

Ho Chi Minh spent 1928 to 1929 proselytising in the area, and in the 1940s a number of Indochinese Communist Party leaders fled to Isan from Laos and helped bolster Thailand's Communist Party. From the 1960s, until an amnesty in 1982, guerrilla activity was rife in Isan, especially in the provinces of Buriram, Loei, Ubon Ratchathani, Nakhon Phanom and Sakon Nakhon. But growing urbanisation drew many peasants to the cities and the various insurgencies evaporated in the glare of Thailand's boom years. Not everyone has benefited though, and the per capita income in Isan is less than one-third of the national average.

Climate

Northeastern Thailand experiences a three-season monsoonal climate, with a relatively cool dry season from November to late February, followed by a hot dry season from March to May (when temperatures can climb to over 40°C) and then a hot rainy season from June to October. The Loei Province experiences the most extreme climactic conditions, with both the hottest temperatures and the coldest – it's one of the few places in Thailand where temperatures dip below zero.

National Parks

Northeastern Thailand has 24 national parks and 21 forest parks. Khao Yai (p464) is its most impressive, covering much of the largest intact monsoon forest in mainland Asia. Other highlights include Phu Kradung (p504) for its wildlife watching and high-altitude hiking; Nam Nao (p481) with its dense forest and unspoilt landscapes; Phu Chong Nayoi (p540), one of Thailand's remotest corners; and Phu Wiang (p481), a must for dinosaur lovers.

Information on all of Thailand's national parks and an online booking service can be found at www.dnp.go.th/parkreserve. You can also book camp sites and bungalows through the **reservations office** (☎ 0 2562 0760; reserve@dnp.go.th). Most lodging can also be reserved by calling the park directly, though you won't always get hold of someone who speaks English.

Language & Culture

Isan language and culture are melting pots of Thai, Lao and Khmer influences. The Khmers left behind Angkor Wat-like monuments across much of the region, but particularly in the Surin, Si Saket, Buriram and Khorat

Provinces, while Lao-style temples – most notably Wat Phra That Phanom – are the norm along the Mekong River. Many of the people living in this area speak Lao (which is very similar to the Isan language) as their first language, and, in fact, there are probably more people of Lao heritage in Isan than in all of Laos. Many villages in the far south still speak Khmer as the primary language.

The people of Isan are known by other Thais for their friendliness, work ethic and sense of humour – flip through stations on the radio and you will hear many DJs laughing at their own jokes. Respect and hospitality towards guests is a cornerstone of Isan life and most villagers, plus plenty of city folk, still pride themselves on taking care of other people before themselves. The best food is usually reserved for monks and guests, and if you get invited to a village home your hosts will almost certainly kill one of their chickens to feed you (vegetarians should speak up early). Isan people are less conservative than most Thais, but short shorts and spaghetti-strap tops will earn a lot more stares than most other places in Thailand because of the scarcity of tourists here.

Though this is by far Thailand's poorest region, based on a new government Well-Being Index, the people of the northeast are the nation's happiest. A strong sense of community and close family ties are the main reasons cited, but it also stems from the fact that the people of Isan seek happiness from the inside, not from what they own. In the villages you can almost never tell who is rich and poor because big homes and fancy clothes garner no respect.

The region's music is born out of a distinctive folk tradition and uses instruments such as the *khaen*, a reed instrument with two long rows of bamboo pipes strung together; the *ponglang*, which is like a xylophone and made of short wooden logs; and the *phin*, a type of small three-stringed lute played with a large plectrum. The most popular song form is the *lâuk thung* (literally, children of the fields), which is far more rhythmic than the classical styles of central Thailand.

The best silk in Thailand is said to come from the northeast, particularly Chaiyaphum, Khon Kaen, Surin and Nakhon Ratchasima. Cotton fabrics from Loei, Nakhon Phanom and Udon Thani are also highly regarded. The defining style uses *mât-mii* methods (see

EATING ISAN

Isan's culinary creations are a blend of Lao and Thai cooking styles that make use of local ingredients. The holy trinity of northeastern cuisine – *kài yáang* (grilled chicken), *sôm-tam* (papaya salad) and *khào niaw* (sticky rice) – is integral to the culture and reminisced like lost lovers by displaced Isan taxi drivers in Bangkok. Also essential are chillies, and a fistful of potent peppers find their way into most dishes, especially *lâap*, a super-spicy meat salad originating from Laos. *Kaeng om* has more in common with *tôm-yam* than with typical Thai curries as it has *plaa raa* (a popular fermented fish sauce that looks like rotten mud) instead of coconut and sugar. It is sometimes served with glass noodles, but even then it's still meant to be eaten with rice.

Except at food stalls and the cheapest restaurants, fish dominates Isan-specific menus with *plaa dùk* (catfish), *plaa chawn* (striped snake-head) and *plaa bu* (sand goby) among the most popular dishes. These are mostly caught in the Mekong and a few other large rivers. Fish that families catch themselves are usually small – sometimes so tiny they're eaten bones and all – because they come from streams and rice paddies; as do crabs, frogs and eels. *Plaa bèuk* (giant Mekong catfish) is the most famous fish associated with the northeast, but it is almost never eaten here because it costs too much.

To Westerners and other Thais nothing stands out in Isan cuisine like insects. Even as recently as the 1970s insects composed a large part of the typical family's diet, though it became a fading tradition when the government promoted chicken and pig farming, thus lowering the prices of these now popular meats. Though the younger generations don't bite bugs all that often anymore, they are still very common as snacks and chilli-sauce ingredients. Purple lights shining out in the countryside are for catching giant water bugs, and these, along with crickets, grasshoppers, cicadas, *non maiphai* (bamboo worm) and more, are sold in most municipal and many night markets. In fact, there is still enough of a demand that imports come from Cambodia. Thailand has no shortage of silkworm larvae, which, after they are popped into the boiling water to remove the silk, are popped into the mouth for a literal taste explosion – try one and you'll see what we mean.

box text, p473) in which threads are tie-dyed before weaving. Most large stores stock some fabrics naturally dyed using plant materials, an old process being revived across Isan: some shops in Khon Kaen and Ubon Ratchathani specialise in these. Prices for fabrics can be 20% to 30% cheaper (more than 50% for less-common fabric styles) in the weaving villages than in Bangkok shops, though finished clothes cost about the same. Another handicraft speciality of the northeast is *máwn khwáan* (literally, axe pillow), a stiff triangle-shaped pillow used as an arm support while sitting on the floor. Sticky-rice baskets also make good souvenirs.

Getting There & Away

The main train and bus lines in the northeast are between Bangkok and Nong Khai, and between Bangkok and Ubon Ratchathani. The northeastern region can also be reached from northern Thailand by bus through Phitsanulok, with Khon Kaen as the gateway. Most of the major centres are also connected to Bangkok by air.

Getting Around

If you have time on your side, travelling in the northeast is rarely a problem: all large- and medium-sized towns are linked by bus or train, and *sáwngthâew* (pick-up trucks) services go on to most, but not all, of the smaller villages and temple complexes. If you are short on time, however, remember that distances are large in this part of Thailand and buses are often slow. Consequently, if time is of the essence and you plan to visit the region's more remote sites, a rental car or motorcycle will save a great many headaches and let you see much more of the region with your available time. There are very few flights between cities in the northeast; you generally need to connect through Bangkok.

NAKHON RATCHASIMA PROVINCE

Silk and stone are the cornerstones of the Nakhon Ratchasima tourist industry and it is well worth dipping an inquisitive toe into both

facets of the region's heritage. First up, history aficionados should soak up the stone remains of the region's Angkor-period heyday. Khmer temples dating from this time still pepper the province and while many have been reduced to amorphous piles of rubble, the restored complex of Prasat Phimai provides an evocative glimpse of times past. If you're a fashionista, you should explore the region's silk-weaving industry in Amphoe Pak Thong Chai, Thai silk weaving's spiritual home. Some of the country's best cloth comes out of this area.

Top it all off by getting deep into the jungle at Khao Yai, Thailand's oldest national park and newest World Heritage site. It's one of the best wildlife-watching destinations in Southeast Asia.

NAKHON RATCHASIMA (KHORAT)

นครราชสีมา(โคราช)

pop 215,000

Khorat doesn't wear its heart on its sleeve. Touch down in the brash gateway to the northeast and only those sporting a hefty set of rose-tinted specs will be reaching for their camera as they step off the bus. A bumper dose of urban hubbub reflects the city's growing affluence and Khorat's one-time historic charm has been largely smothered under a duvet of homogenous development.

Khorat is a city you grow to know. Distinctly Isan, with a strong sense of regional identity, this busy centre is at its best in its quieter nooks (inside the east side of the historic moat, for example), where Thai life, largely untouched

by the country's booming tourist industry, goes on in its own uncompromising way.

Information

EMERGENCY & MEDICAL SERVICES

Ratchasima Hospital (☎ 0 4426 2000; Th Mittaphap)

Tourist police (☎ 1155; Th Chang Pheuk) Opposite bus terminal 2.

INTERNET ACCESS

Net Guru (☎ 0 4425 7441; Th Phoklang; per hr 20B;

☎ 24hr)

MONEY

Siam Commercial Bank (Th Mittaphap; ☎ 10.30am-8pm) At the Mall. Many more banks, also with ATM and exchange services, in the city centre open regular hours.

POST

Post office (Th Jomsurangyat; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat & holidays)

TOURIST INFORMATION

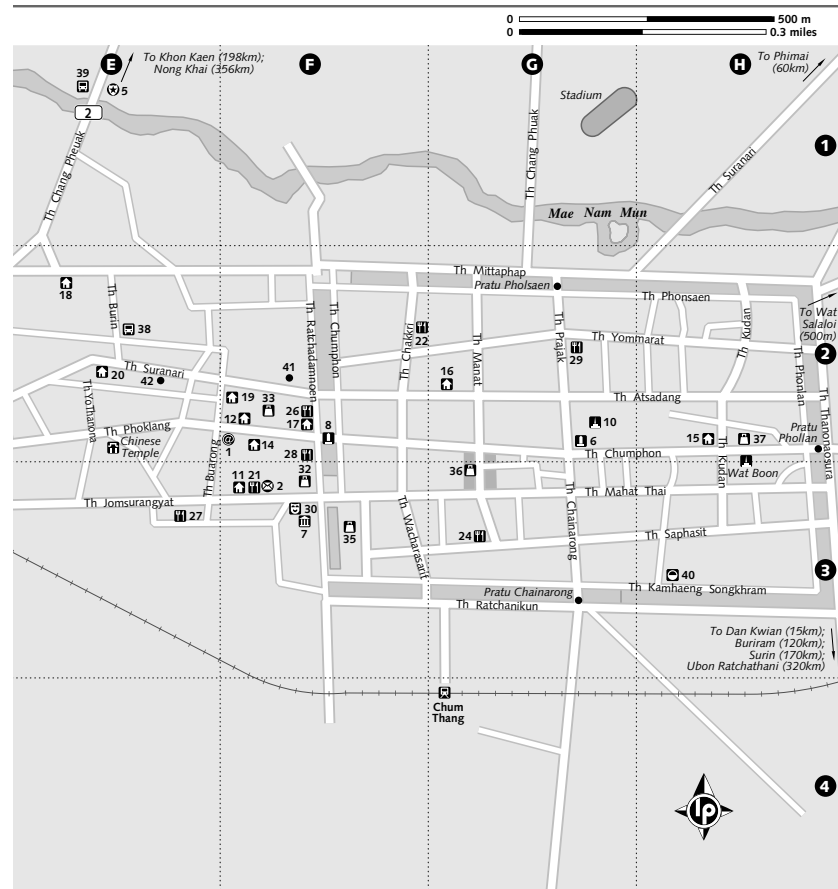
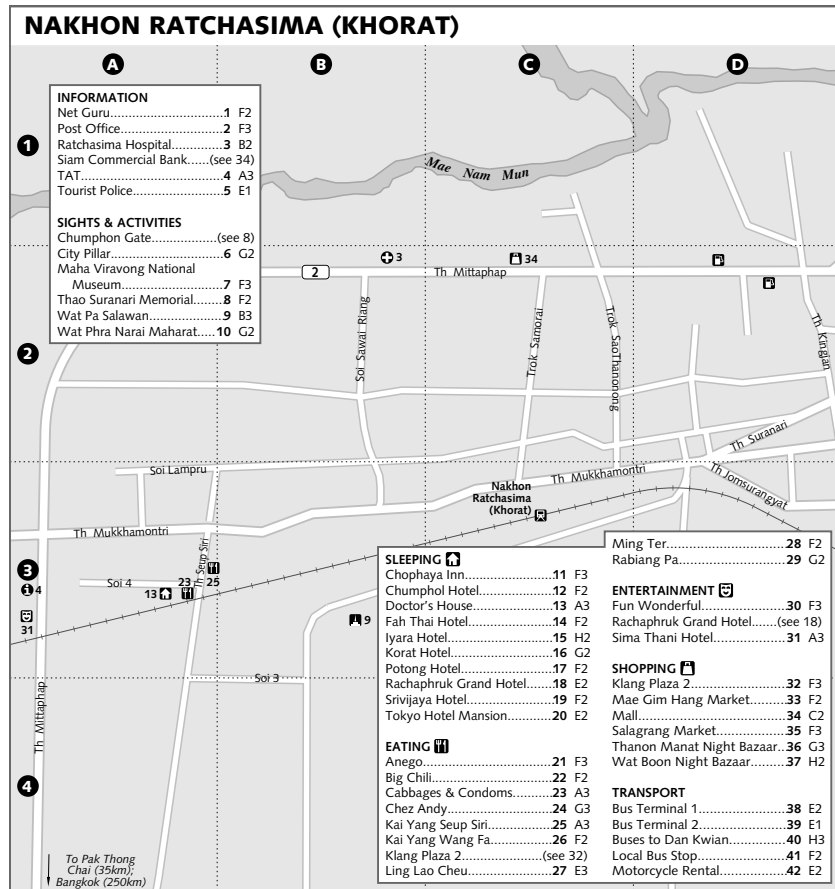
TAT (Tourist Authority of Thailand; ☎ 0 4421 3666; www.tourismthailand.org; 2102-2104 Th Mittaphap; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm) Has information about Khorat, Buriram, Surin and Chaiyaphum Provinces.

Sights

MAHA VIRAVONG NATIONAL MUSEUM

พิพิธภัณฑ์ชาตนาแห่งชาติมหาวิรวงศ์

Despite an interesting collection of Khmer and Ayuthaya-period artefacts, including stone and bronze Buddhas, woodcarvings from an ancient temple and various domestic



utensils, chances are you will have this interesting little **museum** (☎ 0 4424 2958; Th Ratchadamnoen; admission 10B; ☎ 9am-4.30pm Wed-Sun) to yourself. It is hidden away in the grounds of Wat Sutichinda.

THAO SURANARI MEMORIAL

อนุสาวรีย์ท้าวสุรนารี

Thao Suranari is something of a Wonder Woman in these parts. As the wife of the city's assistant governor, she rose to notoriety in 1826, during the reign of Rama III, when she led a ragtag army of locals to victory against the ravaging Vientiane forces of Chao Anuwong. Some scholars suggest the legend was concocted to instil a sense of Thai-ness in the ethnic-Lao people of the province, but locals still flock to her **memorial** (Th Ratchadamnoen) in adoring droves. Those whose supplications to Ya Mo (Grandma Mo), as she is known, burn incense, leave offerings of flowers and food, or hire troupes to perform *phleng khorat*, the traditional Khorat folk song, on a stage near the shrine.

Behind the memorial is a small section of the **city wall**, including the old **Chumphon Gate**, the only one left standing – the other three are recent rebuilds.

OTHER SIGHTS

Several of the city's wats are worth a visit. Thao Suranari and her husband founded **Wat Salaloi** (off Th Thanonaosura; ☎ daylight hours) in 1827. Her ashes are interred here, and many people also hire singers to perform for her spirit. The award-winning *bôt* (central sanctuary), built in 1967, resembles a Chinese junk and, along with several other buildings, is decorated with Dan Kwian pottery (see p463).

Wat Phra Narai Maharat (Th Prajak; ☎ daylight hours) is of interest for two main reasons: it has a very holy Khmer sandstone sculpture of Phra Narai (Vishnu) and Khorat's **lāk meuang** (**city pillar shrine**), site of daily devotions, is just outside.

Wat Pa Salawan (☎ daylight hours) is a Tham-mayut 'forest monastery' and was once surrounded by jungle. It has since been engulfed by the city, but remains a fairly quiet escape from the urban push and shove. The late abbot Luang Phaw Phut was quite well known as a meditation teacher and has developed a strong lay following in the area. Students of all abilities are welcome. A few relics belonging to the legendary Ajahn Man

are on display in the main *wihāan* (large hall), a large but simple wooden affair. A cemetery on the grounds has a couple of markers with photos of US veterans who lived out their later years in Khorat – one of seven air bases in Thailand used by the US armed forces to launch air strikes on Laos and Vietnam in the 1960s and 1970s was just outside Khorat.

Festivals & Events

Khorat explodes into life during the **Thao Suranari Festival**, when city dwellers – in addition to legions of villagers from the surrounding area – come together to celebrate Thao Suranari's victory over the Lao (see left). It's held annually from 23 March to 3 April and features parades, theatre and folk song.

Sleeping BUDGET

Doctor's House (☎ 0 4425 5846; 78 Soi 4, Th Seup Siri; r 150-180B) One of the few cheapies where guests bearing rucksacks are the norm, this homestay has three spacious rooms with shared bathroom in an old wooden house. The slightly draconian rules (the gate is locked at 10pm) ensure plenty of peace and quiet.

Potong Hotel (☎ 0 4425 1962; Th Ratchadamnoen; s/d 170/220B) Potong trades the Doctor's House vibe for an unbeatable location. These are some of the cheapest rooms in the city with good reason, but they make the pass list.

Tokyo Hotel Mansion (☎ 0 4424 2873; 331 Th Suranari; r 240-366B; ☎) Around the corner from the bus station, this hotel shows a little more attention to detail than most of Khorat's cheapies, though most rooms are pretty small.

WHAT TO EXPECT IN NORTHEASTERN THAILAND

- Budget (under 350B)
- Midrange (350B to 999B)
- Top end (over 1000B)

There are few guesthouses in the northeast, so most budget rooms are in Chinese-style concrete-box hotels, and most of these properties mix both older, budget rooms and dowdy but decent midrange options. When available, top-end properties usually offer excellent value.

Chumphol Hotel (☎ 0 4424 2453; 124 Th Phoklang; r 240-380B; ☎) Although the dreary corridors are a little reminiscent of an asylum, the rooms are big enough to swing a brace of cats in and the place is generally tidy.

Fah Thai Hotel (☎ 0 4426 7390; 35-39 Th Phoklang; r 250-380B; ☎) Similar in quality to Chumphol, this Thai-Chinese outfit feels less institutional, but is in bigger need of a paint job.

MIDRANGE

Srivijaya Hotel (☎ 0 4424 2194; 9-11 Th Buarong; r 480-530B; ☎) The Srivijaya is far too ordinary to justify the 'boutique hotel' label it's given itself; nevertheless the comfy, spic-and-span rooms guarantee a good night's sleep.

Chaophaya Inn (☎ 0 4426 0555; www.chaophayainnko.com; 62/1 Th Jomsurangyat; r 490-600B; ☎) Rising beyond the jailhouse vibes endemic in many of Khorat's midrange options, the Chaophaya offers cleanliness, comfort and a little atmosphere for a very reasonable price.

Iyara Hotel (☎ 0 4426 8777; theiyara@yahoo.com; 497/1 Th Chumphon; r 500-600B; ☎) Once a fancy business-class hotel, the Iyara is quite tattered these days, but if you want to soak up the atmosphere of this quiet neighbourhood, it's your only choice. Discounts to 350B are routine.

Korat Hotel (☎ 0 4425 7057; korathotel@hotmail.com; 191 Th Atsadang; r 500-600B; ☎) Here's proof that '70s styling made it to Thailand, and stayed way beyond its welcome. Yep, it's not the hippest of hotels, but the rooms are comfy and the welcome cheery. And if you can't sleep you can always pop down to the disco, karaoke or other night-time diversions.

TOP END

Rachaphruk Grand Hotel (☎ 0 4426 1222; www.rachaphruk.com; 311 Th Mittaphap; r 1200B; ☎) 'Grand' is laying it on a little thick, but this slightly dowdy four-star affair, the only hotel in this class in the city centre, is a decent bet if you fancy a few business-style comforts. There is a fitness centre with a sauna, a pair of restaurants and many other attached entertainment options, plus great views from the top floors.

Eating

Kai Yang Seup Siri (no roman-script sign; Th Seup Siri; dishes 30-40B; ☎ lunch) This spartan spot is famous for its grilled chicken, and reportedly has the best

sôm-tam in town. Just look for the roasting chickens.

Kai Yang Wang Fa (no roman-script sign; Th Ratchadamnoen; whole chicken 75B; ☎ lunch & dinner) Another famed roast chicken spot, this is takeaway only.

Ling Lao Cheu (no roman-script sign; ☎ 0 4426 0311; dishes 30-100B; ☎ lunch & dinner; ☎) This friendly place serves a dizzying array of regional and Chinese seafood dishes. It's down an unnamed street running parallel to Th Jomsurangyat; just look for the bright yellow shopfront.

Cabbages & Condoms (☎ 0 4425 3760; 86/1 Th Seup Siri; dishes 35-180B; ☎ lunch & dinner; ☎) This regular favourite offers a leafy terrace, a wine list (something of a rarity in this part of Thailand) and plenty of newspaper clippings celebrating its mostly Thai food. Like the original in Bangkok, this is a nonprofit operation sponsored by the Population & Community Development Association.

Rabiang Pa (☎ 0 4424 3137; 284 Th Yommarat; dishes 40-220B; ☎ lunch & dinner; ☎) The leafiest and loveliest restaurant on this stretch of Th Yommarat is also one of the most low-key. The 2kg picture menu makes ordering the tasty Thai food risk free.

Chez Andy (☎ 0 4428 9556; Th Manat; dishes 50-650B; ☎ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat; ☎) Khorat's archetypal expat haunt, this Swiss-managed place – appropriately housed in a red-and-white villa – has a global menu, with fondue, steak and fried rice available.

Other recommendations:

Big Chili (☎ 0 4424 7469; 158/8 Th Chakkri; dishes 70-350B; ☎ dinner; ☎) Pretty good Mexican, for Thailand.

Anego (☎ 0 4426 0530; 62/1 Th Jomsurangyat; dishes 60-600B; ☎ lunch & dinner; ☎) For authentic Japanese sushi and noodle dishes, plus some Italian pasta dishes.

Khorat is overflowing with tasty Thai and Chinese restaurants serving cheap meals. Th Ratchadamnoen near the Thao Suranari Memorial and the west end of Th Jomsurangyat are good places to look: two notables are **Ming Ter** (☎ 0 4424 1718; 698 Th Ratchadamnoen; dishes 25-60B; ☎ breakfast & lunch), a simple vegetarian affair, and the food courts at **Klang Plaza 2** (Th Jomsurangyat; dishes 25-60B; ☎ lunch & dinner; ☎). Eating on the hoof is best done at one of the city's many markets (see p460) where Isan specialities can be sampled en masse – keep your eyes open for deep-fried insects and pork sausages.

