous Larva Migrans

Cutaneous Larva Migrans, caused by dog hookworm, is particularly common on the beaches of Thailand. The rash starts as a small lump, then slowly spreads in a linear fashion. It is intensely itchy, especially at night. It is easily treated with medications and should not be cut out or frozen.

## Dengue Fever

This mosquito-borne disease is becoming increasingly problematic throughout Southeast Asia, especially in the cities. As there is no vaccine available it can only be prevented by avoiding mosquito bites. The mosquito that carries dengue will bite day and night, so implement insect avoidance measures at all times. Symptoms include high fever, severe headache and body ache (dengue was previously known as 'breakbone fever'). Some people develop a rash and experience diarrhoea. The southern islands of Thailand are a particularly high risk. There is no specific treatment, just rest and paracetamol – do not take aspirin as it increases the likelihood of haemorrhaging. See a doctor to be diagnosed and monitored.

## Filariasis

This is a mosquito-borne disease that is very common in the local population, yet very rare

in travellers. Mosquito-avoidance measures are the best way to prevent this disease.

## Hepatitis A

Hepatitis A is a problem throughout the region. This food- and water-borne virus infects the liver, causing jaundice (yellow skin and eyes), nausea and lethargy. There is no specific treatment for hepatitis A; you just need to allow the liver time to heal. All travellers to Southeast Asia should be vaccinated against hepatitis A.

## Hepatitis B

The only sexually transmitted disease that can be prevented by vaccination, hepatitis B is spread by body fluids, including sexual contact. In some parts of Southeast Asia up to 20% of the population are carriers of hepatitis B, and usually are unaware of this. The long-term consequences can include liver cancer and cirrhosis.

## Hepatitis E

Hepatitis E is transmitted through contaminated food and water and has symptoms similar to hepatitis A, but is far less common. It is a severe problem in pregnant women potentially resulting in the death of both mother and baby. There is currently no vaccine, and prevention is by following safe eating and drinking guidelines.

## HIV

HIV is one of the most common causes of death in people under the age of 50 in Thailand. Heterosexual sex is the primary method of transmission both in Thailand and neighbouring countries, several of which have rising numbers of people living with HIV, and dying from AIDS. However, while more than 1% of Thais are infected with HIV, aggressive safe-sex campaigns in the 1990s have seen the incidence of new infections drop sharply, and made Thailand a global pin-up for effectively dealing with the disease.

## Influenza

Present year-round in Thailand, influenza (flu) symptoms include a high fever, muscle aches, runny nose, cough and sore throat. It can be very severe in people over the age of 65 or in those with underlying medical conditions such as heart disease or diabetes; vaccination is recommended for these indi-



viduals. There is no specific treatment, just rest and paracetamol.

### Japanese B Encephalitis

This viral disease is transmitted by mosquitoes. While rare in travellers, at least 50,000 locals are infected each year. Most cases occur in rural areas; travellers spending more than one month outside of cities should be vaccinated. There is no treatment, and one-third of infected people will die while another third will suffer permanent brain damage.

### Leptospirosis

This is most commonly contracted after river rafting or canyoning. Early symptoms are very similar to the flu and include headache and fever. Severity can vary from very mild to a being fatal. Diagnosis is achieved through blood tests and it is easily treated with Doxycycline.

### Malaria

For such a serious and potentially deadly disease, there is an enormous amount of misinformation concerning malaria. You must get expert advice as to whether your trip actually puts you at risk, particularly if you are pregnant. Many parts of Southeast Asia, particularly city and resort areas, have minimal to no risk of malaria, and the risk of side effects from taking prophylactics may outweigh the risk of getting the disease. For most rural areas, however, the risk of contracting the disease outweighs the risk of tablet side effects. Remember that malaria can be fatal. Before you travel, seek medical advice on the right medication and dosage for you.

Malaria is caused by a parasite transmitted by the bite of an infected mosquito. The most important symptom of malaria is fever, but general symptoms such as headache, diarrhoea, cough or chills may also occur. Diagnosis can only be made by taking a blood sample.

Two strategies should be combined to prevent malaria – mosquito avoidance and antimalarial medications. Most people who catch malaria are taking inadequate or no antimalarial medication.

Travellers are advised to prevent mosquito bites by taking these steps:

- Use insect repellent containing DEET on exposed skin. Wash this off at night, only if you are sleeping under a mosquito net. Natural repellents such as Citronella can

be effective, but must be applied more frequently than products containing DEET.

- Sleep under a mosquito net impregnated with Permethrin.
- Choose accommodation with fans (if not air-conditioning) and screens.
- Impregnate clothing with Permethrin in high-risk areas.
- Wear long sleeves and trousers in light colours.
- Use mosquito coils.
- Spray your room with insect repellent before going out for your evening meal.

There are a variety of malaria medications available:

**Artesunate** Derivatives of Artesunate are not suitable as a preventive medication. They are useful treatments under medical supervision.

**Chloroquine & Paludrine** The effectiveness of this combination is now limited in most of Southeast Asia. Common side effects include nausea (40% of people) and mouth ulcers. Not recommended.

**Doxycycline** This daily tablet is a broad-spectrum antibiotic that has the added benefit of helping to prevent a variety of tropical diseases, including leptospirosis, tick-borne disease, typhus and melioidosis. The potential side effects include photosensitivity (a tendency to sunburn), thrush in women, indigestion, heartburn, nausea and interference with the contraceptive pill. More serious side effects include ulceration of the oesophagus – you can help prevent this by taking your tablet with a meal and a large glass of water, and never lying down within half an hour of taking it. Must be taken for an additional four weeks after leaving the risk area.

**Lariam (Mefloquine)** Lariam has received a lot of bad press, some of it justified, some not. This weekly tablet suits many people. Serious side effects are rare but include depression, anxiety, psychosis and having fits. Anyone with a history of depression, anxiety, other psychological disorders or epilepsy should not take Lariam. It is considered safe in the second and third trimesters of pregnancy. It is around 90% effective in most parts of Southeast Asia, but there is significant resistance in parts of northern Thailand, Laos and Cambodia. Tablets must be taken for four weeks after leaving the risk area.

**Malarone** This newer drug is a combination of Atovaquone and Proguanil. Side effects are uncommon and mild, most commonly nausea and headache. It is the best tablet for scuba divers and for those on short trips to high-risk areas. It must be taken for one week after leaving the risk area.

A final option is to take no preventive medication but to have a supply of emergency

medication should you develop the symptoms of malaria. This is not ideal and you will need to get to a good medical facility within 24 hours of developing a fever. If you choose this option the most effective and safest treatment is Malarone (four tablets once daily for three days). Other options include Artesunate, Mefloquine and Quinine but the side effects of the latter two drugs at treatment doses make them less desirable. Fansidar is no longer recommended.

### Measles

Measles remains a problem in some parts of Southeast Asia. This highly contagious bacterial infection is spread via coughing and sneezing. Most people born before 1966 are immune as they had measles in childhood. Measles starts with a high fever and rash and can be complicated by pneumonia and brain disease. There is no specific treatment.

### Melioidosis

This infection is contracted by skin contact with soil. It is rare in travellers, but in some parts of northeast Thailand up to 30% of the local population are infected. The symptoms are very similar to those experienced by tuberculosis sufferers. There is no vaccine but it can be treated with medication.

### Rabies

Rabies is still a common problem in most parts of Southeast Asia. This uniformly fatal disease is spread by the bite or lick of an infected animal – most commonly a dog or monkey. Seek medical advice immediately after any animal bite and commence post-exposure treatment. Having a pre-travel vaccination means the post-bite treatment is simplified. If an animal bites you, gently wash the wound with soap and water, and apply iodine-based antiseptic. If you are not pre-vaccinated you will need to receive rabies immunoglobulin as soon as possible.

### STDs

Sexually transmitted diseases most common in Southeast Asia include herpes, warts, syphilis, gonorrhoea and chlamydia. People carrying these diseases often have no signs of infection. Condoms will prevent gonorrhoea and chlamydia but not warts or herpes. If after a sexual encounter you develop any rash, lumps, discharge or pain when passing urine

seek immediate medical attention. If you have been sexually active during your travels have an STD check on your return home.

### Strongyloides

This parasite, transmitted by skin contact with soil, is common in Thailand but rarely affects travellers. It is characterised by an unusual skin rash called *larva currens* – a linear rash on the trunk which comes and goes. Most people don't have other symptoms until their immune system becomes severely suppressed, when the parasite can cause an overwhelming infection. It can be treated with medications.