Entertainment

Sima Thani Hotel (☎ 0 4421 3100; Th Mittaphap; admission free) Hosts touristy cultural shows with Isan folk dances for tour groups; anyone can come along. Call for more details about the current programme.

The **Rachaphruk Grand Hotel** (311 Th Mittaphap) has the dance floor du jour, while **Fun Wonderful** (Th Jomsurangyat) is also popular. Both offer free admission.

The Mall (Th Mittaphap) Has bowling, a mini waterpark and the city's best movie theatre.

Klang Plaza 2 (Th Jomsurangyat) Also has bowling.

Shopping

Khorat has two downtown night markets. Both are at their best from 6pm to 10pm.

Thanon Manat Night Bazaar (Th Manat) Featuring cheap clothes, flowers, sunglasses and food vendors, this is the largest night market.

Wat Boon Night Bazaar (Th Chumphon) The smaller of the two night markets, but better for dining.

Mall (Th Mittaphap; ☎ 10.30am-9.30pm) Isan's largest, glossiest and busiest shopping centre.

Klang Plaza 2 (Th Jomsurangyat; ☎ 10am-9pm) You can find just about anything you need at this place downtown.

Also worth a browse are **Mae Gim Hang Market** (Th Suranari), which has mostly food and clothing, and **Salagrang Market** (Th Mahat Thai), with plenty of handicrafts.

Getting There & Away

BUS

Air-con buses (212B, three hours) leave the Northern bus terminal in Bangkok frequently throughout the day.

There are two bus terminals in Khorat. **Terminal 1** (☎ 0 4424 2899; Th Burin) in the city centre serves Bangkok and towns within the province. Buses to other destinations, plus more Bangkok buses, use **terminal 2** (☎ 0 4425 6006) off Hwy 2.

TRAIN

Eleven trains connect Bangkok to Khorat's two train stations. The express and special express services leave Hualamphong station at 5.45am, 10.05am, 6.30pm, 8.30pm and 9.50pm, arriving in Khorat about 4½ hours later, which is much longer than it takes to travel by bus. The 1st-class fare (express train only) is 230B, 2nd class is 115B and 3rd class is 50B. There are also 10 daily

BUSES TO/FROM KHORAT

| Destination | Fare (B) | Duration (hr) |
|------------------|----------|---------------|
| Chiang Mai | | |
| air-con | 601 | 13 |
| VIP | 701 | |
| Khon Kaen | | |
| ordinary | 125 | 3 |
| air-con | 160 | |
| Loei | | |
| ordinary | 179 | 6 |
| air-con | 372 | |
| Nong Khai | | |
| ordinary | 220 | 6 |
| air-con | 338 | |
| Pattaya | | |
| air-con | 255 | 5 |
| VIP | 310 | |
| Sakon Nakhon | | |
| ordinary | 220 | 6 |
| air-con | 283 | |
| Ubon Ratchathani | | |
| ordinary | 155 | 7 |
| air-con | 279 | |
| Udon Thani | | |
| ordinary | 193 | 4½ |
| air-con | 290 | |
| Yasothon | | |
| ordinary | 169 | 4½ |
| air-con | 220 | |

train services, most taking about six hours, to/from Ubon Ratchathani (1st/2nd/3rd class 268/133/58B).

You can get train information at ☎ 0 4424 2044.

Express trains leave for Bangkok from **Khorat Station** (☎ 0 4424 2044) at 10.18am and 6.47pm and take 4½ hours. Normal trains (six hours) leave at 8.22am, 1.10pm, 3.45pm, 8.36pm and 11.28pm. From Bangkok they depart at 5.45am (express), 6.40am, 9.10am, 11.05am (express), 11.45am, 9pm, 9.50pm and 11.40pm. The 1st-class fare (express train only) is 245B, 2nd class is 110B and 3rd class is 50B.

There are also eight ordinary trains (2nd/3rd class 213/138B, five to six hours) and one express (1st class 333B, four hours) daily to/from Ubon Ratchathani.

Getting Around

Sǎwngthǎew (8B) run fixed routes through the city, with most starting at bus terminal 1

and then passing down Th Suranari near the market. Sǎwngthǎew 1 takes you past Th Seup Siri to near the TAT office, while sǎwngthǎew 15 runs to bus terminal 2.

Túk-túk (motorised pedicab) and motorcycle taxis cost between 30B to 70B to most places around town. Several shops on the eastern half of Th Buarong also rent out motorcycles.

AROUND NAKHON RATCHASIMA

Phimai

The innocuous little town of Phimai has one of northeastern Thailand's finest surviving Khmer temple complexes at its heart. Reminiscent of Cambodia's Angkor Wat, which was built a century later, Prasat Phimai once stood on an important trade route linking the Khmer capital of Angkor with the northern reaches of the realm. Peppered with ruins and surrounded by ragged sections of the ancient town wall, modern-day Phimai still offers a little taste of this historic heyday. There is almost nothing to do here once you have wandered through the ruins – which are far less significant than those at Angkor Wat – but if you prefer the quiet life, this sleepy town makes a pleasant base from which to explore the wider region.

INFORMATION

Kasikornbank (Th Chomsudasadet; ☎ 8.30am-3.30pm Mon-Fri) Has ATM and exchange facilities.

Tourist police (☎ 1155; Th Anantajinda)

SIGHTS

Phimai Historical Park

อุทยานประวัติศาสตร์พิมาย

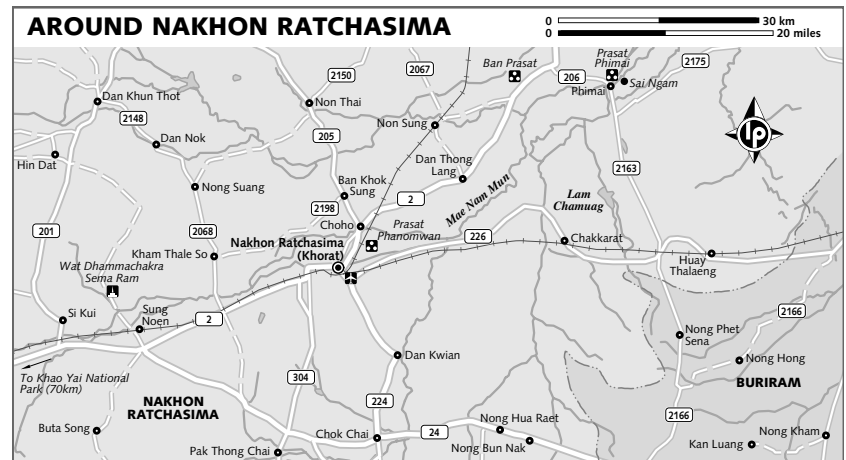
Started by Khmer King Jayavarman V during the late 10th century and finished by King Suriyavarman I (AD 1002–49) in the early 11th century, this Hindu-Mahayana Buddhist temple projects a majesty that transcends its size. Although predating Angkor Wat by a century or so, **Prasat Phimai** (☎ 0 4447 1568; Th Anantajinda; admission 40B; ☎ 7.30am-6pm) nevertheless shares a number of design features with its more famous cousin, not least the roof of its 28m-tall main shrine. It may well be wishful thinking, but the tourist brochures claim that it might have been the model for Angkor Wat.

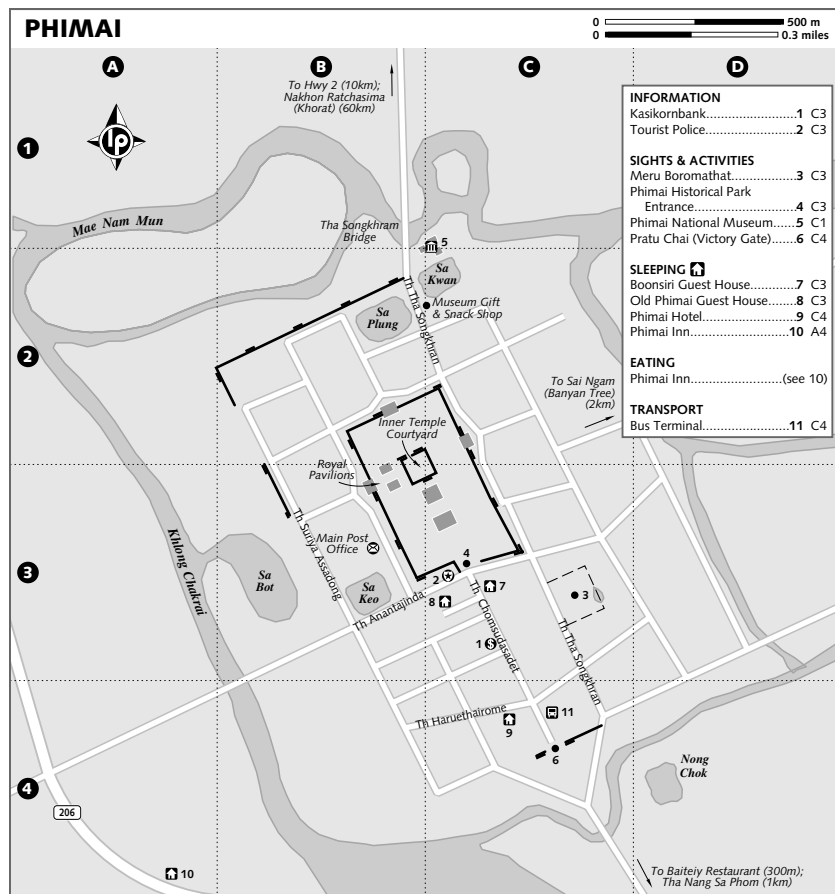
Unlike so many of northeastern Thailand's Khmer temples, Prasat Phimai has been elegantly reconstructed by the Fine Arts Department and is one of the most complete monuments on the circuit. Volunteer guides offer free tours on weekends.

Phimai National Museum

พิพิธภัณฑสถานแห่งชาติพิมาย

Situated on the banks of Sa Kwan, a 12th-century Khmer reservoir, this **museum** (☎ 0 4447 1167; Th Tha Songkhran; admission 30B; ☎ 8.30am-4pm) houses a fine collection of Khmer sculptures from Phimai, Phanom Rung and other ruins, as well as ceramics from nearby Ban Prasat. The museum's most prized possession, a stone sculpture of Angkor King Jayavarman VII, comes from Prasat Phimai and looks very much like a sitting Buddha. A sculpture





garden, next to the main hall, displays ornate boundary stones and other Khmer figures from Phimai.

Other Sights

A number of other historic features survive in and around Phimai. **Meru Boromathat** (Th Tha Songkhran; admission free; ☎ 24hr) is a brick *chedi* (stupa) dating back to the late Ayuthaya period. Its name is derived from a folk tale, which refers to it as the cremation site of King Bramathat.

Large sections of the city walls have crumbled away, but the **Pratu Chai** (Victory Gate), which faces Phimai at the southern end of Th Chomsudasadet, is a good indication of how they once looked.

A couple of kilometres east of town is Thailand's largest and oldest banyan tree, a megaflorum spread over an island in a large reservoir. The locals call it **Sai Ngam** (Beautiful Banyan; admission free; ☎ 6am-6pm), and the extensive system of roots cascading from all but the smallest branches makes it look like a small forest.

One kilometre south of the town is **Tha Nang Sa Phom** (admission free; ☎ 24hr), a landing platform constructed out of laterite in the 13th century.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

The **Phimai Festival**, staged over the second weekend of November, celebrates the town's history and features cultural performances,

light shows and dragon-boat races. A smaller version of the light show is held on the last Saturday of the month from October to April.

SLEEPING

Old Phimai Guest House (☎ 0 4447 1918; off Th Chomsudasadet; dm 80B, r 130-350B; ☎) This homey place down a *soi* (lane) is a little scruffy, but the backpacker vibe prevails and there's a welcoming atmosphere.

Phimai Inn (☎ 0 4428 7228; r 250-650B; ☎) The town's most upmarket option – not that the competition is particularly stiff – sits seemingly in the middle of nowhere on Rte 206, giving you some serious peace and quiet – unless you'd rather rip it up in the karaoke bar. The fan rooms are a bargain.

Boonsiri Guest House (☎ 0 4447 1159; 228 Th Chomsudasadet; dm 150B, r 450-650B; ☎) From the front there doesn't seem to be a whole lot to this hotel, but there are plenty of rooms behind the scenes. Pathological spring-cleaning appears to have scrubbed away most of the atmosphere, but standards are high (the dorms have lockers) and the rooms are big and airy.

Phimai Hotel (☎ 0 4447 1306; 305/1-2 Th Haruethairome; r 250-680B; ☎) Beyond the lobby, this place is letting itself get run-down, but it's the only proper hotel inside the city.

EATING

Sai Ngam (dishes 20-60B; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Most of the vendors next to the island serve Thai and Isan basics, including tasty Phimai noodles.

Phimai Inn (dishes 30-180B; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This hotel restaurant, serving many Isan dishes, gets good reviews.

Baiteiy Restaurant (☎ 0 4428 7103; Th Phimai-Chumpuang; dishes 40-200B; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Appropriately decorated with pseudo-sandstone Khmer carvings, this lovely outdoor eatery, about 500m south of Pratu Chai (Victory Gate), does a decent spread of Thai fare, plus some international staples.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Buses for Phimai leave from Khorat's bus terminal 2 (37B, 1½ hours, every half-hour).

GETTING AROUND

Phimai is small enough to stroll, but, to see more of the town and environs (eg Sai Ngam) you can rent bicycles from Boonsiri Guest House for 20B per hour or 100B per day.

Ban Prasat

บ้านปราสาท

About 3000 years ago, a primitive agricultural/ceramic culture put down roots at Bat Prasat, near the banks of Mae Nam Than Prasat. It survived for nearly 500 years, planting rice, domesticating animals, fashioning coloured pottery, weaving cloth and, in later years, forging tools out of bronze. The secrets of this early civilisation were finally revealed during extensive archaeological digs, finally completed in 1991. Three of the **excavation pits** (donations appreciated; ☎ 24hr), with skeletons and pottery left *in situ*, are on display throughout the village. A small **museum** (donations appreciated; ☎ 8am-4.30pm) houses some of the better discoveries and explains what life was like in those days.

Many of the houses are part of an award-winning **homestay programme** (per person incl 2 meals 400B), where villagers put up visitors in their homes and show them daily activities, like basketry and farming. Reservations should be made a day or two in advance through Khorat's **TAT office** (☎ 0 4421 3666; www.tourismthailand.org; 2102-2104 Th Mittaphap, Khorat; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm), or the village headman here, **Khun Thiam** (☎ 0 4436 7075).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Ban Prasat is 45km northeast of Khorat, off Hwy 2, and ordinary buses (27B, 40 minutes) to Phimai will drop you off. Motorcycle taxis waiting at the highway will zip you around to all the sites, including waiting time of about 15 minutes at each, for 60B.

Prasat Phanomwan

ปราสาทพนมวัน

Even after reconstruction the Khmer ruins of **Prasat Phanomwan** (admission free; ☎ 24hr) are rather tumbledown and the complex lacks the distinctive *prang* (Khmer-style tower) that make so many Khmer temples photogenic. If you're a history buff, however, it's worth a quick trip. Although the structure is thought to have been originally a shrine to the Hindu god Shiva, images of Buddha that have probably been enshrined here since at least the early Ayuthaya period are still in place and remain the objects of veneration. There are direct sawngthæw from Khorat's bus terminal 1 (20B, 30 minutes).

Dan Kwian

ด่านเกวียน

Even if you think you have no interest in **Thai ceramics** you should pay Dan Kwian a visit.

This village 15km southeast of Khorat has been producing pottery for hundreds of years and its creations are famous for the rough texture and rust-like hue – only kaolin sourced from this district produces such results. Myriad shops line the highway and some are as much art gallery as store. It's not all pottery, though. Clay is shaped and fired into all kinds of objects, from jewellery and wind chimes to reproductions of ancient Khmer sandstone sculpture.

Originally the village was a bullock-cart stop for traders on their way to markets in old Khorat (*dàan kwian* means 'bullock-cart checkpoint'). The ramshackle private **Kwian Museum** (☎ 0 4437 5199; donations appreciated; ☞ daylight hours) at the north end of the strip displays a variety of old carts from around the country, plus some farming implements and examples of old-style pottery.

To get here from Khorat, hop on a bus (12B, 30 minutes) from near the south city gate.

Pak Thong Chai

ปากช่อง

Amphoe Pak Thong Chai became one of Thailand's most famous silk-weaving centres when Jim Thompson started buying silk here (for more on Thompson, see p135). Today there are around 35 silk factories in the district, not to mention the hundreds, if not thousands, of families still weaving on hand-loom under their houses in just about every village in the district; except Ban Pak Thong Chai itself, where families are too busy selling silk to make it. Two outlets worth seeking out are **Chattong** (☎ 0 4428 4465; ☞ 9am-6pm), on the highway across from the Silk Cultural Centre (it's been shuttered for many years but there is talk of reopening it), and **Macchada** (☎ 0 4444 1684; ☞ 8am-5pm), at the southern end of the main road through town. You can watch weavers working at the latter.

Pak Thong Chai is 35km south of Khorat on Rte 304. Buses (30B, 40 minutes) leave terminal 1 every half-hour.

Sandstone Reclining Buddha Image

พระพุทธรูปไสยาสน์หินทราย

Housed inside **Wat Dhammachakra Sema Ram** in Khorat's Amphoe Sung Noen is Thailand's oldest **reclining Buddha** (☞ daylight hours). Thought to date back to the 8th century, the 13.5m-long Dvaravati-style image is unique

in that it hasn't been covered with a layer of stucco and a coat of whitewash. It actually looks as old as it is purported to be. The crude but appealing image is protected from the elements by a huge roof, and an altar has been built before it. Also on display at the wat is a stone rendition of the Buddhist Wheel of Law, also found on the site, which is thought to predate the Buddha image.

Visiting **Wat Dhammachakra Sema Ram**, 40km southwest of Khorat, is best done as a day trip from there. **Sung Noen** (6B, 40 minutes) is on the railway line to Bangkok (although only three local trains stop here). It can also be reached by buses from either terminal in Khorat (22B, 30 minutes). From **Sung Noen** you'll have to hire a *sáwngtháew* for the final 5km to the wat. Expect to pay nearly 200B for the return trip.

KHAO YAI NATIONAL PARK

อุทยานแห่งชาติเขาใหญ่

Up there on the podium with some of world's greatest parks, **Khao Yai National Park** (☎ 08 1877 3127; admission 400B; ☞ 6am-9pm) is Thailand's oldest and most visited reserve. Covering 2168 sq km, Khao Yai incorporates one of the largest intact monsoon forests remaining in mainland Asia, which is why it was named a Unesco World Heritage site. The mostly English-speaking staff at the **visitor centre** (☞ 8.30am-4.30pm) are very friendly and helpful.

Rising to 1351m with the summit of **Khao Rom**, the park's terrain covers five vegetation zones: evergreen rainforest (100m to 400m); semi-evergreen rainforest (400m to 900m); mixed deciduous forest (northern slopes at 400m to 600m); hill evergreen forest (over 1000m); and savannah and secondary-growth forest in areas where agriculture and logging occurred before it was protected. Many orchids bloom from the middle of June through the end of July, one of the few benefits of rainy-season visits.

Some 250 wild elephants tramp the park's boundaries; other mammals recorded include sambar deer, barking deer, gaur, Malayan sun bears, Asiatic black bears, tigers, leopards, otters, and various gibbons and macaques. **Khao Yai** also has one of Thailand's largest populations of hornbills, including the great hornbill (*nók kòk* or *nók kaahang* in Thai), king of the bird kingdom, as well as the wreathed hornbill (*nók graam cháang*; literally, 'elephant-jaw

bird'), Indian pied hornbill (*nók khàek*) and brown hornbill (*nók ngéauk sii nám taan*). Hornbills breed from January to March, and this is the best time to see them. Over 200 bird species make the park their home and some 315 have been recorded.

There are two primary entrances into the park. The first is the northern entrance through **Nakhon Ratchasima Province**, with sleeping and transport options originating out of the backpacker town of **Pak Chong** (see transport information, p466). The second option is the southern entrance in **Prachinburi Province** (see Southeastern Thailand, p270), which is closer to Bangkok and a popular weekend destination for residents of the capital.

Sights & Activities

The easiest attraction to reach, other than the **roadside overlooks** (Pha Diew Die, on the way to the radar station, is the highest), is **Nam Tok Kong Kaew**, a small waterfall right behind the visitor centre. The biggest waterfall, just a 1km walk from the road in the far south of the park, is **Nam Tok Haew Narok**, whose three levels combine to form a 150m drop, but the beauty award goes to 25m **Nam Tok Haew Suwat**, which scooped a starring role in Danny Boyle's film *The Beach*. You can swim in the pool at the bottom. Though easily reached by car, this forest-encased jewel is best reached via 8km **Trail 1**, a somewhat challenging path (take a compass, you often have to take long detours around fallen trees) that connects it and other waterfalls to the visitor centre. There is a good chance of seeing gibbons and hornbills and it's probably the best footpath (the roads are better) for spotting elephants, though encounters are unlikely.

It's 5.4km from the visitor centre to **Nong Phak Chi observation tower** along **Trail 5**. This tower (there's another close to the visitor centre) overlooks a little lake and a salt lick and is one of the best wildlife-spotting spots in the park. This is the most likely place you'll see a tiger, but you have to be very lucky – like lottery-winner lucky – to do so. Three-kilometre-long **Trail 9** is a seldom-used path to this tower, but it's the better bet for spotting animals on your way. The shortest route to the tower, ideal for getting there at dawn or dusk (the best wildlife-watching times), is a 1km path along a creek bed, starting near **Km pillar 35**.

Most other hiking trails, some of them formed by the movement of wildlife, are not as well trodden, so guides are recommended. No matter what trail you take, you should wear boots and long trousers – some of the paths get a little rough and during the rainy season leeches are a problem – mosquito repellent also helps keep them away. The staff at the visitor centre gives hiking advice (especially important in the rainy season) and offers **bike rental** (per hr/day 50/200B).

Outside the park, about 10km from the northern gate, is a **bat cave** that begins disgorging millions of rare wrinkle-lipped bats around 5.30pm. Your hotel can direct you to the best viewing point.

Many of the guesthouses around **Khao Yai** offer **park tours** (**Greenleaf Guest House** and **Khao Yai Garden Lodge** have earned widespread praise) and this is really the ideal way to visit. Full-day programmes usually include a 'night safari' (which is your best chance to see elephants); lunch, snacks and water; and, in the rainy season, 'leech socks' (that are actually gaiters). Prices start around 1000B, though do some careful comparison shopping because some companies include the park entrance fee while others do not. Birdwatching, trekking and other speciality tours make good second-day add-ons to the standard tours. Half-day tours are also available, but just too short to be recommended. Reservations are unnecessary, but guides can get booked out by school groups so it's not a bad idea to call ahead. Rangers, if they are free, can sometimes be hired as guides, at the visitor centre. Prices are negotiable, but 500B for a trail walk seems to be the going rate.

Sleeping & Eating

There are also dozens of places to stay in and around the nearby town of **Pak Chong**. Touts at the train station and bus stops are helpful (if in doubt, call the hotel yourself, most have English-speaking staff), since the best places for visiting the park are south of town along Rte 2090 (Th Thanarat) and they can get you a free ride there.

☞ **Greenleaf Guest House** (☎ 0 4436 5024; www.greenleafatour.com; Th Thanarat, Km 7.5; r 200-300B) Half-home, half-guesthouse, this old favourite has some of the few budget rooms outside town. It's a bit ragged, but the friendly, English-speaking owners keep the rooms spotless.

Khao Yai Garden Lodge (☎ 0 4436 5178; www.khaoyai-garden-lodge.com; Th Thanarat, Km 7; r 350-2500B; 🏠 🚗 📶) Previous owners had let standards slide more than just a little, but the new owners appear to have righted the ship, which is good news because the lovely garden and individually decorated rooms (available starting at the mid-price level) make for a lovely stay.

Juldiss Khao Yai Resort (☎ 0 4429 7297; juldiss@khaoyai.com; Th Thanarat, Km 17; r 1430-5200B; 🏠 🚗 📶) This plush place is one of the Khao Yai area originals, and offers tennis courts, spa treatments, pleasant gardens and airy rooms.

Kirimaya (☎ 0 4442 6000; www.kirimaya.com; Rte 3052; r 8475-16,575B, tented villa 31,780B; 🏠 🚗 📶) The first impression of this luxury resort-spa is usually either ‘Wow!’ or stunned silence. Step ‘through’ the wooden front doors and you are greeted by a towering stilted restaurant and other Thai-Bali fusion buildings, all rising from a lotus- and reed-filled pond. All rooms have bamboo furniture, balconies and all the mod cons. We’re not too keen on having an 18-hole golf course on the edge of the park (even one designed by Jack Nicklaus), but there is no denying this place is special. It’s 7km east of the park gate.

The best setting for sleeping is, of course, in the park itself. There are two **camp sites** (per person 30B, 2-person tent rental 100B), basic two-sleeper **bungalows** (r 800B) and rather fancier three-bedroom **villas** (3500B) with air-con and fridge. Simple **dorms** (50B) are another option, but only when not in use by groups.

Each of the lodges listed above serve good food and there are many lovely, garden restaurants near them along Th Thanarat. The park itself has five restaurants: at the visitor centre, the Orchid Campsite, the Lam Takhong Campsite, Nam Tok Haew Suwat and Nam Tok Haew Narok. Even the camp site ones close early, so plan ahead.

Getting There & Away

From Bangkok take a bus (ordinary/air-con 115/148B, 2½ hours, every 20 minutes) from the Northern bus terminal to Pak Chong. From Khorat, just about all Bangkok-bound buses also stop in Pak Chong (ordinary/air-con 45/77B, 1½ hours). You can also get to Pak Chong by train from Bangkok, Ayutthaya or Khorat, but it is slower than the bus, especially if coming from Bangkok.

Sǎwngthǎew travel the 26km from Pak Chong to the park’s northern gate (25B, 45

minutes) from in front of the 7-Eleven store that’s about 300m west of the ordinary bus terminal (air-con buses stop at their own offices at various points on the main road). It’s another 14km to the visitor centre and park guards are used to talking drivers into hauling *faràng* (Westerner) up there.

Some shops on Pak Chong’s main road rent out motorcycles.

BURIRAM PROVINCE

Touch down in the little provincial capital of Buriram, at the heart of one of Thailand’s larger provinces, and you might wonder what all the fuss is about. Despite hanging on to half of its historic moat, the city is a hard sell as a tourist destination. The best advice is to make a beeline into the countryside, where you will find a landscape chock-a-block with tradition and peppered with ruins (143 of them). Most sit in the southern half of the province, which is poised to secede from Buriram; some government offices have already put up Nang Rong Province signs.

The crowning glory is Phanom Rung, a beautifully restored Khmer temple complex straddling the summit of an extinct volcano. The most spectacular Angkor monument in Thailand, Phanom Rung is worth the journey and should impress even those suffering acute temple overload.

BURIRAM & NANG RONG

บุรีรัมย์
pop 30,000

The forgettable capital of Buriram is a possible base for exploring the region’s temples, but the accommodation scene is poor and there’s very little to keep you occupied so most people bed down in Nang Rong, 54km to the south, which has a full range of services and several good guesthouses, before and after their ruin runs. Surin is another reasonable place to base yourself.

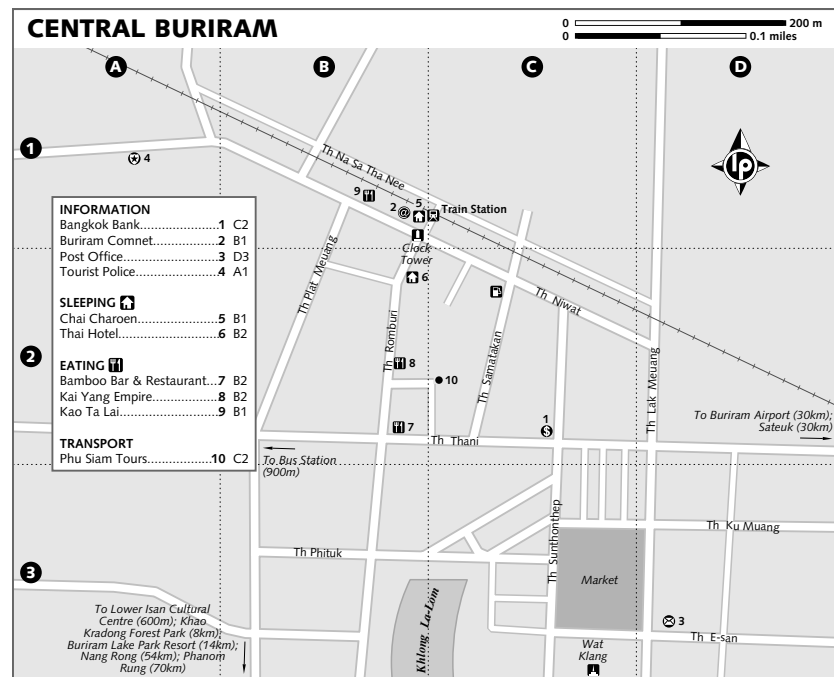
Information

Bangkok Bank (Th Thani; ☎ 8.30am-3.30pm) Has ATM and exchange facilities.

Buriram Comnet (8-10 Th Niwat; per hr 15B; ☎ 8am-9pm) Check your email here.

Post office (Th E-san; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-moon Sat, Sun & holidays)

Tourist police (☎ 1155; Th Niwat)



Sights

Rajabhat University’s **Lower Isan Cultural Centre** (☎ 0 4461 1221; Th Jira; admission free; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm), in the building with the stupa-shaped roof, suffers from neglect, but the elephant-handling display is worth a look.

For panoramic views of the city, join the immense Buddha image atop little **Khao Kradong Forest Park** (Hwy 219; ☎ 6am-6pm). On the drive up you’ll see what is assumed to be the crater of an extinct volcano; going down there’s a sculpture of an elephant prostrating itself before the Lord Buddha. If you are using public transport, any bus heading south will drop you at the entrance where you can climb the 197-step staircase.

Sleeping

BURIRAM
Chai Charoen (no roman-script sign; ☎ 0 4461 1559; Th Niwat; r 120-180B) This scruffy place next to the train station is fast approaching flea-pit, but the rooms aren’t as grubby as the rest of the joint.

Thai Hotel (☎ 0 4461 1112; 38/1 Th Romburi; r 180-400B; 🏠) The Thai could be quite nice if it just

made half an effort. As it is, there are passable rooms, and plenty of them.

Buriram Lake Park Resort (☎ 0 4460 5169; www.birdresort.com; Hwy 219; r 500-1500B; 🏠) If you are travelling with kids in tow, they will never be bored at this large resort on Huay Talat Reservoir, 12km south of the city. There is a small zoo, wandering peacocks, a dinosaur slide and thousands of herons and waterfowl living on the lake. The log-cabin bungalows are large and lovely, but a few that we saw needed a bit of repair so look closely before choosing.

NANG RONG

Honey Inn (☎ 0 4462 2825; www.honeyinn.com; 8/1 Soi Si Kun; r 200-350B; 🏠) This welcoming guesthouse, 1km from the bus station, is run by a knowledgeable retired English teacher. The rooms are simple but bright and a lot of travellers tips get shared among guests. Car and motorcycle rental, guided tours and food (with advance notice) are all available at good prices. To find it, walk north from the bus station and cross the main road, then head east until you see the sign; or take a sǎamlǎw for 30B.

California Inter Hostel (☎ 0 4462 2214; www.geocities.com/california8gh; Th 59/9 Sangkakrit; r 250-500B; 🍽️ 📺) Another friendly, helpful and English-speaking place, this one on the east side of town. The California is a little shinier than the Honey Inn. Khun Wicha also rents bikes, motorcycles and cars, and leads tours.

Cabbages & Condoms (☎ 0 4465 7145; Hwy 24; r 240-1500B; 🍽️ 📺) The cheapest (shared bathroom) rooms at this Population & Community Development Association-run resort, which is set in a garden and ringed by several little lakes, have gone pretty limp, but move up the price scale where you get stone floors and art on the walls, and this is a pleasant place to stay. The restaurant is also very good. A shoe and clothing factory, opened to bring work normally found in the city to the villages, sits onsite.

Eating

Kai Yang Empire (no roman-script sign; ☎ 08 1264 0624; Th Romburi; dishes 25-70B; 🍽️ lunch & dinner) This simple place, fronted by fish and rooster statues, is good for basic Isan food and noodle dishes.

Kao Ta Lai (no roman-script sign; ☎ 0 4461 2089; 136-138 Th Niwat; dishes 25-80B; 🍽️ dinner) Just down from the train station, this simple Chinese place has plenty of fresh fish on display out front and cauldrons of oddities to pick from inside.

Bamboo Bar & Restaurant (☎ 0 4462 5577; 14/13 Th Romburi; dishes 40-290B; 🍽️ breakfast, lunch & dinner) With a dartboard, satellite TV and entire walls covered with Heineken and Chang cans, this is the home-away-from-home of Buriram's expat set. It has a lively atmosphere once the drinking starts, and the menu includes Western staples like schnitzel and spaghetti. It rents motorcycles for 200B per day.

There are also some restaurants and simple food stalls at Phanom Rung Historical Park.

Getting There & Away

AIR

PB Air (☎ in Bangkok 0 2261 0222; www.pbair.com) flies to Bangkok (one way 2360B, 50 minutes) five days a week. Buy tickets at **Phu Siam Tours** (☎ 0 4462 5065; Th Romburi; 🍽️ 8am-5pm) in the back of the Speed Music Complex.

BUS

Air-con buses to Bangkok's Northern bus terminal (227B, six hours) depart all day long; **999 VIP** (☎ 0 4461 5081), with an office at the terminal, has a daily 24-seater (450B) at

10.20pm. The other main destinations from Buriram's **bus terminal** (☎ 0 4461 2534) are Khorat (ordinary/air-con 65/95B, three hours, every half-hour) and Surin (air-con 35B, hourly).

TRAIN

Buriram is on the Bangkok-Ubon line and is served by 10 trains a day. The fastest services (taking under six hours) leave Bangkok at 5.45am and 9.50pm, and depart for Bangkok at 5.15pm. The slower trains take between seven and 8½ hours. Fares to Bangkok start at 67B for 3rd class and 265B for 2nd class, and go as high as 1016B for an air-con sleeper cabin on one of the overnight services. To Ubon Ratchathani (3rd/2nd class 40/201B) takes between 2½ and four hours, while Khorat (3rd/2nd class 24/165B) is two hours from Buriram on most trains.

You can get up-to-date train information from the **train station** (☎ 0 4461 1202).

Getting Around

Túk-túk to the town centre cost about 40B from the bus station and 400B from the airport.

PHANOM RUNG HISTORICAL PARK

อุทยานประวัติศาสตร์เขาพนมรุ้ง

Phanom Rung (Big Hill; ☎ 0 4463 1746; admission 40B; 🍽️ 6am-6pm) has a knock-me-dead location. Crowning the summit of a spent volcano, this sanctuary sits a good 70 storeys above the flat paddy fields below. To the southeast you can clearly see Cambodia's Dongrek mountains, and it's in this direction that the capital of the Angkor empire once lay. The Phanom Rung temple complex is the largest and best restored Khmer monument in Thailand (it took 17 years to complete the restoration) and, although it's not the easiest place to reach, it more than rewards those who make the effort.

The Phanom Rung temple was erected between the 10th and 13th centuries, the bulk of it during the reign of King Suriyavarman II (r AD 1113-50), which by all accounts was the apex of Angkor architecture. The complex faces east, towards the original Angkor capital. Of the three other great Khmer monuments of Southeast Asia, Cambodia's Angkor Wat faces west, its Prasat Khao Wihan faces north and Thailand's Prasat Phimai faces southeast. Nobody knows for sure whether these orientations have any special significance, especially

as most smaller Khmer monuments in Thailand face east (towards the dawn – typical of Hindu temple orientation).

If you can, plan your visit for one of the four times when the sun shines through all 15 sanctuary doorways. The correct solar alignment happens during sunrise on 3-5 April and 8-10 September and sunset on 5-7 March and 5-7 October. In leap years it begins one day earlier. The park extends its hours during this event. Also, on the first Saturday of April, local people have their own special celebration, the **Climbing Khao Phanom Rung Festival**, which commemorates the restoration of Phanom Rung. During the morning there is a procession up Khao Phanom Rung, and at night-time sound-and-light shows and dance-dramas are performed in the temple complex.

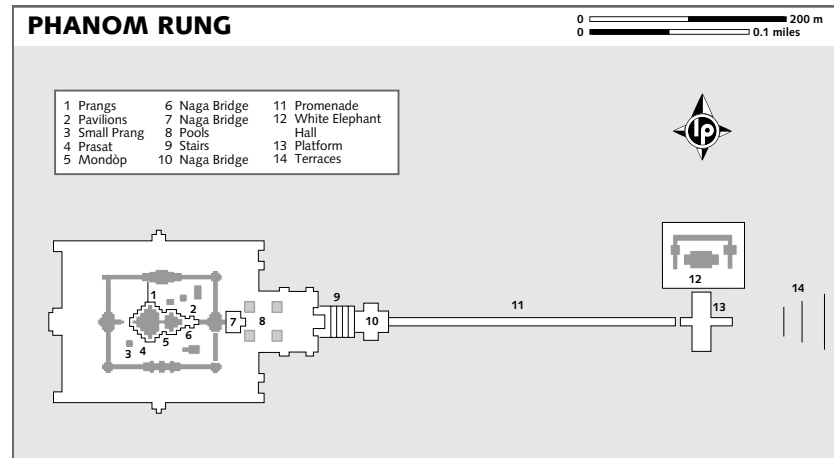
Below the main sanctuary, after the long row of gift shops, an **Information Centre** (admission free; 🍽️ 9am-4.30pm) houses a scale model of the area, artefacts found at the site, and displays about both the construction and restoration. Guides (fees are negotiable) offer their services at the complex, but when we last visited none spoke English. It's possible that bungalows will be available in the future, but it's unlikely.

Design

One of the most remarkable design aspects of Phanom Rung is the promenade leading to the main gate. This is the best surviving example in Thailand. It begins on a slope 400m east of

the main tower, with three earthen terraces. Next comes a cruciform base for what may have been a wooden pavilion. To the right of this is a stone hall known locally as Rohng Cháng Phèuak (White Elephant Hall) where royalty bathed and changed clothes before entering the temple complex. Flower garlands to be used as offerings in the temple may also have been handed out here. After you step down from the pavilion area, you'll come to a 160m avenue paved with laterite and sandstone blocks, and flanked by sandstone pillars with lotus-bud tops, said to be early Angkor style (AD 1100-80). The avenue ends at the first and largest of three *naga* (mythical serpent-like creature) bridges. The first is flanked by 16 five-headed *naga* in the classic Angkor style – in fact, these figures are identical to those found at Angkor Wat.

After passing this bridge and climbing the stairway you come to the magnificent east gallery leading into the main sanctuary. The central *prasat* (building with a cruciform ground plan and needle-like spire) has a gallery on each of its four sides and the entrance to each gallery is itself a smaller version of the main tower. The galleries have curvilinear roofs and false-balustrade windows. Once inside the temple walls, have a look at each of the galleries and the *gopura* (entrance pavilion), paying particular attention to the lintels over the porticoes. The craftsmanship at Phanom Rung represents the pinnacle of Khmer artistic achievement, on par with the reliefs at Angkor Wat in Cambodia.



Khmers some 500 years earlier. The community paid tribute to Vientiane but also cultivated relations with Bangkok and Champasak. When Prince Anou (from Vientiane) declared war on Siam in the early 19th century, the Lao ruler of Chaiyaphum, Jao Phraya Lae, wisely switched allegiance to Bangkok, knowing that Anou's armies didn't stand a chance against the more powerful Siamese. Although Jao Phraya Lae lost his life in battle in 1806, the Siamese sacked Vientiane in 1828 and ruled most of western Laos until the coming of the French near the end of the 19th century. Today a statue of Jao Phraya Lae (renamed Phraya Phakdi Chumphon by the Thais) stands at the entrance to the capital city

CHAIYAPHUM & AROUND

ชัยภูมิ

pop 55,500

Chaiyaphum is a bit of a nowhere town and is a base for visiting the surrounding attractions – all just a short hop outside the city – rather than a destination in itself. In brief, silk lovers should head west to the village of Ban Khwao and the outdoorsy should head to the mountains where the relatively unknown Tat Ton National Park is the star of several national parks in the area.

Information

Bangkok Bank (Th Sanambin, Lotus Department Store; ☎ 10am–8pm) The city's only late-opening bank does foreign exchange.

Pat Pat (☎ 0 4483 0037; Th Tantawan; per hr 15B; ☎ 9.30am–10pm) Friendly internet café and good source of information about Chaiyaphum.

Post office (Th Bannakan; ☎ 8.30am–4.30pm Mon–Fri, 9am–noon Sat, Sun & holidays)

Sights

BAN KHWAO

บ้านขาว

Most visitors to Chaiyaphum are here for the silk village of **Ban Khwao**, 13km southwest of town on Rte 225, where nearly 50 shops sell fabric and clothing. The **Silk Development Centre** (☎ 0 4489 1101; admission free; ☎ 8am–5pm) by the market has displays about silk-making and will soon offer day-long tours: if you've never observed the process – from the cultivation of mulberry trees and propagation of silkworms to the dyeing and weaving of silk thread – you're in for an interesting day. Since over 200 families produce fabric, many using *mát-mii* methods, you'll also be able to see some of the steps on your own if you wander around. Sawngthæw to Ban Khwao (15B, 20 minutes, every 20 minutes) leave from in front of Pat Pat internet café.

TAMNAK KHEO

ตำหนักเขียว

Tamnak Kheo (Green Hall; ☎ 0 4481 1574; off Th Burapha; admission free; ☎ 10am–noon & 2–4pm), built in 1950 as the governor's residence and now restored as a museum, has displays of old *mát-mii* cloth and photos from King Rama IX's 1955 visit. The classic wooden house itself is more interesting than the displays.

MÁT-MII

Thanks to growing interest from both Thais and foreigners, the once-fading Isan tradition of *mát-mii* has undergone a major revival and is now one of Thailand's best-known weaving styles. Similar to Indonesian *ikat*, *mát-mii* is a tie-dye process (*mát* is 'tie' and *mii* is 'strands') that results in a geometric pattern repeatedly turning back on itself as it runs up the fabric. The wider the pattern, the more complicated the process. No matter what the design, every *mát-mii* fabric has an ever-so-slight blur to it, which, more than anything else, makes it so distinct.

To start, the weavers string their thread – either silk or cotton, but usually silk – tightly across a wooden frame sized exactly as wide as the finished fabric will be. Almost always working from memory, the weavers then tie plastic (traditionally the skin of banana plant stalks were used) around bunches of strands in their desired design. The frame is then dipped in the dye (usually a chemical colour, though natural sources such as flowers and tree bark are regaining popularity), which grips the exposed thread but leaves the wrapped sections clean. The wrapping and dipping continues for multiple rounds, which results in intricate, complex patterns that come to life on the loom. The more you see of the process, the more you realise how amazing it is that the finished product turns out so beautifully.

Most of the patterns, usually abstract representations of natural objects such as trees and birds, are handed down from mother to daughter, but increasingly designers are working with weaving groups to create modern patterns, which invariably fetch higher prices. Some silk weavers now fetch outlandish prices for their artistry. On the other hand, a two-colour cotton pattern, which can be turned out in a matter of days, might cost as little as 60B per metre.

PRANG KU

ปราสาทคู

This hollow Khmer **prang** (☎ daylight hours), about 800m east of the **Jao Phraya Lae monument**, was constructed during the reign of the final Angkor king, Jayavarman VII (AD 1181–1219), as a place of worship at a 'healing station' on the Angkor temple route between the Angkor capital in Cambodia and Prasat Singh in Kanchanaburi Province. It's not much to look at and has just one poorly preserved lintel, but it's the top ancient site in the province – which is why history buffs don't flock to Chaiyaphum. The Buddha figure inside the *ku* (hollow, cave-like stupa) purportedly hails from the Dvaravati period (6th to 10th centuries).

TAT TON NATIONAL PARK

อุทยานแห่งชาติตาดโตน

It isn't the grandest of reserves, but **Tat Ton National Park** (☎ 0 4485 3293, reservations 0 2562 0760; admission 400B; ☎ 7am–6pm) gets few weekday visitors and makes a pleasant escape for those who really want to get away from it all. Covering 218 sq km at the edge of the Laen Da mountain range, 23km north of the city, Tat Ton is best known for its photogenic namesake 6m-high waterfall, which stretches 50m wide during the May to October monsoon, but flows year-round. You'll probably be the only sightseer at

the park's other smaller waterfalls, including **Tat Fah**, which is the most beautiful.

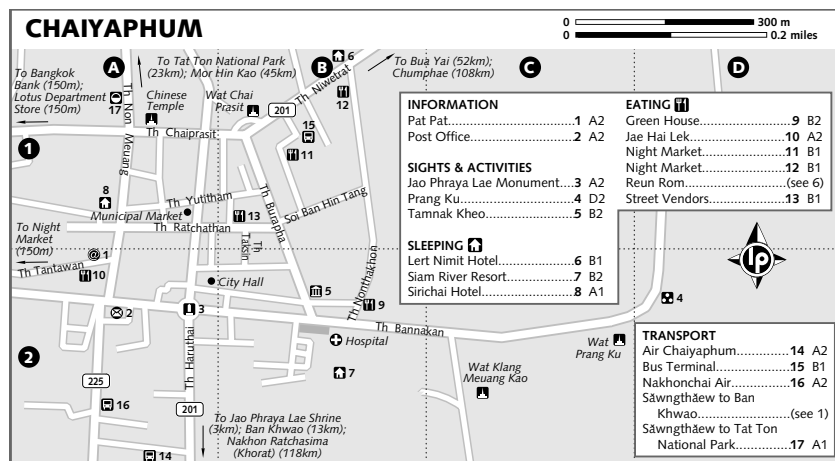
The park has **camp sites** (per person 30B, 3-person tent hire 300B) and 13 **bungalows** (4 people from 1200B), plus a restaurant and snack shops.