### Tuberculosis

While rare in short-term travellers, medical and aid workers, and long-term travellers who have significant contact with the local population should take precautions. Vaccination is usually only given to children under the age of five, but adults at risk are recommended to take pre- and post-travel tuberculosis testing. The main symptoms are fever, cough, weight loss, night sweats and tiredness.

### Typhoid

This serious bacterial infection is spread via food and water. Symptoms include a high, slowly progressive fever and headache, and may be accompanied by a dry cough and stomach pain. It is diagnosed by blood tests and treated with antibiotics. Vaccination is recommended for all travellers spending more than a week in Southeast Asia, or travelling outside the major cities. Be aware that vaccination is not 100% effective so you must still be careful with what you eat and drink.

### Typhus

Murine typhus is spread by the bite of a flea, whereas scrub typhus is spread via a mite. These diseases are rare in travellers. Symptoms include fever, muscle pains and a rash. You can avoid these diseases by following general insect-avoidance measures. Doxycycline will also prevent them.

### TRAVELLER'S DIARRHOEA

Traveller's diarrhoea is by far the most common problem affecting travellers – between 30% and 50% will suffer from it within two weeks of starting their trip. For the vast majority it won't be a huge problem. A change of diet can often loosen stools and when you

add copious amounts of chilli to unfamiliar cuisine there's a good chance you'll end up scampering to the throne sooner or later. Recovery is usually swift. So if the symptoms are not major (ie there's no blood in your stool) then the usual advice is to...errr...sit on it for a day or two before you reach for the antibiotics.

Having said that, genuine traveller's diarrhoea is usually caused by bacteria and therefore can be treated with antibiotics. Traveller's diarrhoea is defined as the passage of more than three watery bowel-actions within 24 hours, plus at least one other symptom such as fever, cramps, nausea, vomiting or feeling generally unwell.

Treatment includes staying hydrated; rehydration solutions such as Gastrolyte are the best for this. Antibiotics such as Norfloxacin, Ciprofloxacin or Azithromycin will kill the bacteria quickly.

Loperamide is just a 'stopper' and doesn't get to the cause of the problem. It can be helpful, for example if you have to go on a long bus ride. Don't take Loperamide if you have blood in your stools or a fever. Seek medical attention quickly if you don't respond to an appropriate antibiotic.

### Amoebic Dysentery

Amoebic dysentery is very rare in travellers but is often misdiagnosed by poor quality labs in Southeast Asia. Symptoms are similar to bacterial diarrhoea (ie fever, bloody diarrhoea and generally feeling unwell). You should always seek reliable medical care if you have blood in your diarrhoea. Treatment involves two drugs: Tinidazole or Metronidazole will kill the parasite in your gut and a second drug will kill the cysts. If left untreated, complications such as liver or gut abscesses can occur.

### Giardiasis

*Giardia lamblia* is a parasite that is relatively common in travellers. Symptoms include nausea, bloating, excess gas, fatigue and intermittent diarrhoea. 'Eggy' burps are often attributed solely to giardiasis, but work in Nepal has shown that they are not specific to this infection. The parasite will eventually go away if left untreated but this can take months. The treatment of choice is Tinidazole, with Metronidazole being a second line option.

## ENVIRONMENTAL HAZARDS

### Air Pollution

Air pollution, particularly from vehicles, is an increasing problem in most of Southeast Asia's major cities. If you have severe respiratory problems speak with your doctor before travelling to any heavily polluted urban centres. This pollution also causes minor respiratory problems such as sinusitis, dry throat and irritated eyes. If troubled by the pollution, leave the city for a few days and get some fresh air.

### Diving

Divers and surfers should seek specialised advice before they travel to ensure their medical kit contains treatment for coral cuts and tropical ear infections, as well as the standard problems. Divers should ensure their insurance covers them for decompression illness – get specialised dive insurance through an organisation such as **Divers Alert Network** (DAN; www.danseap.org). Have a dive medical before you leave your home country – there are medical conditions that are incompatible with diving, and economic considerations may override health considerations for some Thai dive operators.