Some sawngthæw pass the park entrance road (25B, 45 minutes) every morning, but you'll have to walk 1.5km to the falls. Or stop in Ban Tat Ton (15B, 30 minutes), and hire a *túk-túk* for about 200B with an hour or so wait.

MOR HIN KHAO

มอหินขาว

Oddly promoted as the 'Stonehenge of Thailand', **Mor Hin Khao** contains a line of five natural stone pinnacles with tapered bottoms rising to 15m. Two fields of less dramatic, but still oddly sculpted rocks lie further up the mountain, beyond the reforestation office. The route to the rocks, 20km northwest of Tat Ton via rough country roads, will be paved and signed in English sometime in the near future, but until then it's very difficult to find, so inquire at the park visitor centre. Someone from the park might ride with you if you ask. A camp site is also planned, which will be welcome because the site can be spectacular at sunset. Call the **Ministry of Sports & Tourism** (☎ 0 4481 1218) in Chaiyaphum for updates.



Festivals & Events

Chaiyaphum residents celebrate two week-long festivals yearly in honour of **Jao Phraya Lae** (see p471 for more on this ruler). The one starting January 12, the date of his death, takes place at City Hall, near his statue, while activities in mid-May focus on a shrine erected on the spot where he was killed, about 3km southwest of town off the road to Ban Khwao. Both events feature music, dance and an elephant parade.

Sleeping

Lert Nimit Hotel (☎ 0 4481 1522; 447 Th Niwetrat; r 200-800B; 🍷) Step past the stylish lobby and this hotel is pretty ordinary, but the rooms are pleasant enough, though the fan-cooled ones are slightly dowdy. Rooms at the back have lovely mountain views.

Sirichai Hotel (☎ 0 4481 1461; 565/1 Th Non Meuang; r 340-1000B; 🍷) The Sirichai boasts similar standards as the Lert Nimit, though the cheaper rooms are a little bigger and better. Smiling staff make up for the lack of atmosphere.

Siam River Resort (☎ 0 4481 1999; off Th Bannakan; r 800-1800B, ste 3500B; 🍷) Chaiyaphum doesn't cater to droves of tourists, but this shiny new hotel out of earshot of the hubbub of the city (what little there is, anyway) is betting this will change. Free bikes for guest use.

Eating

Jae Hai Lek (no roman-script sign; ☎ 0 4607 7819; Th Tantanwan; dishes 20-55B; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) A simple, friendly all-vegetarian affair with a range of Thai and Chinese standards.

Green House (☎ 08 7245 2622; 299/20 Th Non-thankhon; dishes 35-150B; 🍷 dinner) The most laid-back of several garden restaurants on this end of Th Nonthankhon, and the only one with an English menu (though it lists just a few of the many dishes available). The food and service are excellent.

Reun Rom (☎ 0 4481 1522; 447 Th Niwetrat; dishes 30-800B; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner; 🍷) The Lert Nimit Hotel's restaurant serves good Thai and Western food, including pancakes, and the menu lists four pages of seafood. It is open right through to the witching hour.

You might want to try *mahm* (sour beef and liver) sausages in Chaiyaphum's lacklustre **night market** (🕒 5-10pm), a short stroll west of the city centre, since locals claim it makes Isan's best. There are also two food-only night markets by the bus terminal, and the street

vendors near the park on Th Ratchathan stay open early to late.

Getting There & Away

Nakhonchai Air (☎ 0 4481 2522), with evening-only services to Ubon Ratchathani (air-con 510B, six hours) and Chiang Mai (VIP 750B, four hours), and **Air Chaiyaphum** (☎ 0 4481 1556), with hourly services to Bangkok, have their own southern offices.

Government buses to/from Khon Kaen (ordinary/air-con 70/85B, 2½ hours, hourly), Khorat (ordinary/air-con 60/108B, two hours, hourly) and Bangkok's Northern bus terminal (air-con 270B, five hours, 14 daily) use Chaiyaphum's bus terminal.

Getting Around

A túk-túk should cost no more than 25B for any destination in town.

KHON KAEN & ROI ET PROVINCES

Khon Kaen and Roi Et, where farming and textiles still dominate life, lie at the heart of Isan and are excellent places to dip a toe into the region's culture without having to rough it. On the flipside, things are booming in Khon Kaen itself and the city makes for a lively stopover if you fancy a quick slug of metropolitan living.

KHON KAEN

ขอนแก่น

pop 145,300

Khon Kaen is the darling of Isan's economic boomtime. The skyline rises high, neon illuminates the night, and a bumper crop of bars and restaurants entertain an expanding middle class. As the site of the northeast's largest university and an important hub for all things commercial and financial, the city is youthful, educated and on the move.

Of course, not everyone will feel the urge to celebrate in Khon Kaen's downtown clubs. With a sterile concrete veneer blanketing most of the centre, this big city has inherited little of Isan's idiosyncratic appeal. Wandering through traffic, with office blocks above, it sometimes takes the elephants, trudging down the busy city-centre streets, to remind you that you are in Thailand at all.

But with fine eateries, swanky hotel rooms and plenty of places to wear holes in your dancing shoes, Khon Kaen is the ideal spot to decompress after humping it through the northeast's quieter corners.

History

The city gets its name from Phra That Kham Kaen, a revered *chedi* at Wat Chetiyaphum in the village of Ban Kham, 32km to the northeast. Legend says that early in the last millennium a *thâat* (four-sided, curvilinear reliquary stupa) was built over a tamarind tree stump that miraculously came to life after a contingent of monks carrying Buddha relics to Phra That Phanom (in today's Nakhon Phanom Province) camped here overnight. There was no room at That Phanom for more relics, so the monks returned to this spot and enshrined the relics in the new That Kham Kaen (Tamarind Heartwood Reliquary). A town developed nearby, but was abandoned several times until 1789 when a Suwannaphum ruler founded a city at the current site, which he named Kham Kaen after the *chedi*. Over the years the name has changed to Khon Kaen (Heartwood Log).

Orientation & Information

Khon Kaen has two nearly adjacent tourist centres. Most budget and midrange hotels lie between the bus stations, on or near Th Klang Meuang. The upmarket choices are all a quick hop to the southeast in the city's nightlife district. There are good eats in both places.

CONSULATES

Laos (☎ 0 4324 2858; 171 Th Prachasamoson; 🕒 8am-noon & 1-4pm Mon-Fri) Normal turnaround for visas is three days, but for an extra 200B you can get immediate service. It only accepts baht, and at a poor exchange rate.

TIES THAT BIND THAIS

To occupy yourself on long bus rides through Isan, do a survey of passengers wearing thin white strings around their wrists. In rural villages in Isan, elders and family members assemble to tie *fai phiuk khâen* (sacred thread) as a bon voyage measure. The strings act as leashes for important guardian spirits and ensure safety during a trip or success in a new venture. The ceremony is also used on newlyweds.

Strings are also strung on wrists in a similar ceremony, known as *phiuk siaw* (friend bonding), most famously celebrated in Khon Kaen (see p477) to cement friendships with one's closest confidants. More than just a symbolic ritual, the friends gain a standing on par with siblings in each other's families.

Some people believe that these strings must fall off naturally rather than be cut, but this can take weeks, turning sacred thread into stinky thread.

Vietnam (☎ 0 4324 1586; Th Chatapadung; 🕒 8.30-11.30am & 2-4pm Mon-Fri) Visas ready next day.

EMERGENCY & MEDICAL SERVICES

Khon Kaen Ram Hospital (☎ 0 4333 3800; Th Si Chan) For specialist and 24-hour emergency care.

Tourist police (☎ 1155; Th Mittaphap) Next to HomePro.

INTERNET ACCESS

There are dozens of internet cafés in town. **Meeting Net** (no roman-script sign; 54/6 Th Klang Meuang; per hr 15B; 🕒 24hr)

MONEY

There are banks with exchange and ATM facilities across Khon Kaen.

Siam Commercial Bank (Th Si Chan, Oasis Plaza; 🕒 10.30am-8pm) One of several banks in this area.

POST

Main post office (Th Klang Meuang; 🕒 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 9.30am-noon Sat, Sun & holidays)

TOURIST INFORMATION

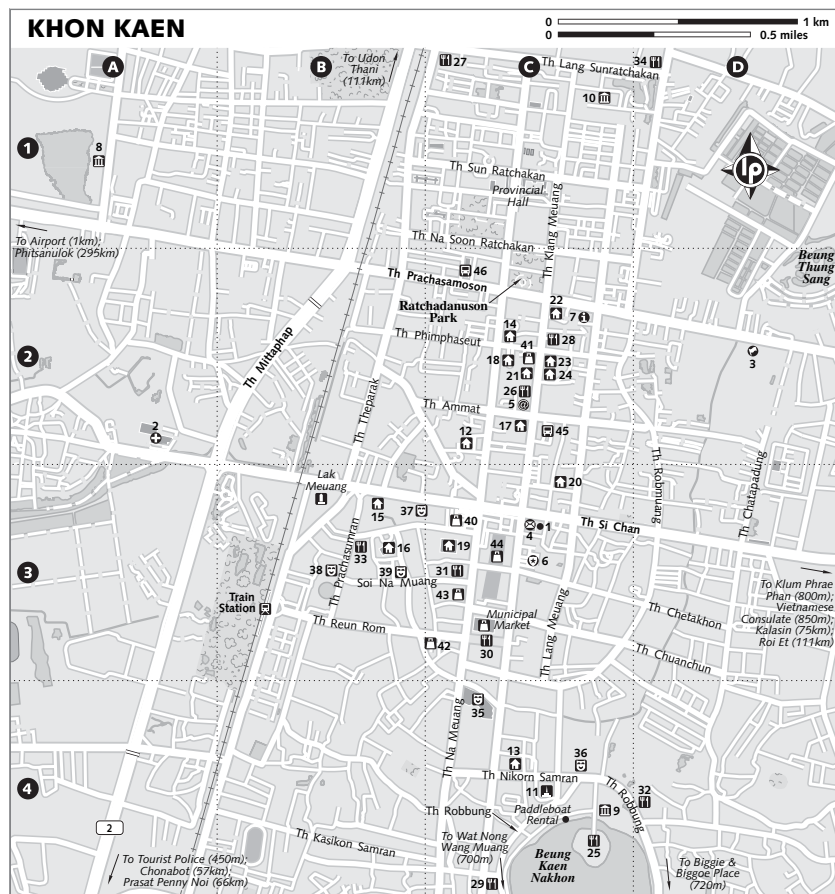
TAT (☎ 0 4324 4498; www.tourismthailand.org; 15/5 Th Prachasamoson; 🕒 8.30am-4.30pm) Distributes maps of the city and can answer queries on Khon Kaen and the surrounding provinces. It has information about an informal temple-stay programme at Wat Tee Pak Sonk Sa Wang Porn in Amphoe Khao Suan Kwang.

TRAVEL AGENCIES

Air Booking & Travel Centre (☎ 0 4324 4482; 403 Th Si Chan; 🕒 8.30am-6pm Mon-Sat) Books flights and makes other travel arrangements.

Sights

Although it doesn't seem like it at first look, there is more to do in Khon Kaen than revel in



the nightlife and shop for souvenirs. First stop should be the **Khon Kaen National Museum** (☎ 0 4324 6170; Th Lang Sunratchakan; admission 30B; ☹ 9am-4pm), which has an interesting collection of artefacts from prehistoric times to the present, including a Dvaravati *sēmaa* (temple boundary marker) from Kalasin depicting Princess Pimpa washing Lord Buddha's feet with her hair, and Ban Chiang painted pottery.

The National Museum's household and agricultural displays shed light on what you'll see out in the countryside, but for a more in-depth introduction to Isan, visit the excellent and engaging **Khon Kaen City Museum** (Hong Munmung; ☎ 0 4327 1173; Th Rop Buengkaen Nakhon; admission 90B; ☹ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat), with dioramas and displays going back to the Jurassic period.

The **Art & Culture Museum** (☎ 0 4333 2035; admission free; ☹ 10am-7pm) at Khon Kaen University is also informative about Isan history and culture, but only if you read Thai. The ground-floor gallery sometimes has art exhibits.

Beung Kaen Nakhon (Kaen Nakhon Pond), a 100-hectare lake lined with eateries and walkways, attracts early-evening strollers and smoochers to its banks. At the northern end of the lake is **Wat That** (Th Robbung; ☹ daylight hours), with elongated spires typical of this area, and at the south end is **Wat Nong Wang Muang** (Th Robbung; ☹ daylight hours), with its gorgeous nine-tier *chedi*. Inside you'll find enlightening murals depicting Khon Kaen history, historical displays and a staircase to the top.

| INFORMATION | | ENTERTAINMENT | |
|--|----------|--------------------------------------|----------|
| Air Booking & Travel Centre..... | 1 C3 | Kaen Inn..... | 17 C2 |
| Khon Kaen Ram Hospital..... | 2 A2 | Khon Kaen Hotel..... | 18 C2 |
| Lao Consulate..... | 3 D2 | Kosa Hotel..... | 19 C3 |
| Main Post Office..... | 4 C3 | Phu Inn..... | 20 C3 |
| Meeting Net..... | 5 C2 | Roma Hotel..... | 21 C2 |
| Police Station..... | 6 C3 | Rossukond Hotel..... | 22 C2 |
| Siam Commercial Bank..... | (see 37) | Saen Sumran Hotel..... | 23 C2 |
| Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT)..... | 7 C2 | Sri Mongkol Hotel..... | 24 C2 |
| SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES | | EATING | |
| Art & Culture Museum..... | 8 A1 | Bualuang Restaurant..... | 25 C4 |
| Khon Kaen City Museum..... | 9 C4 | Covered Night Market..... | (see 20) |
| Khon Kaen National Museum..... | 10 C1 | Food Stalls..... | 26 C2 |
| Wat That..... | 11 C4 | Kai Yang Rabeab..... | 27 C1 |
| SLEEPING | | Kao Tom Pae Tee..... | 28 C2 |
| Chaipat Hotel..... | 12 C2 | Kiwi Café..... | 29 C4 |
| Europe Guest House..... | 13 C4 | Kosa Coffee Shop..... | (see 19) |
| First Choice..... | 14 C2 | Open-air Night Market..... | 30 C3 |
| Grand Leo Mansion..... | 15 B3 | Pizza Uno..... | 31 C3 |
| Hotel Sofitel..... | 16 B3 | Plaa Pha Noi..... | 32 D4 |
| | | Restaurant Didine..... | 33 B3 |
| | | Tawantong..... | 34 D1 |
| | | TRANSPORT | |
| | | Air-Con Bus Terminal..... | 45 C2 |
| | | Ordinary Bus Terminal..... | 46 C2 |
| | | Thai Airways International..... | (see 16) |
| | | Fairy Plaza..... | 35 C4 |
| | | Iyara..... | 36 C4 |
| | | Kosa Bowl..... | (see 37) |
| | | Oasis Plaza..... | 37 B3 |
| | | Rad Pub..... | 38 B3 |
| | | U-Bar..... | 39 B3 |
| | | Khon Kaen OTO Center..... | 40 C3 |
| | | Lao Khao..... | (see 8) |
| | | Naem Laplae..... | 41 C2 |
| | | Prathamakhan Local Goods Centre..... | 42 C3 |
| | | Rin Thai Silk..... | 43 C3 |
| | | Sueb San..... | (see 41) |
| | | Talat Bobae..... | 44 C3 |

Festivals & Events

The **Silk Fair** and the **Phuk Siaw Festival** are held simultaneously over 12 days starting in late November. Centred on the Provincial Hall (*sālaa klaang*), the festival celebrates, and seeks to preserve, the tradition of *phūuk siaw* (friend bonding), a ritual renewal of the bonds of friendship during which *fai phuk kan* (sacred thread) are tied around one's wrists (see p475). Other activities include parades, Isan music, folk dancing, and the preparation and sharing of Isan food.

Khon Kaen kick-starts **Songkran**, the Thai New Year, on 8 April, with parades of floats bedecked with flowers.

Sleeping BUDGET

Saen Sumran Hotel (☎ 0 4323 9611; 55-59 Th Klang Meuang; s 150-200B, d 250B) The city's oldest hotel is also it's most charismatic with the wooden front holding onto its once-upon-a-time glory. The rooms are a little shaky, but scrubbed spotless, and an eclectic mix of decoration provides colour downstairs.

First Choice (☎ 0 4333 2374; 18/8 Th Phimphaseut; r 150-200B) This friendly little café is the city's proto backpacker hostel, with no-frills rooms upstairs and a traveller-friendly eatery below. Plane tickets, massage and travel advice are available. Bathrooms are shared.

Sri Mongkol Hotel (no roman-script sign; ☎ 0 4323 7939; 61-67 Th Klang Meuang; r 150-300B; ☹) The wooden front of this place also has a certain tumbledown charm, but you'll have to be a

sound sleeper – the walls are thin. There are concrete-block air-con rooms at the back.

Grand Leo Mansion (☎ 0 4332 7745; 62-62/1 Th Si Chan; r 350-450B; ☹) This homogenous place, around the corner from Disco Street, is functional and a little frumpy, but the spotless rooms promise a good night's sleep no matter at what hour you stumble back.

Roma Hotel (☎ 0 4333 4444; 50/2 Th Klang Meuang; r 230-550B; ☹) The Roma's air-con rooms are good value, spotless and comfy, and the fan rooms are...well, good value and comfy. Unfortunately, the hotel has some noisy neighbours, so you might get an early wake-up call.

MIDRANGE

Europe Guesthouse (☎ 0 4327 1083; www.europe-khonkaen.com; 23/5 Th Nikorn Samran; r 440-490B; ☹) This Dutch-owned place is no fancier than the big places in this class, but its six rooms are far cosier. A tiny fan room goes for just 150B, but, like the others, still has TV and fridge.

Phu Inn (☎ 0 4324 3174; off Th Lang Meuang; r 350-500B; ☹) The views of the car park at the centre of this Chinese-oriented place don't look so good but, at these prices, the rooms do.

Chaipat Hotel (☎ 0 4333 3055; 106/3 Soi Na Meuang; r 370-600B; ☹) Housed in a plain white tower just off Th Na Meuang, this reasonable place features smiley staff, marble floors and, if the brochure is to be believed, a uniformed lady clutching a cocktail in every room.

Biggie & Biggoe Place (☎ 0 4332 2999; Th Robbung; r 550-650B; ☹) If you're in Khon Kaen to

relax rather than live it up, this midsize hotel at the foot of the lake is a good bet. Rooms are rather simple and bland, but as it went up in 2005 there are none of the irritating quirks so common in older hotels.

Rossukond Hotel (☎ 0 4323 7797; 1/11 Th Klang Meuang; r 600-700B; 🍷) With wood-panelled walls and womb-red décor, the lobby of this good-value midranger has more character than most of the other options combined. The balconied rooms are also relatively fresh on the décor front, and if you're a stickler for detail, there's a 'hygienic' paper cover on every toilet seat.

Khon Kaen Hotel (☎ 0 4333 3222; 43/2 Th Phimphasue; r 650-1200B; 🍷) This seven-storey place also bags a few points for atmosphere, with a pleasant maroon paint job downstairs and the odd nod to traditional décor throughout. The hotel remains functional rather than fabulous, but the lower-priced rooms, each with a private balcony, are definitely above average for this class.

Kaen Inn (☎ 0 4324 5420; kaenninhotel@yahoo.com; 56 Th Klang Meuang; r 660-1400B; 🍷 📺) Long since toppled as the town's top spot, the Kaen Inn is looking rather sorry for itself on the outside, but get through the door and you'll find an excellent midranger.

TOP END

Kosa Hotel (☎ 0 4332 0320; www.kosahotel.com; 250-252 Th Si Chan; s 1140-1380B, d 1260-1500B; 🍷 📺 📺) Only a little less glitzy than its neighbour the Sofitel, this fantastic-value place (unless it's full and jacks up the rates) is a good top-end choice and offers excellent facilities and slick service.

Hotel Sofitel (☎ 0 4332 2155; www.sofitel.com; 9/9 Th Prachasumran; r 2600B; 🍷 📺 📺) A stunning lobby sets the tone for one of Isan's best hotels. This international-standard Accor-run place in the heart of the city's nightlife district has plenty of razzle-dazzle, big well-equipped rooms, a gym and even its own microbrews.

Eating & Drinking

Khon Kaen has a fabulous array of restaurants and is the place to satisfy your cravings before heading back out into the countryside.

☐ **Tawantong** (☎ 0 4333 0389; 227/129 Th Lang Sunratthakan; per plate 40B; 🍷) breakfast & lunch) This large all-veggie, health-food restaurant sits across from the National Museum. The food is so good it gets many carnivorous diners.

Kai Yang Rabeab (no roman-script sign; ☎ 0 4324 3413; Th Lang Sunratthakan; chicken 90B; 🍷) lunch) Many locals believe Khon Kaen has Thailand's best *kai yaang* (grilled chicken) and this simple joint, serving an all-Isan menu, gets the most nods as best of the best.

First Choice (☎ 0 4333 2374; 18/8 Th Phimphasue; dishes 30-180B; 🍷) breakfast, lunch & dinner) This traveller-style eatery-hostel has some tasty breakfasts, smoothies, and a good range of Western and Thai dishes, including vegetarian options. Eat inside or on a little terrace surrounded by potted plants.

Kao Tom Pae Tee (no roman-script sign; ☎ 0 4324 1932; Th Klang Meuang; dishes 50-150B; 🍷) dinner) This no-frills local haunt lacks a little in décor, but serves up a mean *tôm yam* (spicy and sour soup made with seafood or chicken) until 3am, and has an English menu.

Plaa Pha Noi (no roman-script sign; ☎ 0 4322 4694; Th Robbung; dishes 40-200B; 🍷) lunch & dinner) This large, alfresco spot near Beung Kaen Nakhon specialising in seafood is where locals bring out-of-town guests to sample Isan food. Elephants sometimes perform in the park out the front.

Restaurant Didine (☎ 08 7189 3864; Th Prachasumran; dishes 40-200B; 🍷) lunch & dinner) As much a bar as a restaurant, as the two-page drinks list attests, the French chef whips up superb food, like tuna steak with saffron, that belies the simple surrounds. It's also got pub grub and Thai standards.

Bualuang Restaurant (☎ 0 4322 2504; Th Top Buengkaen Nakhon; dishes 60-350B; 🍷) lunch & dinner; 🍷) Ask a local out for dinner and they will probably want to go here. Perched on a pier over Beung Kaen Nakhon, it serves up a great spread of Thai, Isan and Chinese dishes in a largely alfresco setting.

Also recommended:
Kiwi Café (☎ 0 4322 8858; 311/13 Th Robbung; 50-115B; 🍷) dinner Mon-Fri, lunch & dinner Sat & Sun) Coffee, wine, cottage pie and, we swear, the best cakes and pies in Isan.

Pizza Uno (☎ 0 4322 0604; 340/3 Soi Na Muang; large pizza 189B; 🍷) lunch & dinner) Might be the best 'za in the city, and the rooftop patio is a nice touch.

Kosa Coffee Shop (☎ 0 4332 0320; 250-252 Th Si Chan; dishes 100-600B; 🍷) breakfast, lunch & dinner; 🍷) Serves an excellent lunch buffet (179B) and the beer garden out the front is pleasant.

Two **night markets** (🍷 5pm-midnight), a covered one near the air-con bus terminal and an open-air affair on Th Reun Rom on the south side

of the Municipal Market, are the life and soul of the budget eating scene. Many **food stalls** (Th Klang Meuang) also open up between Th Ammat and the Roma Hotel in the late afternoon. For cheap eats around the high-priced hotels, hit the 5th-floor food court at **Oasis Plaza** (Th Si Chan; dishes 20-40B; 🍷) lunch & dinner) shopping centre.

Entertainment

Khon Kaen's exuberant nightlife is centred on Th Prachasumran, also known as Disco Street, where clubs and bars run wild to mild. Most get going around 10pm and few charge a cover.

Rad Pub (☎ 0 4322 5987; Th Prachasumran) One anchor is this multifaceted place, with two rooms of live music, one loud and one soft, 'coyote' dancers, and an alfresco restaurant and coffee shop.

U-Bar (☎ 0 4332 0434; off Th Prachasumran) Has a student-filled dance floor, behind the Sofitel.

☐ **Ilyara** (☎ 0 4332 2855; 43 Th Robbung; dishes 55-250B; 🍷) dinner) This place has a *ponglang* (percussion instrument made of short logs) music, dance and comedy show every night at 7.30pm, but if the show is cancelled, don't worry – with a Khmer-style art theme, this is the loveliest restaurant in the city so it's worth the trip anyway.

The cineplexes at **Fairy Plaza** (Th Na Meuang) and **Oasis Plaza** (Th Si Chan) shopping centres often screen films in English. **Kosa Bowl** (per game 59B; 🍷 11am-2am) has 30 lanes atop Oasis Plaza.

Shopping

Khon Kaen is the best places to buy Isan handicrafts; the selection of shops is excellent.

Klum Phrae Phan (☎ 0 4333 7216; 131/193 Th Chatapadding; 🍷 9am-6pm Mon-Sat) Run by the Handicraft Centre for Northeastern Women's Development, this out-of-the-way store has a superb collection of natural-dyed, hand-woven silk and cotton produced in nearby villages.

Sueb San (no roman-script sign; ☎ 0 4334 4072; Th Klang Meuang; 🍷 8am-6.30pm) More accessible than Phrae Phan, this store also stocks natural-dyed fabrics, plus some atypical Isan souvenirs.

Lao Khao (☎ 0 4333 2035; 🍷 10am-7pm) The gift shop at the Art & Culture museum (p476) carries both traditional crafts and modern art, and some interesting combinations of the two.

Rin Thai Silk (☎ 0 4322 0705; 412 Th Na Meuang; 🍷 8am-7pm) Locals, especially brides-to-be, looking for top-quality silk shop here.

Prathamkhan Local Goods Center (☎ 0 4322 4080; 79/2-3 Th Reun Rom; 🍷 9am-8.30pm Thu-Tue) This outlet has both textiles and handicrafts (including plenty of silver) and is a good one-stop shop if you don't have the time or inclination to spend the day trawling through the smaller stores. Don't miss the knick-knack and handicraft display at the back.

Khon Kaen OTOP Center (☎ 0 4332 0320; Th Si Chan; 🍷 9am-8pm) This large handicrafts store is most convenient to the top-end hotels, but is predictably touristy and pricey as well.

Naem Laplae (no roman-script sign; ☎ 0 4323 6537; 32 Th Klang Meuang; 🍷 6am-9.30pm Mon-Thu, 6am-10pm Fri-Sun) You can follow the fabulous aromas to this old-school Isan food store (if you've got a cold, look out for the bright yellow-and-red shopfront), the largest of several in this area, which sells everything from dried fish to fat, flavoursome sausages, most notably *naem*, made of raw pickled pork.

The most enjoyable souvenir-shopping experience is looking for the handful of people selling traditional baskets and wooden items hidden away within the food, clothes and household-goods stalls in **Talat Bobae** (Th Klang Meuang).

Getting There & Away

AIR

THAI (Thai Airways International; ☎ 0 4322 7701; www.thaiairways.com; 9/9 Th Prachasumran, Hotel Sofitel; 🍷 8am-5pm Mon-Fri) operates three services daily between Bangkok and Khon Kaen (one way 2305B, 55 minutes). The **airport** (☎ 0 4324 6345) is just west of the city off Hwy 12.

BUS

Both the **ordinary bus terminal** (☎ 0 4323 7472; Th Prachasamon) and the **air-con bus terminal** (☎ 0 4323 9910; Th Klang Meuang) are central and convenient.

Air-con buses leave to/from Bangkok's Northern bus terminal (329B, 6½ hours, every half-hour) from 6am to midnight. VIP service starts at 440B. Other air-con destinations from Khon Kaen include Chiang Mai (542B, 12 hours, 8pm and 9pm only), Nakhon Phanom (238B, five hours, four daily), Nong Khai (148B, 3½ hours, four daily), Pattaya (416B, nine hours, 10 daily), Roi Et (99B, two hours, four daily) and Udon Thani (104B, two hours, every 20 minutes).

There are ordinary buses from Khon Kaen to Chaiyaphum (70B, 2½ hours, hourly), Khorat

(125B, three hours, every 30 minutes) and Roi Et (50B, two hours, every 40 minutes).

TRAIN

Khon Kaen is on the Bangkok–Nong Khai line. Express trains leave from Bangkok's Hualamphong station for the Khon Kaen **train station** (☎ 0 4322 1112) at 8.20am, 6.30pm and 8.45pm, arriving about eight hours later. Bangkok-bound express trains leave Khon Kaen at 8.37am, 8.11pm and 9.05pm. The fares to Bangkok are 227/399/1068B for a 3rd-class seat/2nd-class seat/1st-class sleeper.

Getting Around

A regular, colour-coded *sǎwngthǎew* system plies the city for 8B per ride. The TAT office has a city map showing all the routes, but ask if it's the old, outdated one or an updated version before relying on it too heavily. Motorcycle taxis charge about 25B for a medium-length trip though town, while *túk-túk* drivers will want 40B to 60B. A shuttle runs from the airport to most hotels for 60B.

There's a plethora of car-rental outlets around the Kosa Hotel and Sofitel, and First

Choice Guesthouse has a bike to rent for 50B per day.

AROUND KHON KAEN

Chonabot

ชอนบอต
This small town located 55km southwest of Khon Kaen is one of Thailand's most successful silk villages. The easiest place to see the fabrics is at **Sala Mai Thai** (Thai Silk Pavilion; no roman-script sign; ☎ 0 4328 6160; donations appreciated; ☎ 8am–5pm), a resource centre for the local silk industry on the campus of Khon Kaen Industrial & Community Education College. There are a couple of traditional northeastern wooden houses with looms and other artefacts (ask the staff to unlock them), plus an exhibition hall cataloguing traditional *mát-mii* patterns. The campus is 1km west of Chonabot on Rte 229.

The pavilion sells silk, too, but most people buy from the shops on **Th Sriunreung** (aka Silk Road), though textiles can be purchased directly from silk-weaving houses in Chonabot – look for the tell-tale looms beneath the wooden homes. Even if you're not interested

in buying, it's worth wandering around to look at the amazing variety of simple wooden contraptions devised to spin, tie, weave and dry silk.

Some well-known **weaving households** include those belonging to Khun Suwan, Khun Songkham, Khun Chin and Khun Thongsuk. Very little English is spoken in Chonabot, so it helps considerably if you bring someone along who knows Thai.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Bus bound for Nakhon Sawan, departing hourly from Khon Kaen's ordinary bus terminal, will drop you in Chonabot (50B, one hour).

Prasat Peuay Noi

ปราสาทเปือยน้อย

Also known as Ku Peuay Noi, and locally as That Ku Thong, the 12th-century Khmer temple **Prasat Peuay Noi** (admission free; ☎ daylight hours) is the largest and most interesting Khmer ruin in northern Isan, though it can't compete with the famous sites further south. About the size of Buriram's Prasat Meuang Tam, the east-facing monument, rich in sculpted lintels, comprises a large central sandstone sanctuary surmounted by a partially collapsed *prang* and surrounded by laterite walls with two major gates.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

If you have your own wheels, head 44km south from Khon Kaen on Hwy 2 to Ban Phai, then east on Hwy 23 (signposted to Borabu) for 11km to the turn-off to Rte 2301. Follow it and Rte 2297 for 24km southeast through a scenic tableau of rice fields to Ban Peuay Noi. The ruins are at the western end of town.

By public transport from Khon Kaen, catch a bus (35B, one hour) or the 7.55am local train (9B, 30 minutes) to Ban Phai, then a *sǎwngthǎew* to Peuay Noi (25B, 30 minutes). The last *sǎwngthǎew* back to Ban Phai leaves Peuay Noi around 2pm.

Phu Wiang National Park

อุทยานแห่งชาติภูเวียง

When uranium miners discovered a dinosaur's patella bone in this region in 1976, palaeontologists were soon to follow, excavating the top of Phu Pratutima and unearthing a fossilised 15m-long herbivore later named *Phuwiangosaurus sirindhornae* (after Her

Royal Majesty, Princess Sirindhorn). Dinosaur fever followed (explaining the epidemic of model dinosaurs in Khon Kaen), more remains were uncovered and **Phu Wiang National Park** (☎ 0 4324 9052, reservations 0 2562 0760; admission 400B; ☎ 8.30am–4.30pm), northwest of Khon Khaen, was born.

Four enclosed excavation sites, including one with a partial skeleton of *Siamotyrannus isanensis*, an early ancestor of Tyrannosaurus Rex, can be easily reached by trail from the visitor centre or nearby parking areas. Park guides (some speak a little English) offer free tours of the bone sites if you call in advance. Those who want to explore further (best done by car or mountain bike) will find dinosaur footprints, waterfalls and prehistoric cave paintings.

The **Phu Wiang Museum** (☎ 0 4343 8204; admission free; ☎ 9am–5pm), 5km before the park, has geology and palaeontology displays, including full-size models of the dinosaur species that have been found in the area.

The park has **camp sites** (per person 30B, 3-sleeper tent hire 225B) and a **bungalow** (up to 12 people 1800B).

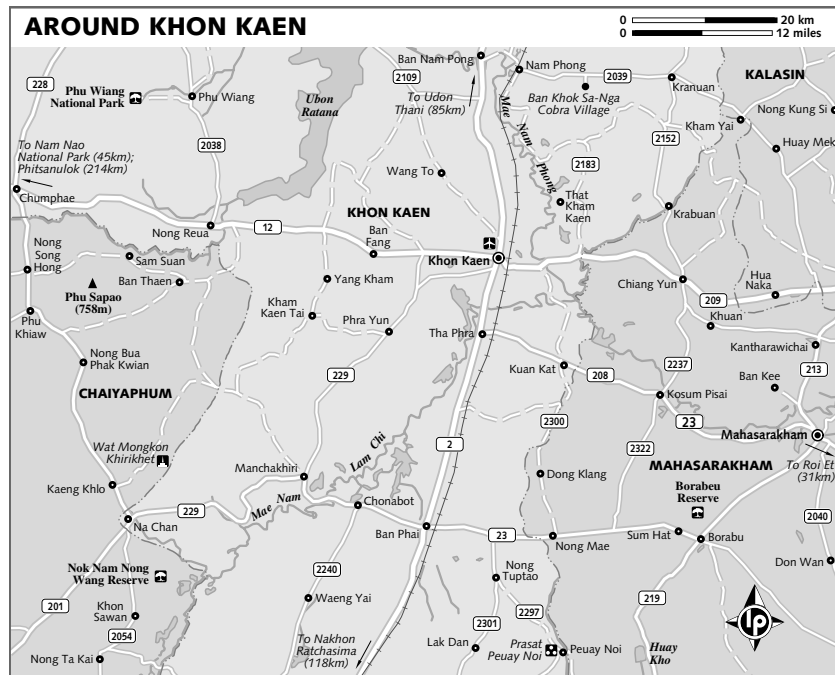
GETTING THERE & AWAY

The park entrance is 90km west of the provincial capital. Nong Bualamphu-bound buses from Khon Kaen's ordinary bus terminal stop in Phu Wiang town (ordinary/air-con 38/50B, 1½ hours, hourly). It's best to get off downtown, not at the bus terminal, where you can hire a *túk-túk* (one way/return 200/400B) or motorbike taxi (50B less each way) for the remaining 19km to the park entrance. If you only pay for a one-way trip you'll risk not being able to get a ride back, and hitching is tough.

Nam Nao National Park

อุทยานแห่งชาติน้ำหนาว

One of Thailand's most beautiful and valuable parks, **Nam Nao National Park** (☎ 0 5672 9002, reservations 0 2562 0760; admission 400B; ☎ 6am–10pm) covers nearly 1000 sq km at an average elevation of 800m across the border of Chaiyaphum and Phetchabun Provinces, just beyond Khon Kaen Province. Although it covers remote territory – this remained a People's Liberation Army of Thailand (PLAT) stronghold until the early 1980s – Hwy 12 makes access easy. Temperatures are fairly cool year-round, especially nights and mornings, and



& dinner; ☺) Karaoke, Beer Chang and some decent Thai cooking (no English menu) conspire to make this place a big hit with the local crowd. Sit indoors or out on the pleasant terrace and watch the sun dip below the...erm...rooftops.

White Elephant (☎ 04351 4778; Th Robmung Dannok; dishes 40-240B; ☺ lunch & dinner; ☺) This stylish place, along the old moat, has both a Thai menu and many Western faves, but the specialities are German, as is the owner. The outdoor terrace is surrounded by greenery.

The main **night market** (5pm-midnight), a block behind the Saithip Hotel, is a covered spot that sees a little action during the day, too. A better daytime choice for cheap soups and stir-fries is the food court at the **Plaza Department Store** (Th Ploenchit; dishes 20-40B ☺ lunch & dinner).

Shopping

OTOP Center (Th Pranpracharat) Construction had not quite finished on this handicrafts mall when we last checked, but surely this will be the place to shop for silks and souvenirs.

MĀW LAM & THE KHAEN

Among villages in Isan, the up-tempo Lao-Thai musical tradition of *māw lam* – roughly ‘master of verse’ – rules. Performances always feature a witty, topical combination of singing and improvised or recited speech that ranges across themes as diverse as politics and sex. Very colloquial, even bawdy language is employed; this is one art form that has always bypassed government censors and provides an important outlet for grassroots expression. *Māw lam* is most commonly performed at temple fairs and local festivals.

There are four basic types of *māw lam*. The first, *māw lam lūang* (great *māw lam*), involves an ensemble of performers onstage in costume, and these days the dancing sometimes eclipses the music. *Māw lam khūu* (couple *māw lam*) features a man and woman who engage in flirtation and verbal repartee. *Māw lam jòt* (duelling *māw lam*) has two performers of the same gender who ‘duel’ by answering questions or finishing an incomplete story issued as a challenge. Finally, *māw lam diaw* (solo *māw lam*) involves only one performer.

The backbone of *māw lam* is the *khaen*, a wind instrument consisting of a double row of bamboo-like reeds fitted into a hardwood soundbox. The rows can be as few as four or as many as eight (for a total of 16 pipes), and the instruments vary in length from around 80cm to 2m. Around the turn of the 20th century there were also nine-course *khaen*, but these have all but disappeared. Melodies are almost always pentatonic; ie they feature five-note scales. The *khaen* player blows (as with a harmonica, sound is produced whether the breath is moving in or out) into the soundbox while covering or uncovering small holes in the reeds that determine the pitch for each. An adept player can produce a churning, calliope-like music that inspires dancing. The most popular folk dance is the *lam wong*, the ‘circle dance’, in which couples dance circles around one another until there are three circles in all: a circle danced by the individual, the circle danced by the couple and one danced by the whole crowd.

Traditionally the *khaen* was accompanied by the *saw* (a bowed string instrument), although the plucked *phin* is much more common today. In modern *māw lam*, the *khaen* and *phin* are electrically amplified, and electric bass and drums are added to the ensemble to produce a sound enjoyed by both young and old.

There are also good shops on Th Phadung Phanit, particularly for *khaen* and other traditional musical instruments.

Getting There & Away

PB Air (☎ 04351 8572, in Bangkok 0 2261 0222; www.pbair.com) flies to/from Bangkok (one way 2225B, one hour) daily. There is a ticket office at the airport, which is 13km north of the centre.

From Roi Et’s **bus terminal** (☎ 04351 1466; Th Jangsanit), frequent buses head to Khon Kaen (ordinary/air-con 50/99B, two hours), Ubon Ratchathani (ordinary/air-con 80B/148B, three hours), Surin (ordinary 50B, three hours) and Yasothon (ordinary/air-con 30/50B, one hour). Many air-con buses link Roi Et with Bangkok’s Northern bus terminal (293B, seven hours) and **999 VIP** (☎ 04351 1466) runs one daily 24-seat VIP bus to Bangkok (585B, seven hours) at 9.30pm.

Getting Around

Sāamlāw usually cost 20B. For a tūk-tūk, you’ll pay 10B to 20B more.

AROUND ROI ET Ku Phra Koh Na

พุทธโคณา

Around 60km southeast of Roi Et town are the minor ruins of **Ku Phra Koh Na** (admission free; ☺ daylight hours), an 11th-century Khmer shrine. The monument comprises three brick *prang* facing east from a sandstone pediment surrounded by a sandstone-slab wall that once had four gates. The middle *prang* was replastered in 1928 and Buddha niches were added. A Buddha footprint shrine, added to the front of this *prang*, is adorned with the Khmer monument’s original Baphuon-style *naga* sculptures. The two other *prang* have been restored (though they still look like they might tumble over any time) but retain their original forms. The northern *prang* has a reclining Narai (Vishnu) lintel over one door and a *Ramayana* relief on the inside gable. The ruins themselves are neither impressive nor well restored, but it’s interesting to see how they’ve been incorporated into the modern temple. And if that doesn’t thrill you, spend your time watching the hundreds of monkeys that live here; they are part of the everyday fabric of the grounds.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Any Surin-bound bus from Roi Et can drop you off at Wat Ku (ordinary/air-con 40/52B, 1½ hours), as the compound is known locally, which is 6km south of Suwannaphum on Rte 215.

UDON THANI PROVINCE

UDON THANI

อุดรธานี

pop 227,200

Udon Thani has one foot on the highway and the other off the beaten track. The city boomed on the back of the Vietnam War, exploding into life as US air bases opened nearby. Today it’s become the region’s primary transport hub and commercial centre, and you have to dig deep behind its prosperous concrete veneer to find any flashes of its past. Because it lacks the urban chutzpah of Khon Kaen and the touristy appeal of Nong Khai, which is equally convenient for visiting wonderful surrounding attractions, Udon sees few travellers other than a growing number of sex tourists.

Information

EMERGENCY & MEDICAL SERVICES

Aek Udon International Hospital (☎ 0 4234 2555; 555/5 Th Pho Si) One of the best medical facilities in the upper Northeast.

Tourist police (☎ 1155; Th Naresuan)

INTERNET ACCESS

Awo Internet (Th Teekathanont; per hr 20B; ☺ 10am-midnight) One of several internet cafés on this block.

MONEY

Kasikornbank (Th Teekathanont, Charoensri Complex; ☺ 11am-8pm) One of several banks in the mall. Many more banks, open regular business hours, are lined along Th Pho Si.

POST

Main post office (Th Wattananuwong; ☺ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat, Sun & holidays)

TOURIST INFORMATION

TAT (☎ 0 4232 5406; www.tourismthailand.org; Th Thesa; ☺ 8.30am-4.30pm) Has information on Udon, Loei, Nong Khai and Nong Bualaphu Provinces.

TRAVEL AGENCIES

Ultinet Travel (☎ 0 4224 8606; 277/44 Th Teekathanont ☺ 8am-6.30pm) For plane tickets and car rental.

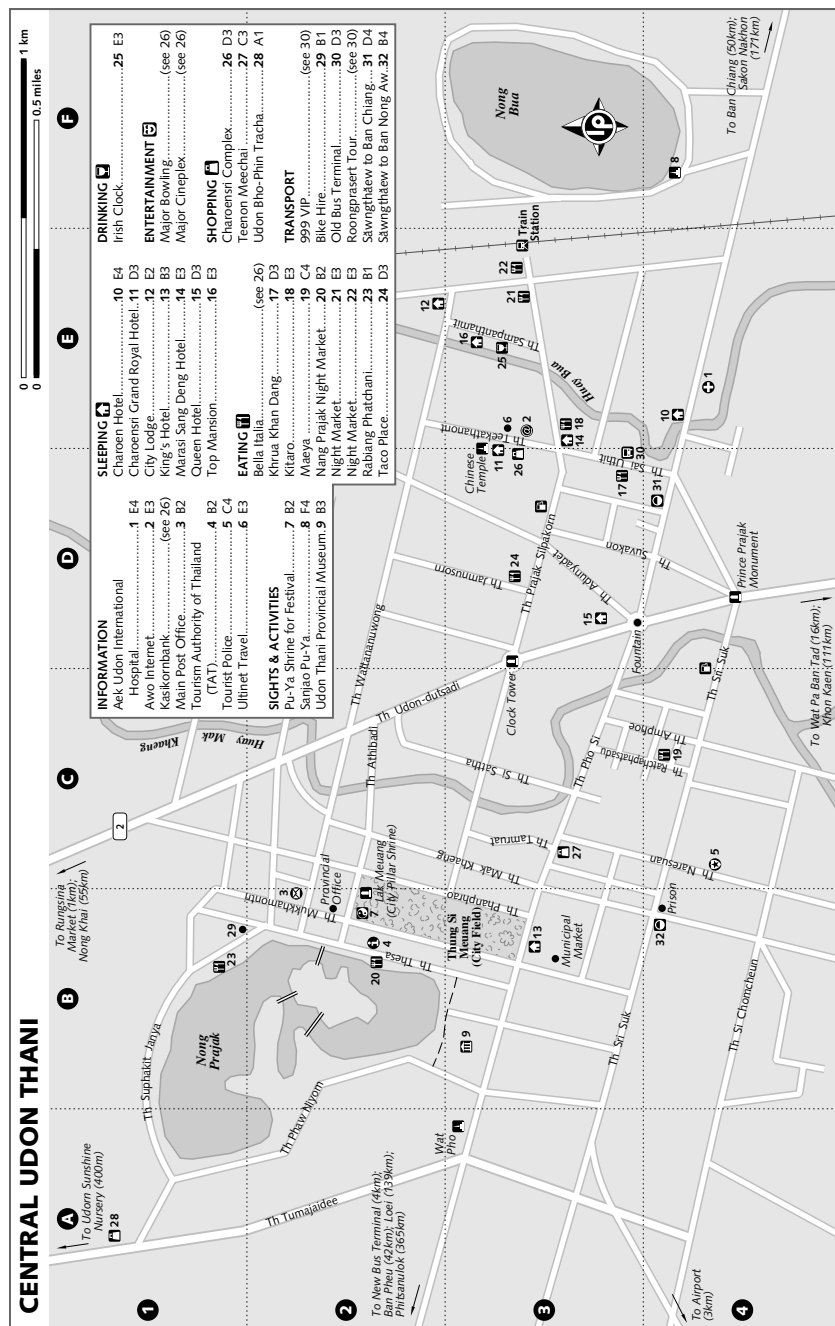
Sights

UDORN SUNSHINE NURSERY

อุดรชนชาพันธ์เนอรศรี

Ever seen a plant dance? If not, this is the place to do it. Originally earning notoriety for producing the first ever orchid made into a perfume, the **Udon Sunshine Nursery** (☎ 0 4224 2475; 127 Th Udorn-Nong Samrong; ☺ 8am-6.30pm), just west of town, has since developed a hybrid of *Codariocalyx motorius ohashi leguminosae*, which curiously ‘dances’ to music. The mature gyant has long oval leaves, plus smaller ones of similar shape. If you sing or talk to the plant in a high-pitched voice (saxophone or violin works even better), a few of the smaller leaves will shift back-and-forth. This is no hype; we’ve seen it for ourselves, although it’s much more of a waltz than a jig. The plants are most active from November to February, the cool season, and between 7am to 10am and 4.30pm to 6.30pm.