### Food

Eating in restaurants is the biggest risk factor for contracting traveller's diarrhoea. Ways to avoid it include eating only freshly cooked food, and avoiding shellfish and food that has been sitting around in buffets. Peel all fruit, cook vegetables and soak salads in iodine water for at least 20 minutes. Eat in busy restaurants with a high turnover of customers.

### Heat

Many parts of Thailand are hot and humid throughout the year. For most people it takes at least two weeks to adapt to the hot climate. Swelling of the feet and ankles is common, as are muscle cramps caused by excessive sweating. Prevent these by avoiding dehydration and excessive activity in the heat. Take it easy when you first arrive. Don't eat salt tablets (they aggravate the gut) but drinking rehydration solution or eating salty food helps. Treat cramps by stopping activity, resting, rehydrating with double-strength rehydration solution and gently stretching.

Dehydration is the main contributor to heat exhaustion. Symptoms include feeling weak, headache, irritability, nausea or vomiting, sweaty skin, a fast, weak pulse and nor-

mal or slightly elevated body temperature. Treatment involves getting out of the heat and/or sun, fanning the victim and applying cool wet cloths to the skin, laying the victim flat with their legs raised and rehydrating with water containing ¼ teaspoon of salt per litre. Recovery is usually rapid and it is common to feel weak for some days afterwards.

Heatstroke is a serious medical emergency. Symptoms come on suddenly and include weakness, nausea, a hot dry body, a body temperature of over 41°C, dizziness, confusion, loss of coordination, fits and eventually collapse and loss of consciousness. Seek medical help and commence cooling by getting the person out of the heat, removing their clothes, fanning them and applying cool wet cloths or ice to their body, especially the groin and armpits.

Prickly heat is a common skin rash in the tropics, caused by sweat being trapped under the skin. The result is an itchy rash of tiny lumps. Treat by moving out of the heat and into an air-conditioned area for a few hours and by having cool showers. Creams and ointments clog the skin so they should be avoided. Locally bought prickly-heat powder can be helpful.

Tropical fatigue is common in long-term expats based in the tropics. It's rarely due to disease and is caused by the climate, inadequate mental rest, excessive alcohol intake and the demands of daily work.

### Insect Bites & Stings

Bedbugs don't carry disease but their bites are very itchy. They live in the cracks of furniture and walls and then migrate to the bed at night to feed on you. You can treat the itch with an antihistamine. Lice inhabit various parts of your body but most commonly your head and pubic area. Transmission is via close contact with an infected person. They can be difficult to treat and you may need numerous applications of an anti-lice shampoo such as Permethrin.

Ticks are contracted after walking in rural areas. Ticks are commonly found behind the ears, on the belly and in armpits. If you have had a tick bite and experience symptoms such as a rash at the site of the bite or elsewhere, fever or muscle aches, you should see a doctor. Doxycycline prevents tick-borne diseases.

Leeches are found in humid rainforest areas. They do not transmit any disease but their bites are often intensely itchy for weeks afterwards and can become infected. Apply

an iodine-based antiseptic to any leech bite to help prevent infection.

Bee and wasp stings mainly cause problems for people who are allergic to them. Anyone with a major bee or wasp allergy should carry an injection of adrenaline (eg an EpiPen) for emergency treatment. For others, to ease the pain, apply ice to the sting and take painkillers.

### Jellyfish

Most jellyfish in Southeast Asian waters are not dangerous, just irritating, however there have been incidents of serious (and in rare cases, fatal) stings by box jellyfish on both the Andaman and Gulf coasts. First-aid for jellyfish stings involves pouring vinegar onto the affected area to neutralise the poison. Do not rub sand or water onto the stings. Take painkillers if necessary, and for box jellyfish stings in particular seek immediate medical attention. Heed advice from local authorities, dive shops and your hotel about seasonal water conditions, and if there are dangerous jellyfish around keep out of the water.

### Parasites

Numerous parasites are common in local populations in Southeast Asia; however, most of these are rare in travellers. The two rules to follow if you wish to avoid parasitic infections are to wear shoes and to avoid eating raw food, especially fish, pork and vegetables. A number of parasites, including strongyloides, hookworm and *cutaneous larva migrans*, are transmitted via the skin by walking barefoot.