The plants are not for sale, and all flowers from plants on public display are removed so nobody can pilfer them and grow their own. You can, however, buy Udon Dancing Tea,



made from the plant, along with the more famous Miss Udon Sunshine orchids and perfumes. The nursery's newest product is Toob Moob, a perfume derived (using a secret recipe and process they won't discuss) from an insect.

To get here, go under the Ban Nong Samrong sign on Rte 2024, then after 150m follow the Udon Sunshine Fragrant Orchid sign. The Yellow Bus and several sawngthaeu pass here. A tük-tük from Udon's city centre should cost about 60B.

SANJAO PU-YA CHINESE TEMPLE

ศาลเจ้าปู่ย่า

The garish **Sanjao Pu-Ya** (Th Pho Si; ☎ daylight hours) on the southern shore of Nong Bua is a particularly colourful Chinese temple that attests to the wealth of the local Thai-Chinese merchant class. At its heart, the **Pu-Ya Shrine** houses small images of the God and Goddess of Mercy.

During December's **Thung Si Meuang Festival**, which features Isan music and dance performances and a fair to promote local products, Pu (Grandpa) and Ya (Grandma) are moved to a temporary home in the northwest corner of City Field. There is dragon and lion dancing on several days during the festival.

UDON THANI PROVINCIAL MUSEUM

พิพิธภัณฑสถานเมืองอุดรธานี

Filling a 1920s colonial-style building that used to be a girls' school, **Udon Thani Provincial Museum** (☎ 0 4224 5976; Th Pho Si; donations appreciated; ☎ 8am-4pm) has a catch-all collection spanning geometry to handicrafts.

Sleeping

BUDGET

King's Hotel (☎ 0 4224 1444; 57 Th Pho Si; r 190-220B; ☎) A construction crew could probably convert this Vietnam War-era veteran into a prison in a couple of hours; nevertheless, cheery staff and cheap prices make it a good budget choice.

Queen Hotel (☎ 0 4222 1451; 6-8 Th Udon-dutsadi; r 120-240B; ☎) Located in a busy market area, this place is basic with a double-decker 'B', though the owner is friendly.

Top Mansion (☎ 0 4234 5015; topmansion@yahoo.com; 35/3 Th Samphanthamit; r 310B; ☎) Mix the quality, location and well-appointed rooms and this newly erected tower is the best bargain for your baht in town. The only thing missing is some style, but at these prices, who cares?

Marasi Sang Deng Hotel (☎ 0 4234 4131; Th Prajak Silpakorn; r 250-350B; ☎) Location, location, location. This noisy, slightly scruffy place would surely be cheaper if it didn't sit smack between the bus terminal and the Charoensri Complex. On the other hand, the wood floors and good mattresses are worth a little extra and it's much better than the other cheapies right around this corner.

MIDRANGE & TOP END

Charoen Hotel (☎ 0 4224 8155; charoenhotel@hotmail.com; 549 Th Pho Si; r 800-900B; ☎) A few rungs down the glamour ladder from the top, this large business-class hotel is a little dated, but still offers plenty of trimmings and evening entertainment options.

City Lodge (☎ 0 4222 4439; 83/14-15 Th Wattananuwong; r 600-1000B; ☎) This British-owned property is a good example of the new breed of small hotel springing up in this area that deliver more charm and value than the big boys. The already bright and colourful rooms are cheered up even more with wicker furniture.

Charoensri Grand Royal Hotel (☎ 0 4234 3555; www.charoensrigrand.com; Th Teekathanont; s/d 1300/1400B, ste 2000-2500B; ☎) At the hub of Udon's main shopping and nightlife district, this is the town's glossiest top-ender. The rooms are spacious and immaculate, the facilities are top-notch and the service is swift.

Eating

Kharu Khan Dang (no roman-script sign; ☎ 0 4224 0596; 296/43 Th Sai Uthit; dishes 25-30B; ☎) breakfast, lunch & dinner) No sign, no menu, no atmosphere, but the noodle dishes are simply superb.

Taco Place (☎ 08 1369 8936; 19/3 Th Jamnuorn; dishes 40-155B; ☎) lunch & dinner) A south-of-the-border experience? Of course not, this is Thailand; it can't be done. But Tu, who studied Mexican food while running a Thai restaurant in Mexico, makes a pretty good stab at it. She also makes sub sandwiches, from her time in New Jersey.

Rabiang Pattachanee (☎ 0 4224 1515; 53/1 Th Suphakrit Janya; dishes 45-250B; ☎) lunch & dinner; ☎) On the lake's east shore, this classy Thai place whips up a fabulous array of local dishes on the deck or in air-conditioned dining rooms.

[Maeya (no roman-script sign; ☎ 0 4222 3889; 79/81 Th Ratchaphatsadu; dishes 38-310B; ☎) lunch & dinner) One part Thai restaurant and three parts English tearoom, this labyrinth has waiters

dressed in black tie and a menu stretching from burgers to ice creams to Oriental mains. The curries are divine, though the translations are a little cryptic (the 'rice with spit in sauce' is really 'rice with liver in sauce').

Also recommended:

Bella Italia (☎ 0 4234 3134; Th Teekathanont, Charoensri Complex; dishes 80-500B; 🍴 lunch & dinner; ♿) As close to Italy as you'll get in Isan, and as fancy as you'll get in Udon.

Kitaro (☎ 0 4224 3094; Th Prajak Silpakorn; dishes 40-880B; 🍴 lunch & dinner) A long-term Japanese favourite.

Vendors in the city's side-by-side **night markets** (Th Prajak Silpakorn; 🕒 4-11pm) in front of the train station serve a good groove of Thai food; and you can watch football on the big screen. A bevy of massage and paint-your-own pottery stands joins the small food shops (which go all day long) on the sunset-watching side of Nang Prajak Park, a favourite jogging and socialising spot, to form the **Nang Prajak Night Market** (Th Thesa; 🕒 4-10pm).

Drinking & Entertainment

Udon's growing expat population makes its presence felt on the city's eating and drinking scene. If you are anywhere near the Charoensri Complex, you can't avoid passing a *faràng*-owned or -aimed bar. Most of those in the block right across the street from the mall are aimed at people looking to meet new friends, if you catch our drift.

Irish Clock (☎ 04224 7450; Th 19/5-6 Th Samphanthamit; 🍴 8am-midnight) A wood-trimmed, Guinness-infused pub on the backside of this block is lower key and higher class.

Major Bowling and **Major Cineplex** (☎ 0 2515 5555) sit atop the Charoensri Complex on Th Teekathanont.

Shopping

Teenon Meechai (☎ 0 4222 2838; 206-208 Th Pho Si; 🕒 2-5pm Mon-Sat) This souvenir shop has so much quirky style you'll forget you're a tourist.

Udon Bho-Phin Tracha (no roman-script sign; ☎ 0 4224 5618; Th Phaw Niyom; 🕒 9am-6pm Mon-Sat) There is a very good selection of silk and cotton, including some natural-dyed fabrics, at this spot northwest of Nong Prajak Lake. Look for the sign with the wooden roof.

Charoensri Complex (Th Teekathanont) One of Isan's largest shopping centres and the hub of the city. It has the standard department store,

supermarket, designer-clothing boutiques and dining options.

Getting There & Away

AIR

THAI (www.thaiairways.com), **Nok Air** (www.nokair.com) and **Air Asia** (www.airasia.com) together make 10 daily flights to Bangkok (one hour). One-way fares average 2200B. Nok Air also flies three times a week to Chiang Mai (1½ hours) for the same price as to Bangkok.

BUS

For most destinations, including Bangkok's Northern bus terminal (air-con 443B, eight hours, every 15 minutes), buses use Udon's **old bus terminal** (☎ 0 4222 1489; Th Sai Uthit) or the street in front of it. Other air-con buses include those to Khorat (193B, 4½ hours, every 20 minutes), Sakon Nakhon (109B, 3½ hours, every 15 minutes), Khon Kaen (104B, 2½ hours, every 20 minutes), Pattaya (504B, 10 hours, 10 daily) and Vientiane (80B, two hours, six daily; you must already have a Lao visa). Many companies, including **999 VIP** (☎ 0 4222 1489) and **Roongprasert Tour** (☎ 0 4234 3616), operate 24-seat VIP buses (640B) to Bangkok in the evening.

The **new bus terminal** (☎ 0 4224 7788) is on the Ring Rd on the western outskirts of the city (take the Yellow Bus or sǎwngthǎew 6) and has buses to western destinations, including Loei (ordinary/air-con 60/110B, three hours, every 30 minutes) and Chiang Mai (air-con/32-seat VIP 563/657B, 12 hours, eight daily).

For Nong Khai (ordinary 40B, one hour) you can use either terminal, but the most frequent departures are from Rungsina Market.

TRAIN

Udon Thani is on the Bangkok-Nong Khai line. Express trains leave Hualamphong station in Bangkok at 8.20am, 6.30pm and 8.45pm arriving at Udon's **train station** (☎ 0 4222 2061) about 10 hours later. Express departures in the reverse direction leave at 6.47am, 6.40pm and 7.20pm. The fares to Bangkok are 245/369/1177B for a 3rd-class seat/2nd-class seat/1st-class sleeper.

Getting Around

Sǎwngthǎew (8B) run regular routes across town; TAT hands out free city maps that show the routes. There are also two city buses (8B),

the Yellow and the White. The former runs up and down Th Pho Si and the later tracks Hwy 2. Tùk-tùk short trips start at 40B (sǎamlǎw rates are a little less) and it's 100B to the airport or the new bus terminal.

There are almost as many car-rental outlets around Charoensri Complex as there are bars. Rates start at 1000B, but this is for an older car: for an extra couple hundred you'll get a better quality car and for 1500B you can get a car with a driver.

A couple of **bike rental outlets** (Th Thesa) by Nong Prajak Park have one-, two- and three-seaters starting at 100B per day.

AROUND UDON THANI PROVINCE Ban Chiang

บ้านเชียง

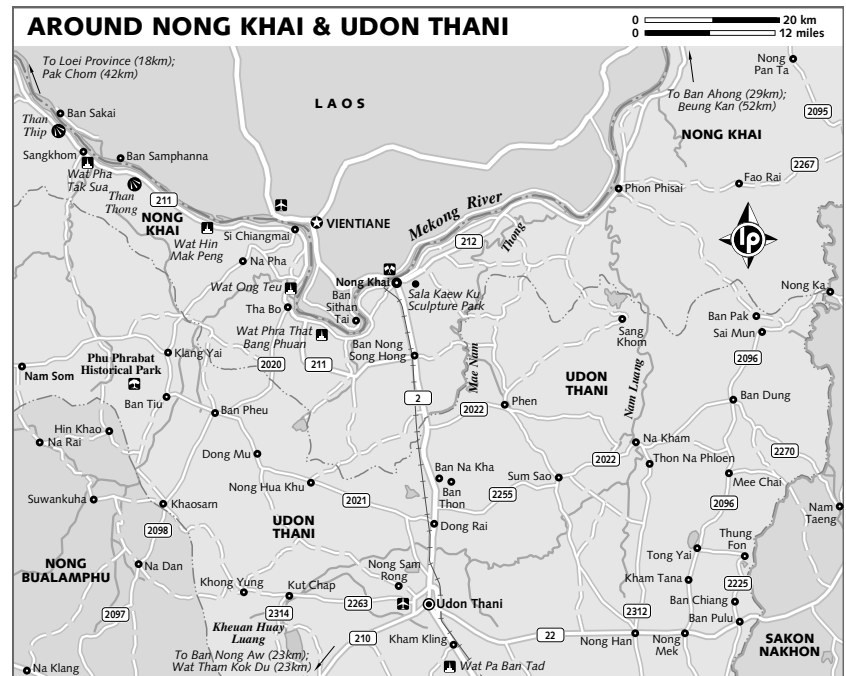
This town, 50km east of Udon, was once the hub of the ancient Ban Chiang civilisation and archaeological digs here have uncovered a treasure-trove of artefacts dating as far back as 5600 years.

What is now one of the most important archaeological sites in Southeast Asia was discovered quite accidentally in 1966. Stephen

Young, an anthropology student from Harvard, tripped while walking through the area and found the rim of a buried pot right under his nose. Looking around he noticed many more and speculated that this might be a burial site – he was right. The first serious excavations took place in 1974-75 and they uncovered over a million pottery pieces as well as 126 human skeletons. Researchers later uncovered the earliest evidence of both farming and the manufacture of metal tools in the region.

The Ban Chiang culture, an agricultural society that once thrived in northeastern Thailand, is now famous for its early bronze metallurgy and clay pottery, especially pots and vases with distinctive burnt-ochre swirl designs, most of which were associated with burial sites. Seven layers of civilisation have been excavated; the famous swirl-design pottery comes from the third and fourth layers. The area was declared a Unesco World Heritage site in 1992.

The excellent **Ban Chiang National Museum** (☎ 0 4220 8340; admission 30B; 🕒 8am-5pm) exhibits pottery from all Ban Chiang periods, plus myriad bronze objects recovered from various



excavation pits, including spearheads, sickles, axe heads, fish hooks, chisels, ladles, neck rings and bangles. The displays (with English labels) offer excellent insight into the region's distant past and how its mysteries were unravelled. An original **burial ground excavation pit** (same hours as the museum, and admission included in the museum ticket) displaying 52 skeletons, in whole or part, and lots of pots is at nearby Wat Pho Si. The museum is currently closed for renovation, but will be open soon after publication.

Rice cultivation remains the town's primary livelihood, but the site has made souvenir selling a close second. On the way into town you'll pass many villages specialising in handicrafts, such as pottery, silk weaving, rice baskets and clothes sewn with a distinctive thick, hand-woven cotton fabric; all of these and more can be bought from shops facing the museum. Locals also attempt to sell Ban Chiang artefacts, real and fake, but neither is allowed out of the country, so don't buy them.

The **University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology & Anthropology** (www.museum.upenn.edu) has a good page on the archaeological discoveries at Ban Chiang on its website. From the home page type Ban Chiang Project into the search engine.

SLEEPING & EATING

Lakeside Sunrise Guest House (☎ 0 4220 8167; www.banchianglakeside.com; r 200B) On the west side of the lake, within easy striking distance of the museum, this homey, nicely landscaped place is the village's best bet for a budget sleep. Clean, shared facilities are downstairs, while the wooden upper floor boasts a spacious veranda. The joyful owner, an encyclopaedia of Ban Chiang knowledge, speaks English and rents bikes.

There are several simple restaurants across from the national museum entrance.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

A few *sǎwngthǎew* run between Ban Chiang and Udon (35B, one hour) each morning before 10am. In Udon, catch them on Th Pho Si southwest of the old bus terminal. In Ban Chiang, they stop in front of the museum. Alternatively, take a bus bound for Sakon Nakhon or Nakhon Phanom and get off at the Ban Pulu (45B, one hour) turn-off, a 15-minute *sǎamláw* ride (per person 50B) from Ban Chiang.

Phu Phrabat Historical Park

อุทยานประวัติศาสตร์ภูพระบาท

Steeped in local legend and peppered with bizarre rock formations daubed with ancient cave paintings, **Phu Phrabat Historical Park** (☎ 0 4225 1350; admission 30B; 🕒 8.30am-4.30pm) is one of the region's highlights, offering great views from the crags of the Phu Phrabat escarpment and plenty of mythical intrigue. For Isan residents, this is an important place of pilgrimage. For visitors, the side-by-side progression from rock art to Buddhist stupa represents a localised evolution of thought and aesthetics.

The formations are a collection of balanced rocks, spires, whale-sized boulders and caves (more like grottoes or rocky overhangs) with several shrines and wats built in and around them. Prehistoric paintings in several grottoes feature wild animals, humans and cryptic symbols. There are also some small but sophisticated rock carvings of Buddha images dating back to when the Mon and, later, Khmer ruled this area. A climb beyond the rock formations to **Pha Sa Dej** at the edge of the escarpment ends with dramatic views of the valley below and the mountains of Laos beyond. A well-marked web of trails trail meanders past these sites and you can see all of them in about an hour.

Near the entrance to the area is the largest temple in the historical park **Wat Phra That Phra Phutthaabht Bua Bok**, with its namesake Lao-style *chedi* covering a Buddha footprint. It also has some odd temple buildings in the general mood of those in the park.

Most of the bizarre rock formations to be found here are featured in an enchanting local legend about a king (Phaya Kong Phan), his stunningly beautiful daughter (Nang Usua), a hermit (the Rishi Chantra) and a love-struck prince from another kingdom (Tao Baros). The most striking rock formation, **Hoh Nang-Usa**, an overturned boot-shaped outcrop with a shrine built into it, is said to be the tower where the beautiful princess was forced to live by her overprotective father. Many of these rock formations are signposted with names in Thai and English alluding to the legend, but, unless you're familiar with it, they'll make little sense. There's a short version in the museum, but if you're staying at the Mut Mee Garden Guest House in Nong Khai (p496), you can read the whole tale.

The park has three simple **dormitories** (per person 150B) if you want to spend some time

here, but they're geared more towards groups of Thai students. Ask at the office if you want to pitch a tent.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

The park is 70km northwest of Udon Thani and Nong Khai, near the small town of Ban Pheu, and can be visited as a long day trip from either city. From Udon's Rungsina Market it's a 40B, 1½-hour bus ride; it's 35B and two hours from Nong Khai. From Ban Pheu take a *sǎwngthǎew* (8B) to Ban Tiu, the village at the base of the hill, and then a motorcycle taxi or *túk-túk* the final 4km to the park itself. If you're using public transport, you should plan on leaving the park by 3.30pm.

Weaving Villages

Ban Na Kha, 16km north of Udon right on Hwy 2, is renowned for *khít*-pattern fabrics. *Khít* is a geometric, diamond-grid minimal weft brocade traditionally used in pillows and other decorative items, but now commonly used in clothing. Dozens of shops line the highway and the main road through town: **Wongduan** (☎ 0 4220 6089; Hwy 2) and **Chanruan Nakha** (☎ 0 4220 6276; cr Hwy 2 & Mu 1) are used to dealing with foreigners.

Before leaving, take a peek at **Wat Na Ka Taewee** (Hwy 2; 🕒 daylight hours), which was founded before the village after a wandering monk found a hole from which bellowed the sound and smoke of a *naga*. He plugged the hole with a rock and built the small *bòt* over it. The hall by the entrance displays pottery, gold Buddhas and human skeletons unearthed during various construction projects at the temple. Udon's Yellow bus runs to the village; catch it anywhere on Hwy 2.

Ban Thon, just 2km east of Ban Na Kha, is a much more peaceful weaving village, though you'll only find looms spinning in the winter since the full-time weavers moved to the highway where most of the customers are found.

The best (and most expensive) *khít* comes from **Ban Nong Aw**, about 40km southwest of Udon via Rte 210 in Nong Bualamphu Province, but there is less available for sale to the public. *Sǎwngthǎew* (27B, one hour) depart from next to Udon's prison.

Wat Pa Ban Tad

วัดป่าบ้านตาด

Luang Ta Maha Bua, now in his 90s and a former disciple of Ajahn Man, is one of Thailand's most revered monks. Though he

earned his reverence as a meditation master, he gained universal celebrity after the 1997 economic crisis by collecting over 10,000kg of gold (people turned in jewellery to be melted down) and US\$10 million in baht to help pay the country's international debts. He has been heavily involved in other charity work and in 2005 made unprecedented criticisms of Thaksin, the now-deposed prime minister.

Over 250 monks and *mǎe chii* (Thai Buddhist nuns) – all taking ascetic vows in addition to the regular 227 precepts – live and meditate at **Wat Pa Ban Tad** (🕒 daylight hours), a vast, humble forest wat 16km south of Udon (take Hwy 2 south and, after a U-turn, follow the signs), including about a dozen Westerners. Hundreds come every morning to hear his simple, direct talks on Buddhism, and thousands more listen via a nationally broadcast radio programme (103.25FM in Udon) or at www.luangta.com.

NONG KHAI PROVINCE

Nong Khai Province, occupying a narrow, 320km-long sweep along the banks of the Mekong, is a beautiful, intriguing region. The capital, Nong Khai, is where the Friendship Bridge crosses into Laos – only the second bridge to be erected anywhere along the Mekong's entire length; the first was in the People's Republic of China. The town is one of northeastern Thailand's most popular tourist destinations and features the surreal Sala Kaew Ku sculpture park, a must-see on any jaunt through the region.

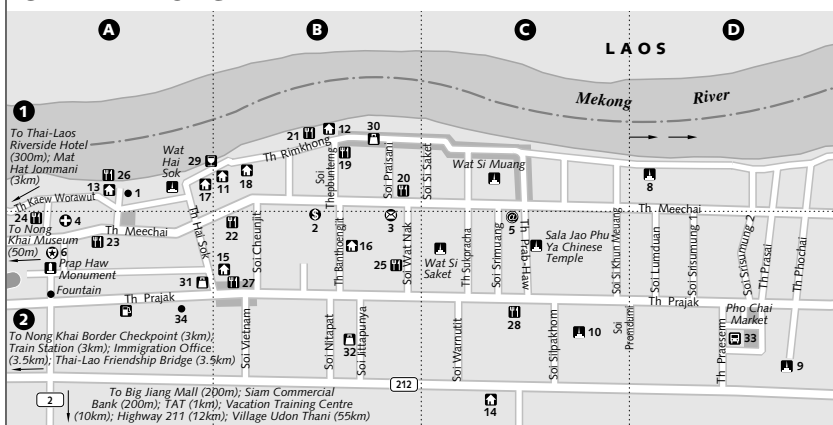
NONG KHAI

หนองคาย

pop 61,500

Spread out along the leafy banks of the Mekong River, Lady Luck certainly smiles on the location. As a major staging post on the tourist trail north, Nong Khai benefits from a steady stream of travellers, and a clutch of excellent places to stay and eat have sprung up to accommodate them, making this the only Isan town with a full-fledged backpacker scene; albeit a modest one. But Nong Khai's popularity is about more than just its proximity to Laos and bounty of banana pancakes. Seduced by its dreamy river views, sluggish pace of life and surrounding attractions, many who mean to stay a day end up bedding down for many more.