### Skin Problems

Fungal rashes are common in humid climates. There are two fungal rashes that commonly affect travellers. The first occurs in moist areas that get less air such as the groin, armpits and between the toes. It starts as a red patch that slowly spreads and is usually itchy. Treatment involves keeping the skin dry, avoiding chafing and using an antifungal cream such as Clotrimazole or Lamisil. *Tinea versicolor* is also common. This fungus causes small, light-coloured patches, most commonly on the back, chest and shoulders. Consult a doctor.

Cuts and scratches can become easily infected in humid climates. Take meticulous care of any cuts and scratches to prevent complications such as abscesses. Immediately wash all wounds in clean water and apply antiseptic. If you develop signs of infection (increasing pain

### TRADITIONAL MEDICINE

Throughout Thailand traditional medical systems are widely practised. There is a big difference between traditional healing systems and 'folk' medicine. Folk remedies should be avoided, as they often involve rather dubious procedures with potential medical complications. On the other hand, healing systems, such as traditional Chinese medicine, are well respected and aspects of them are being increasingly utilised by medical practitioners throughout the West.

All traditional Asian medical systems identify a vital life force, and see blockage or imbalance as the cause of disease. Techniques such as herbal medicines, massage and acupuncture are utilised to bring the vital force back into balance, or to maintain balance. These therapies are best used for treating chronic disease such as chronic fatigue, arthritis and some chronic skin conditions. Traditional medicines should be avoided for treating acute infections such as malaria.

Be aware that 'natural' doesn't always mean 'safe', and there can be drug interactions between herbal medicines and Western medicines. If you are utilising both systems, ensure you inform both practitioners what the other has prescribed.

and redness) see a doctor. Divers and surfers should be particularly careful with coral cuts as they become easily infected.

### Snakes

Thailand is home to many species of both poisonous and harmless snakes. Assume all snakes are poisonous and never try to catch one. Always wear boots and long pants if walking in an area that may have snakes. First-aid in the event of a snakebite involves pressure immobilisation via an elastic bandage firmly wrapped around the affected limb, starting at the bite site and working up towards the chest. The bandage should not be so tight that the circulation is cut off, and the fingers or toes should be kept free so the circulation can be checked. Immobilise the limb with a splint and carry the victim to medical attention. Do not use tourniquets or try to suck the venom out. Antivenom is available for most species.

### Sunburn

Even on a cloudy day sunburn occurs rapidly. Use a strong sunscreen (factor 30), reapply after a swim, and always wear a wide-brimmed hat and sunglasses outdoors. Avoid lying in the sun during the hottest part of the day (10am to 2pm). If you become sunburnt, stay out of the sun until you have recovered, apply cool compresses and take painkillers for the discomfort and apply a 1% hydrocortisone cream.

### WOMEN'S HEALTH

In the urban areas of Thailand, supplies of sanitary products are readily available. Birth control is cheap but not all options are widely available so it's safest to bring adequate sup-

plies of your own form of contraception. Heat, humidity and taking antibiotics can all contribute to thrush. Treatment is with antifungal creams and pessaries such as Clotrimazole. A practical alternative is a single tablet of Fluconazole (Diflucan). Urinary tract infections can be precipitated by dehydration or long bus journeys without toilet stops; bring suitable antibiotics.

Pregnant women should receive specialised advice before travelling. The ideal time to travel is in the second trimester (between 16 and 28 weeks), when the risk of pregnancy-related problems is lowest and pregnant women generally feel at their best. During the first trimester there is a risk of miscarriage and in the third trimester complications such as premature labour and high blood pressure are possible. It's wise to travel with a companion. Always carry a list of quality medical facilities at your destination and ensure you continue your standard antenatal care at these facilities. Avoid rural travel in areas with poor transport and medical facilities. Most of all, ensure travel insurance covers all pregnancy-related possibilities, including premature labour.

Malaria is a high-risk disease during pregnancy. WHO recommends that pregnant women do *not* travel to areas with Chloroquine-resistant malaria. None of the more effective antimalarial drugs are completely safe during pregnancy.

Traveller's diarrhoea can quickly lead to dehydration and result in inadequate blood flow to the placenta. Many of the drugs used to treat various diarrhoea bugs are not recommended during pregnancy. Azithromycin is considered safe.

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