CENTRAL NONG KHAI



Developers have stuck their concrete boots into some of the city's prettier historic districts, but compared to Udon Thani and Khon Kaen further south, Nong Khai has managed to keep at least one of its feet firmly rooted in the past. Cut through with a sprinkling of French colonial villas and a starburst of wats, time, like the Mekong, appears to flow a little more slowly here.

History

Crammed between nations, Nong Khai is both a historic and physical bridgehead between Thailand and Laos. Nong Khai once fell within the boundaries of the Vientiane (Wiang Chan) kingdom, which itself vacillated between independence and tribute to either Lan Xang (1353-1694) or to Siam (late 18th century until 1893). In 1827 Rama III gave a Thai lord Thao Suwothamma the rights to establish Meuang Nong Khai at the present city site, which he chose because the surrounding swamps ('Nong' in Thai) would aid in the city's defence. In 1891, under Rama V, Nong Khai became the capital of *monthon* Lao Phuan, an early Isan satellite state that included what are now Udon, Loei, Khon Kaen, Sakon Nakhon, Nakhon Phanom and Nong Khai Provinces, as well as Vientiane.

The area came under several attacks by *jiin haw* (Yunnanese) marauders in the late 19th century. The 1886-vintage Prap Haw Monument (*pràap haw* means 'defeat of the Haw') in front of the former Provincial Office (now used as a community college) commemorates Thai-Lao victories over Haw invasions in

1874, 1885 and 1886. When western Laos was partitioned off from Thailand by the French in 1893, the *monthon* capital was moved to Udon, leaving Nong Khai to fade into a provincial backwater.

The opening of the US\$30 million, 1174m-long Saphan Mittaphap Thai-Lao (Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge) on 8 April 1994 marked the beginning of a new era of development for Nong Khai as a regional trade and transport centre and the skyline has been creeping slowly upwards ever since.

Orientation & Information

Nong Khai follows the curve of the Mekong River, and most of the hotels and restaurants are along, or just off, the three parallel streets of Th Rimkhong, Th Meechai and Th Prajak on the western side of the centre of town. The Friendship Bridge is about 3km west of the centre.

BOOKSHOPS

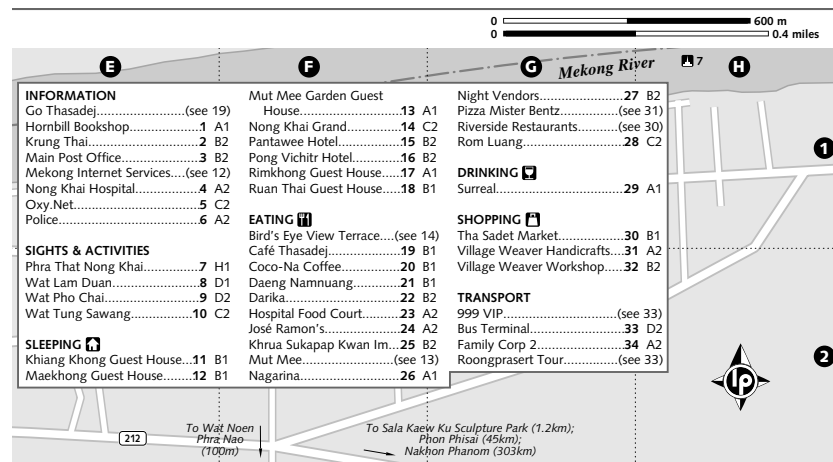
Hornbill Bookshop (☎ 0 4246 0272; Th Kaew Worawut; ☎ 10am-7pm) Buys, sells and trades English-language books.

EMERGENCY & MEDICAL SERVICES

Nong Khai Hospital (☎ 1669; Th Meechai)
Tourist police (☎ 1155; Hwy 2) In the OTOP Center, 1km south of town.

IMMIGRATION OFFICES

Immigration Office (☎ 0 4242 0242; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri) On the highway bypass that leads to the Friendship Bridge; offers Thai visa extensions.



INTERNET ACCESS

Mekong Internet Services (519 Th Rimkhong; per hr 30฿; ☎ 10am-10pm) At the Maekhong Guest House.
Oxy.Net (569/2 Th Meechai; per hr 25฿; ☎ 10am-midnight)

MONEY

There are banks with ATM and exchange facilities across town.
Krung Thai (Th Meechai; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri) A Traveler money-transfer agent.
Siam Commercial Bank (Hwy 2, Big Jiang Mall; ☎ 10.30am-8pm) An agent for Moneygram.

POST

Main post office (Th Meechai; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat, Sun & holidays) An agent for Western Union.

TOURIST INFORMATION

TAT (☎ 0 4242 1326; www.tourismthailand.org; Hwy 2; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri) In the OTOP Center, 1km south of town.

TRAVEL AGENCIES

Family Corp 2 (☎ 0 4241 1526; Th Prajak; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Sat)
Go Thasadej (☎ 0 4242 3921; www.gothasadej.com; 387/3 Soi Thepbuntern; ☎ 10am-10pm) Books air tickets and visa-run tours (from Bangkok). At the Café Thasadej.

Sights & Activities

SALA KAEW KU SCULPTURE PARK
ศาลาแก้วกู่
Nong Khai's most enigmatic attraction, **Sala Kaew Ku Sculpture Park** (Pavilion of Kaew Ku; ☎ 08 1369

5744; admission 10฿; ☎ 7.30am-5.30pm) is a surreal, sculptural journey into the mind of a mystic shaman. Built over a period of 20 years by Luang Pu Boun Leua Sourirat, who died in 1996, the park features a weird and wonderful array of gigantic sculptures ablaze with Hindu-Buddhist imagery.

As his own story goes, Luang Pu, a Lao national, tumbled into a hole as a child, where he met an ascetic named Kaewkoo. Kaewkoo introduced him to the manifold mysteries of the underworld and set him on course to become a Brahmanic yogi-priest-shaman. Shaking up his own unique blend of Hindu and Buddhist philosophy, mythology and iconography, Luang Pu developed a large following in northeastern Thailand, where he had moved following the 1975 communist takeover in Laos, and had been working on a similar project.

The park is a real smorgasbord of bizarre cement statues of Shiva, Vishnu, Buddha, and every other Hindu and Buddhist deity imaginable, as well as numerous secular figures, all supposedly cast by unskilled artists under Luang Pu's direction. Some of the sculptures are quite amusing: if you're travelling with kids they'll enjoy the serene and stately elephant wading though a pack of anthropomorphic dogs. The tallest sculpture, a Buddha seated on a coiled *naga* with a spectacular multi-headed hood, is 25m high. Also of interest is the Wheel of Life, entered through a giant mouth, which boils Luang Pu's philosophies down to a single, slightly baffling, image – an

explanation is available on the **Mut Mee Garden Guest House website** (www.mutmee.com).

The main shrine building, almost as bizarre as the sculpture park, is full of framed pictures of Hindu and Buddhist deities, temple donors and Luang Pu at various ages, plus smaller bronze and wooden figures of every description and provenance guaranteed to throw an art historian into a state of disorientation. Luang Pu's corpse lies under a glass dome ringed by flashing lights in the upper room.

To get to Sala Kaew Ku, board a bus heading to Phon Phisai or any other eastern destination and ask to get off at Wat Khaek (10B), as the park is also known; it's about a five-minute walk from the highway. Chartered tuk-tuk cost 120B return with a one-hour wait, or you can reach it by bike in about 30 minutes: Mut Mee Garden Guest House distributes handy maps if you want to take the scenic route.

WAT PHO CHAI

วัดโพธิ์ชัย

Luang Pu Phra Sai, a large Lan Xang-era Buddha, awash with gold, bronze and precious stones, sits at the hub of **Wat Pho Chai** (Th Phochai; ☎ 7am-7pm). The head of the image is pure gold, the body is bronze and the *utsanit* is set with rubies. The altar on which the image sits features gilded wooden carvings and mosaics, while the ceiling bears wooden rosettes in the late Ayuthaya style.

This was one of three similar statues and the murals in the *bòt* depict their travels from the interior of Laos to the banks of the Mekong where they were put on rafts. A storm sent one to the bottom of the river where it remains today: it was never recovered because, according to one monk at the temple, the *naga* like having it. The third statue, Phra Soem, is at Wat Patum Wanaram in Bangkok.

WAT NOEN PHRA NAO

วัดเนินพระเนาร

A forest wat on the south side of town, **Wat Noen Phra Nao** (☎ daylight hours) boasts a Vipassana (insight meditation) centre on pleasant, tree-shaded grounds. It serves as a spiritual retreat for those (Westerners included, if they are serious about meditation) facing personal crises. Some extremely ornate temple architecture, including perhaps the most rococo bell tower we've ever seen, stands in contrast with the usual ascetic tone of forest monasteries. There's

a Chinese cemetery and some of the statuary wouldn't be out of place at Sala Kaew Ku.

WAT LAM DUAN

วัดลำดวน

You can easily pick **Wat Lam Duan** (Th Rimkhong; ☎ daylight hours) out of the skyline since an immense Buddha image sits on top of the *bòt*. You are welcome to climb up (shoes off) and gaze over the Mekong with it.

WAT TUNG SAWANG

วัดทุ่งสว่าง

The *bòt* at **Wat Tung Sawang** (Sai Silpakhom; ☎ daylight hours) is one of the city's smallest, but the exceptional artistic flair put into the decoration makes it one of the most attractive. Nine Buddhist and Hindu sculptures sit on fanciful pedestals alongside the chapel.

PHRA THAT NONG KHAI

พระธาตุหนองคาย

Also known as **Phra That Klang Nam** (Holy Reliquary in the Middle of the River; admission free), this Lao *chedi* is submerged in the Mekong River and can only be seen in the dry season when the Mekong lowers about 13m. The *chedi* slipped into the river in 1847 and continues to slide – it's near the middle now. Once the top of the *chedi* has cleared the water during the dry season, coloured flags are fastened to the top. **Phra That La Nong**, a replica erected on the original site, glows brightly at night.

NONG KHAI MUSEUM

พิพิธภัณฑสถานหนองคาย

The little **Nong Khai Museum** (☎ 0 4241 3658; Th Meechai; admission free; ☎ 9am-4pm Mon-Fri) once had little to hold your interest, but a renovation ongoing during our last visit could change that, or maybe not.

HAT JOMMANI

หาดจอมมณี

It only makes a seasonal appearance during the dry season, but the sandy beach of **Hat Jommani** under the Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge is a favourite with picnickers, sunsoakers and those who just like to feel the Mekong running between their toes; perhaps from a rented inner tube. During the dry season a rustic thatched shelter with straw mats becomes a restaurant serving delicious *kai yâang*, *plaa ping* (grilled fish), *sôm-tam* (papaya salad) and cold beer.

MUAY THAI

Several *faràng* have trained in *muay thai* (Thai boxing) with **Seksorn Kupradit** (☎ 0 4246 0184), who knows enough English to get his ideas across. It's not a typical hard-nosed camp; instead students get two hours a day of one-to-one lessons. A three-month course costs 12,000B and you'll get into the ring at the end.

VOLUNTEERING

While volunteer opportunities usually require a fairly long commitment, you can do a whole lot of good in just a couple of hours by stopping at one of the orphanages near

town, including **Sarnelli House** (<http://sarnelli.siam.de>) for HIV-positive children, run by Father Mike Shea, to play with the children on weekend mornings. Inquire at Mut Mee Garden Guest House if you're interested. Mut Mee also has information on English-teaching opportunities.

Festivals & Events

During the annual **Songkran Festival** (in April), the priceless image of Luang Pu Phra Sai, a Lan Xang-era Buddha, is paraded around town.

Like many other cities in the northeast, Nong Khai has a **Rocket Festival** (Bun Bang Fai),

GREAT BALLS OF FIRE

Mass hysteria? Methane gas? Drunken Lao soldiers? Or perhaps the fiery breath of the sacred *naga*, a serpent-like being that populates folkloric waterways throughout Theravada Buddhist Southeast Asia. For the Lao and Thai who live along a certain stretch of the Mekong River in Thailand's Nong Khai Province, it's not a matter of whether or not to believe. Since 1983 (or for ages, depending on who you ask), the sighting of the *bàng fai pháyaa nâak* (loosely translated 'naga fireballs') has been an annual event. Sometime in the early evening, at the end of the Buddhist Rains Retreat (October), which coincides with the 15th waxing moon of the 11th lunar month, small reddish balls of fire shoot silently from the Mekong River just after dusk and float fly a hundred or so metres into the air before vanishing without a trace. Most claim the *naga* fireballs are soundless, but others say a hissing can be heard if one is close enough to where they emerge from the surface of the river. People on both sides of the Mekong see the event as a sign that the resident *naga* is celebrating the end of the holiday.

Naga fireballs have only recently come to the attention of the rest of Thailand. TV news has been reporting the annual sightings for years, but it wasn't until the 2002 release of a film based on the phenomena that Thais really began to take notice. Entitled *Síp Hâa Khâm Deuan Síp-èt*, or *Fifteenth Waxing Moon of the Eleventh Lunar Month* (the film was released with English subtitles under the curious title *Mekhong Full Moon Party*), the debut of the film not long before the scheduled event had an expected effect. Thousands of Thais from Bangkok and the rest of the country converged on the banks of the Mekong in Nong Khai Province and waited for the show to begin. Sadly, it rained that year. But that didn't dampen enthusiasm and *naga* fireballs were witnessed right on schedule.

So what, you might ask, is the real cause behind *naga* fireballs? Thais have various theories. One, which was aired on a Thai TV exposé-style programme, claimed that Lao soldiers taking part in festivities on the other side of the Mekong were firing their rifles into the air. Interestingly, the reaction to the TV programme was anger and a storm of protest from both sides of the river. Others suggest that a mixture of methane gas and phosphane, trapped below the mud on the river bottom, reaches a certain temperature at that time of year and is released. Whatever the real cause, few Thais will even entertain the suggestion of a hoax.

Naga fireballs have become big business in Nong Khai Province. Every year some 40,000 people invade little Phon Phisai, the locus of fireball watching, and thousands more converge on about two dozen other riverside spots between Sangkhom and Nakhom Phanom in hopes of sightings. Traffic is so bad that public transport isn't a viable option, but Mut Mee Garden Guest House in Nong Khai runs trucks (200B) to the festivities.

The fireball experience is much, much more than just watching a few small lights rise from the river; it's mostly about watching Thais watching a few small lights rise from the river. And even if the *naga* doesn't send his annual greeting on the day you come (it is sometimes delayed by a day), it will be an interesting experience.

which begins on Visakha Puja day (Buddha's birth and enlightenment day) in late May/early June.

At the end of Buddhist Lent (Okk Paan Saa) in late October/early November, there is a large **Rowing Festival** featuring long-boat races on the Mekong. It corresponds with the October full moon, which is when **naga fireballs** can be seen (see the boxed text, p495).

The **Anou Savari Festival** on March 5 marks the end of the 'Hau' rebellions and boasts the city's biggest street fair.

Sleeping

BUDGET

Catering to the steady flow of backpackers heading across the border, Nong Khai's budget offerings are some of the best in the region and, in fact, these guesthouses also have the best midrange rooms available.

Rimkhong Guest House (☎ 0 4246 0625; 815/1-3 Th Rimkhong; s/d 120/180B) Sparse rooms, some in a shabby wooden house, with shared bathrooms and plenty of hush are standard at this unassuming outfit. A friendly old dog pads around the leafy courtyard and sets the sluggish pace, while the owners provide the warm welcome.

Ruan Thai Guest House (☎ 0 4241 2519; 1126/2 Th Rimkhong; r 120-400B; ☺) Once little more than a small private home, this pleasant spot has grown with the boomtime, boasting a good variety of good-quality rooms with some simple shared bathroom basics out the back to a family room in a little wooden cottage. Factor in the tangle of flower-filled garden greenery and it's a winner.

Pong Vichit Hotel (☎ 0 4241 1583; 1244/1-2 Th Banthoengjit; r 200-400B; ☺) With a lobby stacked floor to ceiling with boxes of ramen noodles, you sure don't expect much out of this old-school concrete block, but open the door to your room and you'll find...OK, they're just as drab as you expected. But the price is right: air-con starts at 270B and all rooms have private bathroom with hot water.

Khiang Khong Guest House (☎ 0 4242 2870; 541 Th Rimkhong; r 300-400B; ☺) Rooms in this newly built concrete block sparkle and shine, and you can lament the lack (not the loss; it was an empty lot before construction) of history with river views from the 3rd-floor terrace or your private balcony.

Sawasdee Guest House (☎ 0 4241 2502; 402 Th Meechai; r 140-420B; ☺) If you could judge a

hotel by its cover, this charismatic place in an old, Franco-Chinese shophouse would come up trumps. The tidy rooms (the fan options share bathrooms) lack the exterior's old-school veneer, but at least you'll sleep well in the knowledge that you're bedded down in a little piece of living history.

Maekhong Guest House (☎ 0 4246 0689; www.me.konguesthouse.com; 519 Th Rimkhong; dm 150B, r 300-500B; ☺) This revamped riverside outfit serves up little bonuses like decorative headboards and plush towels, rarely found at these prices. Its position, right on the river, also scoops a few credits.

Mut Mee Garden Guest House (☎ 0 4246 0717; www.mutmee.com; 1111/4 Th Kaew Worawut; dm 90B, r 130-600B; ☺) Occupying a sleepy stretch of the Mekong riverbank, Nong Khai's budget old-timer has a garden so relaxing you may not want to leave. A huge variety of rooms (some on a raft on the river are planned) are clustered around a thatched-roof restaurant where the owner, Julian, holds court with his grip of local legend and his passion for all things Isan. A little floating bar, named Gaia, sits on the river. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the alleyway leading to Mut Mee has developed into a self-contained travellers village with yoga instruction, internet cafés and a bookshop at hand.

MIDRANGE & TOP END

Thai-Laos Riverside Hotel (☎ 0 4246 0263; 51 Th Kaew Worawut; r 500-800B; ☺) Built a year before the Friendship Bridge opened, this is a good example of unmet expectations. If you don't mind peeling paint and torn carpets, you'll get good views. And, if you're into tacky hotel clubs, you'll find three of them here.

Pantawee Hotel (☎ 0 4241 1568; www.nongkhaihotel.com; 1049 Th Hai Sok; r 800-1800B; ☺) The Pantawee brand is something of a cartel along Th Hai Sok, with a string of accommodation options plus a spa, travel agency and 24-hour restaurant. The main hotel is somewhat homogenous but spotless, with a big choice of air-con rooms, almost all with DVD players and internet-connected PCs.

Nong Khai Grand (☎ 0 4242 0033; www.nongkhai.grandhotel.com; Hwy 212; r 1290B, ste 3700B; ☺) This slick, modern place has plenty of sparkle. A big hit with passing suits, 'executive' standards are maintained throughout and swanky suites (usually available at 40% discount) are on offer for those after the Midas touch.

Eating

Khrua Sukapap Kwan Im (☎ 0 4246 0184; Soi Wat Nak; dishes 20-30B; ☺) breakfast & lunch) The owners of this simple little vegetarian place make a mumsy fuss over *faràng* diners, and serve Thai and Chinese standards (from a buffet counter and an English-language menu) that are good enough for carnivores. The juices are excellent, too.

Darika (no roman-script sign; ☎ 0 4242 0079; 668-669 Th Meechai; dishes 25-60B; ☺) breakfast & lunch) If you're an early riser this spartan, English-speaking outfit will be waiting for you from 5am with cheap egg-and-toast breakfasts, banana pancakes, real Thai coffee, Lao-style baguette sandwiches and all the usual Thai choices.

Mut Mee Garden Guest House (☎ 0 4246 0717; 1111/4 Th Kaew Worawut; dishes 35-135B; ☺) breakfast, lunch & dinner) Mut Mee's food is very popular, especially the breakfasts, but keep in mind that the Thai dishes are toned down to European tastes. But whether you like it hot or not, you simply cannot beat this riverside location, and there are sometimes cultural performances.

Nagarina (☎ 0 4246 0717; dishes 35-75B; ☺) lunch & dinner) There is no paucity of peppers in the kitchen of Mut Mee's riverboat, which docks below the guesthouse. It offers sunset and night cruises for 100B (check at the guesthouse for times), but serves its superb Thai cuisine throughout the day.

Rom Luang (no roman-script sign; ☎ 08 7853 7136; 45/10 Th Prajak; dishes 40-120B; ☺) dinner) Though the menu is mainly Thai, most of the Yellow Umbrella's best known dishes, like sausages and pork neck, are Isan specialties. The hand-made tables and chairs add flair, and the grills stay smoking until 4am.

José Ramon's (1128/11 Th Takai; dishes 80-140B; ☺) lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) A trace of Latin Americana prevails at this hole-in-the-wall diner. And the south-of-the-border menu, cooked up by the gregarious and hilarious José himself, isn't just a Nong Khai novelty – the food's not half bad.

Daeng Namnuang (☎ 0 4241 1961; 526 Th Rimkhong; dishes 30-180B; ☺) breakfast, lunch & dinner) This Vietnamese place has grown into an Isan institution and hordes of out-of-towners head home with car boots and carry-on bags (it's got an outlet at the Udorn Thani airport) stuffed with Vietnamese *namnuang* (pork spring rolls).

Café Thasadej (☎ 0 4242 3921; 387/3 Soi Thepbuntern; dishes 50-310B; ☺) breakfast, lunch & dinner) Sophistication is in short supply in Nong Khai,

but it oozes out of this little restaurant. Both the menu and liquor list, the latter among the best in town, go global. Gyros, weinerschnitzel, fish and chips, lasagne, tuna salad and smoked salmon are some of the most popular options.

Also recommended:
Pizza Mister Bentz (☎ 08 7806 8930; 1121 Th Hai Sok; pizza 99B; ☺) dinner) A pretty good pizza at a very good price.

Bird's Eye View Terrace (☎ 0 4242 0033; Hwy 212; dishes 55-200B; ☺) dinner) You can sample Isan food and see nearly the whole city from the Nong Khai Grand hotel's rooftop restaurant.

For quick, colourful eats swing by the **Hospital Food Court** (no roman-script sign; Th Meechai; ☺) breakfast, lunch & dinner) where about a dozen cooks whip up the standards, or visit the **night vendors** (Th Prajak) who set up their stalls each evening between Soi Cheunjit and Th Hai Sok. During the day, grilled fish reigns supreme at the lunch-only **riverside restaurants** (Th Rimkhong) tucked behind Tha Sadet Market.

Drinking

Surreal (☎ 08 1391 3828; 476/4 Th Rimkhong; ☺) noon-1am Nov-April, 7pm-1am May-Oct) This little place rises above, both figuratively and literally, the other bars on this end of Th Rimkhong. It looks out over the river, has a free pool table and book exchange, and the owner Mark nearly never stops smiling.

Coco-Na Coffee (☎ 0 4241 1362; Th Meechai; ☺) 5pm-midnight; ☺) This coffeehouse-nightclub hybrid attracts a youthful crowd. Gabber away with the other caffeinated punters inside, or take in a live band (November to May) with a glass of whiskey in the terrace out back.

Shopping

Tha Sadet Market (Th Rimkhong) This huge market runs for most of the day and offers the usual mix of dried food, electronic items, souvenirs and assorted bric-a-brac; most of it imported from Laos and China.

Village Weaver Handicrafts (☎ 0 4242 2651; www.villageweaver.net; 1020 Th Prajak; ☺) 8am-7pm) Selling high-quality, moderately priced hand-woven fabrics and ready-made clothing, this shop was established by the Good Shepherd Sisters as part of a project to encourage local girls to stay in the villages and earn money by weaving. The *mát-mii* cotton is particularly good here. Its **workshop** (☎ 0 4241 1236; 1151 Soi Jittapanaya;

(☎ 9am-4pm Mon-Sat), where some of the products are produced, is located off Th Prajak, and visitors are welcome. The Thai name for the project is Hatthakam Sing Thaw.

Village Vocational Training Centre (☎ 0 4241 1860; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Sat) Though separate from Village Weaver, this school 7km south of town (take Hwy 2 and follow the sign east) has similar goals. It's a great place to see the *mát-mii* process from start to finish, and it also has a pottery workshop and mushroom farm.

Getting There & Away

AIR

The nearest airport is 55km south in Udon Thani. Regular flights operate from there to Bangkok. See p488 for more details. Several travel agencies run shuttles to the airport (150B, one hour); **Family Corp 2** (☎ 0 4241 1526; Th Prajak; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Sat), one of these agencies, runs five a day.

BUS

Nong Khai's main **bus terminal** (☎ 0 4241 1612) is located just off Th Prajak, over 1km from the riverside guesthouses.

Buses to Udon Thani (ordinary 40B, one hour) leave Nong Khai about every half-hour throughout the day. There are also regular air-con buses to Khon Kaen (148B, 3½ hours), Bangkok (482B, 11 hours) and Rayong (600B, 12 hours). For Chiang Mai, you have to change at Udon's New Bus Terminal. **Roongprasert Tour** (☎ 0 4241 1447) and **999 VIP** (☎ 0 4241 2679), with offices on opposite sides of the bus terminal, also offer daily 24-seat VIP services (700B, 10 hours) services to Bangkok at 7.45pm and 8pm respectively.

The ordinary bus 507 travels to Loei (105B, six hours), via Sangkhom (47B, 2¾ hours) throughout the morning; the last bus departs at 3pm.

Laos

Take a *túk-túk* to the border crossing where you get stamped out of Thailand. From there regular minibuses ferry passengers across the bridge (15B) between 6am and 9.30pm to the Lao immigration checkpoint. From there it's 22km to Vientiane – there will be plenty of buses, *túk-túk* and taxis waiting for you. If you already have a visa for Laos, there are also six direct buses a day to Vientiane from Nong Khai's bus terminal (55B, one hour).

VISAS FOR LAOS

Despite what travel agents in Bangkok might tell you, the Lao government issues 30-day tourist visas on arrival at Nong Khai's Friendship Bridge and the other border crossings open to those who are not Thai or Lao citizens. Most *faràng* pay either US\$30 or US\$35, though Canadians get socked with a US\$42 fee. You are also allowed to pay in baht, but the price works out much higher. Beside the fee, you'll need a passport photo and the name of a hotel you will be staying at in Laos. Lonely Planet's *Laos* guidebook contains extensive travel information.

TRAIN

From Bangkok, express trains leave Hualamphong station daily at 6.30pm and 8.45pm, arriving in Nong Khai at 5.05am and 9.10am respectively. Going the other way, the express train services depart from Nong Khai at 6am and 6.20pm, arriving at 5.10pm and 6.25am respectively. The fares range from 1217B for a 1st-class sleeper cabin to 498/253B for a 2nd-/3rd-class seat. There is also one rapid train (348/213B 2nd/3rd class) leaving Bangkok at 6.40pm (arriving at 7.35am) and leaving for Bangkok at 6.20pm (arriving at 6.25am).

For information you can call Nong Khai **train station** (☎ 0 4241 1592), which is 2km west of town.

Getting Around

If your guesthouse doesn't rent bikes (30B to 100B) or motorcycles (150B to 200B), someone nearby will. And it pays to shop around a bit, since brakes aren't necessarily standard equipment. Village Weaver Handicrafts has a Jeep available for 1000B per day, which is about the going rate for car rental in Nong Khai.

A short *túk-túk* trip around the town centre will probably cost about 25B.

AROUND NONG KHAI PROVINCE

The Mekong region west of Nong Khai is madly obsessed with **topiary** and along the entire length of Rte 211 you'll pass hedges and bushes sculpted by ambitious gardeners into everything from elephants to *naga* to boxing matches.

Wat Phra That Bang Phuan

วัดพระธาตุบังพวน

Boasting a beautiful and ancient Indian-style stupa, **Wat Phra That Bang Phuan** (☎ daylight hours) is one of the region's most sacred sites, not least because some of the Buddha's bones are supposedly buried here. It is similar to the original *chedi* beneath the Phra Pathom Chedi in Nakhon Pathom, but while it is presumed that this stupa dates back to the early centuries AD, no one really knows when either was built.

In 1559 King Jayachettha of Chanthaburi (not the present Chanthaburi in Thailand, but Wiang Chan – now known as Vientiane – in Laos) extended his capital across the Mekong and built a newer, taller Lao-style *chedi* over the original as a demonstration of faith (just as King Mongkut did in Nakhon Pathom). Rain caused the *chedi* to lean precariously and in 1970 it finally fell over. The Fine Arts Department restored it in 1976 and 1977. The current *chedi* stands 34.25m high on a 17.2-sq-metre base and has several unsurfaced *chedi* around it, which give the temple an ancient atmosphere.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

From Nong Khai, catch the 507 Loei-bound bus and ask for Ban Bang Phuan (20B, 40 minutes).

Tha Bo

ท่าบ่อ

pop 16,000

Surrounded by banana plantations and tobacco fields that flourish in the fertile Mekong floodplains, prosperous Tha Bo is the most important market centre between Nong Khai and Loei. The covered market, which spills out to the surrounding streets, is full of tobacco, tomatoes and other locally grown products.

The area's largest Vietnamese population lives here, and they've cornered the market on noodle production. You don't have to travel far before you'll see sheets of *kúaytiaw* (wide, flat noodles) drying in the sun. It used to be mostly spring-roll wrappers laid out on the bamboo racks, but noodles are a better export product and most businesses are making the switch. Si Chiangmai, just upriver and directly across the Mekong from Vientiane, has picked up the slack and is now the area's spring-roll wrapper capital.

Hotels are still something of an oddity in Tha Bo, but you'll be well cared for at the **Gasa-**

long Resort & Guest House (☎ 0 4243 1227; Rte 2020; 250-500B; ☎), 1km out of town, where bright and cheery bungalows (plus two 250B fan rooms) rest in a quiet little compound filled with trees and flowers and surrounded by rice paddies. There is a handful of food stalls and basic restaurants on the main street through the town.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

The 'yellow bus' runs regularly between Nong Khai and Tha Bo (25B, one hour), taking the scenic riverside route – look for fish cranes along the way. Pick it up in Nong Khai at the bus station or near the Hospital Food Court on Th Meechai. Alternatively, take bus 507 (25B, 40 minutes).

Wat Hin Mak Peng

วัดหินหมากเป้ง

Wat Hin Mak Peng (☎ daylight hours) is worth a trip if only for the scenery along Rte 211 as the riverside mountains begin to rise here. The vast forest temple is nationally known for its *thúdong* (*dhutanga* in Pali) monks who have taken ascetic vows in addition to the standard 227 precepts, eating only once a day and wearing robes sewn by hand from torn pieces of cloth. There are also several *màe chíi* living here. This place is very quiet and peaceful, set in a cool forest with lots of bamboo groves overlooking the Mekong. It was built above three giant boulders that form a cliff rising out of the river. From this point, a Lao forest temple can be seen directly across the river and fisherfolk occasionally drift by on house rafts. Several monuments honour Luang Pu Thet, the wat's deeply revered founding abbot, including a glistening *chedi* housing all his earthly possessions.

The current abbot requests that visitors dress politely – no shorts or sleeveless tops. Those who don't observe the code may be turned away.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

The temple is midway between Si Chiangmai and Sangkhom, on the river side of Rte 211. Bus 507 passes the wat en route between Nong Khai (45B, two hours) and Loei.

Sangkhom

สังขม

Seductively sleepy, the little town of Sangkhom, facing the Lao island of Don Klang

Khong, is a convenient staging post for those taking the high (river) road (Rte 211) between Nong Khai and Loei. The Mekong dominates life here, but there are also some lovely waterfalls in the area.

The largest local waterfall is three-tiered **Nam Tok Than Thip** (admission free; ☞ daylight hours), 13km west of Sangkhom (2km off Rte 211). The lower level drops 30m and the second, easily reached via stairs, falls 100m. The 70m-top drop is only barely visible through the lush forest. **Nam Tok Than Thong** (admission free; ☞ daylight hours), 11.5km east of Sangkhom off the northern (river) side of Rte 211, is a wider but shorter drop with a swimmable pool at the bottom. The short nature trail takes you down by the Mekong. Than Thong is more accessible than Than Thip, but can be rather crowded on weekends and holidays.

The forest wat peering down on the town from the eastern hills, **Wat Pa Tak Sua** (☞ daylight hours), lies about 4km as the crow flies (ask someone to point you to the footpath to the top), but it's 18km to drive (take the turn-off across from Nam Tok Than Thong). It has a very good sunset-over-the-Mekong view.

Bouy's Guest House (☎ 0 4244 1065; Rte 211; r 160-190B; 📺) is an Isan word association game; Sangkhom and the town's veteran guesthouse are rarely more than a breath apart. Rusticity is the buzzword here and the riverside thatched bungalows, the cheaper ones sharing bathrooms, are pretty basic, but in better shape than much of the competition. The owner is a great big bag of smiles and the location just west of town is wonderfully relaxing.

Vanda House (☎ 0 4244 1088; Rte 211; r 500-600B; 📺) offers some swankier digs 1km east of town. The resort doesn't make good use of the river views and isn't really great value, but its beds will satisfy those who demand a certain level of comfort. The resort's adjoining **Pu-Pae Restaurant** (dishes 30-140B; ☞ breakfast, lunch & dinner; 📺) recently relocated out here from a great spot across from the police station in the centre of town; which is a shame because its atmospheric old post had a wooden terrace dining room over the Mekong, with two cosy timber rooms above. It's worth seeing what has moved in.

A couple of surrounding villages, Ban Pha Tang and Ban Pak Som, participate in a **home-stay** (☎ 0 4242 3783) programme. For 300B you get three meals and one night's sleep. Extras, like walks in the forest and cultural perform-

ances, are available. The TAT office in Nong Khai can help with arrangements.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Bus 507 passes through Sangkhom on its way between Nong Khai (47B, 2¼ hours) and Loei (58B, 3½ hours).

BEUNG KAN

เบื้องกาฬ

Beung Kan is a small dusty town on the Mekong River, 136km east of Nong Khai by Rte 212. You may want to break your journey here if you are working your way around the northeastern border from Nong Khai to Nakhon Phanom (as opposed to the easier but less interesting route via Udorn Thani and Sakon Nakhon).

Amphoe Beung Kan itself isn't much, but it has banks, an internet café and most other services you might need, plus a nice promenade along the waterfront. During the dry season the Mekong River recedes from Beung Kan and reaches its narrowest point along the Thai-Lao border. People picnic on the sandbar that comes exposed at this time. The surrounding countryside has several waterfalls.

If you're saving your baht for sundowners, consider the **Mekong Guest House** (☎ 0 4249 1341; 202/1 Th Chansin; r 200-300B; 📺), but look carefully because it treads a fine line between dirty and filthy. Three doors down, the **Maenam Hotel** (☎ 0 4249 1052; 107/1 Th Chansin; r 350-450B; 📺) is a big step up in quality and service, offering spotless rooms with lots of little extras. Just about all the restaurants on Th Chansin serve inside or river-side (which can be buggy), including **Chowdin** (no roman-script sign; ☎ 08 7863 4170; Th Chansin; dishes 30-100B; ☞ dinner), a **jim jam** restaurant (cook your own soup over a wood-burning fire at your table) where you sit on cushions at short tables. For a menu in English, try **Joy's Restaurant** (Th Chansin, Mekong Guest House; ☞ breakfast, lunch & dinner).

Getting There & Away

Ordinary buses (70B, three hours, three daily) to Nong Khai park in front of the 'Thai Beauty' shop near the clocktower. Air-con buses (110B, two hours, four daily) use the petrol station about 100m south.

AROUND BEUNG KAN

วัดภูทอก

Accessed via a network of rickety staircases built in, on and around a giant sandstone out-

crop, **Wat Phu Tok** (☞ 6.30am-5pm, closed 10-16 April) is one of the region's true wonders, with fabulous vistas over the surrounding countryside and a truly soporific atmosphere. Six levels of steps, plus a seventh-level scramble up roots and rocks to the thick forest at the summit, represent the seven factors of enlightenment in Buddhist psychology. Monastic *kūti* (meditation huts) are scattered around the mountain, in caves and on cliffs. It is the cool and quiet isolation of this wat that entices monks and *mâe chii* from all over the northeast to come and meditate here – many of them do so on the summit, so be quiet and respectful up there.

This wat used to be the domain of the famous meditation master Ajahn Juan, a disciple of the fierce Ajahn Man (see p515) who died in 1949. Ajahn Juan died in a plane crash in 1980 along with several other highly revered forest monks who were flying to Bangkok for Queen Sirikit's birthday celebration. A marble *chedi* containing his belongings and some bone relics sits below the mountain.

Visitors who impress the monks by acting and dressing respectfully are permitted to stay the night here. Dorms are single sex and you should not forget that this is a holy place. Another, perhaps better, option is the **homestay programme** (☎ 08 6086 1221; per person 200B) in **Ban Kom Kan Phat Tana**, the village just outside the wat. Just ask around and you'll get pointed in the right direction.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Túk-túk can be hired to get to Wat Phu Tok from the clocktower in Beung Kan – fares cost around 600B for the return journey, plus a two-hour wait at the wat itself. Better still, take bus 225 from the clocktower south to Si Wilai (20B, 45 minutes) where túk-túk drivers charge around 250B to the wat. If you catch an early bus to Beung Kan, Wat Phu Tok can be visited as a day trip from Nong Khai. If you're driving or pedalling, a more direct route to the monastery is to continue southeast along Rte 212 from Beung Kan for 27km until you reach 212 from Beung Kan for 27km until you reach 3024, the road signed for Jet Si, Tham Phra and Chut Na waterfalls. After 17.5km make a right (southwest) and continue 4km more.

Ban Ahong

บ้านอาฮอง

A nice alternative to staying in Beung Khan, Ban Ahong is a pretty little riverside village

at the Km 115 marker on Rte 212. **Wat Ahong Silawat** (☞ daylight hours), on the village's west side, is built around ruddy boulders at a river bend known as 'The Navel of the Mekong' because of the large whirlpool that spins here. A 7m-tall copy of Phitsanulok's Chinnarat Buddha gazes over the Mekong from next to the simple little *bòt*. This is considered a highly auspicious spot to spend the evening of *wan àwk phansāa*, the end of the Buddhist Rains Retreat (Buddhist Lent), because the *bàng fai pháyaa nàak* (*naga* fireballs) were first reported here (see the boxed text, p495).

The **Ahong Mekong View Hotel** (☎ 0 4290 1112; r 350-650B; 📺) sits along the river on the temple grounds and does most of its business with tour groups – so you'll likely either find it booked out or you'll be the only guests. The prices are a bit high, but each of the 14 large rooms is well appointed and has a balcony.

A better overnight option is the village's new **homestay programme** (☎ 08 7223 1544; per person 150B, per meal 50B). About two dozen families have guestrooms in their houses and you can join in village life as much as you like, perhaps joining your hosts out in the surrounding rubber plantations. Either call ahead or stop by to see Khun Win at house number 74, a little west of the school on the river road.

The bus between Beung Kan and Ban Ahong costs 25B (30 minutes).

LOEI PROVINCE

Stretching south from the sleepy arc of the Mekong River near Chiang Khan to the undulating hilltops of Phu Kradung National Park, Loei is a diverse, beautiful province untouched by mass tourism, despite all it has to offer. This isn't the wildest place in Thailand, but potholes definitely pepper a still relatively untrammelled trail that will lead you from the hush of the region's tranquil national parks to the hubbub of Dan Sai's annual Phi Ta Khon Festival.

The terrain here is mountainous and temperatures fluctuate from one extreme to the other – hotter than elsewhere in Thailand during the hot season and colder than anywhere else during the cold season. This is the only province in Thailand where temperatures can drop below 0°C, a fact the tourist brochures love to trumpet. For hiking, the best time to visit Loei is during the cool months of mid-October through February.



LOEI

เมือง
pop 33,000

Arrive here after a sojourn in the region's dreamy countryside and Loei, the capital of the province, is little more than a reminder that concrete and congestion still exist. Efforts to upgrade the town, including a large city-centre lake and a plush new hotel, have done little to haul Loei out of the doldrums, and, as the Tourism Authority of Thailand itself says: 'The city of Loei has little to hold the traveller's interest.'

Information

Bangkok Bank (Th Charoenrat; ☎ 8.30am-3.30pm Mon-Fri) Has an ATM and exchange service.

Faster Zone (22/38 Soi Pia Th Chumsai; per hr 15฿;

☎ 8am-10pm) Surf the web here.

Loei Ram Hospital (☎ 0 4283 3400; Th Maliwan)

South of the city centre.

Loei Tourism Coordination Centre (☎ 0 4281 2812;

Th Charoenrat; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm)

Loei Travel (☎ 0 4283 0741; 167/4 Th Charoenrat) In the Loei Palace Hotel.

Main post office (Th Charoenrat; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat, Sun & holidays)

Tourist police (☎ 1155; Rte 203) West of town.

Sights

If you've been to any other Isan museum, the little **Cultural Centre of Loei** (☎ 0 4283 5224; Rte 201; admission free; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm), 4km north of town at Rajabhat University, is hardly worth

the trip, though if you won't be stopping in Dan Sai, there are Phi Ta Khon festival masks and photos to see.

Wang Saphung, 24km south of Loei, is the strange and unlikely location of the **Sirindhorn Arts Centre** (☎ 0 4284 1410; Rte 210; admission free; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm). It was built to honour Sang-kom Thongmee, a famous local teacher (since retired) at the adjoining school whose students, mostly farmers' children, have won thousands of awards for their work. There's a sculpture garden and gallery and sometimes student work on display, which is invariably more interesting than the professionals' exhibits.

Festivals & Events

Though Loei's farmers are fast switching to other crops, the end of January/start of February still sees a **Cotton Blossom Festival** that culminates in a parade of cotton-decorated floats.

Sleeping

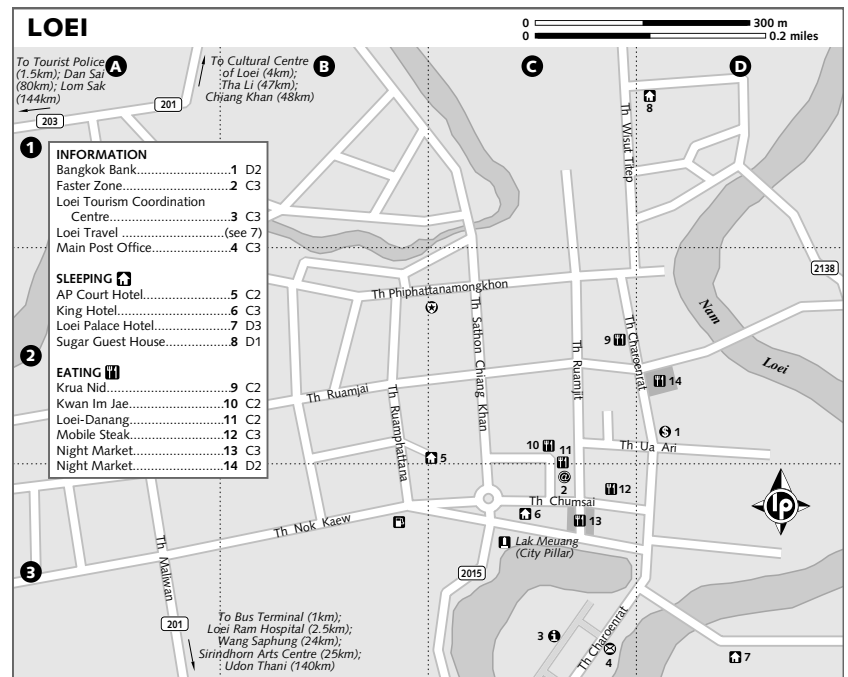
Sugar Guest House (☎ 0 4281 2982; 4/1 Th Wisut Titep Soi 2; r 150-350฿; ☎) The cheapest place in town is also the friendliest. The fan rooms share a hot-water bath. The English-speaking owner

arranges trips around the province at reasonable prices and rents motorcycles (200฿) if you'd rather get there yourself.

King Hotel (☎ 0 4281 1701; 11/9-12 Th Chumsai; r 240-600฿; ☎) Fit for a king? No, but business travellers love it. The pleasant rooms surround a small courtyard and shining surfaces, even in the fan rooms, bear testament to a clutch of hard-working, behind-the-scenes cleaners.

AP Court Hotel (☎ 0 4286 1627; www.apcourthotel.com; 31/29 Th Ruamphattana; r 350-600฿; ☎) The rooms at this newly built property, hidden away in the centre of the block, are a bit of a letdown compared to the plant- and art-filled lobby (where you can use wi-fi), but the value is undeniable.

Loei Palace Hotel (☎ 0 4281 5668; loeipalace@amari.com; 167/4 Th Charoenrat; s/d/t 3060/3296/4002฿; ☎) Loei's flagship hotel sports some wedding-cake architecture, helpful staff, plenty of mod cons and 40% discounts when business is slow, which is almost always. Check out the flood marker and photos next to the reception desk to see what the city suffered in September 2002.



Eating

Kwan Im Jae (☎ 0 4281 4863; Soi Pia Th Chumsai; dishes 15-30B; 🍴 breakfast & lunch) A small, friendly vegetarian restaurant.

Krua Nid (no roman-script sign; ☎ 0 4281 3013; Th Charoenrat; dishes 20-45B; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Basic and stripped, this no-frills eatery serves *hàw mòk* (soufflé-like curry steamed in banana leaves) and other central-Thai dishes. Look for the banana-leaf balls or the 'Welcome' sign.

Loei-Danang (☎ 0 4283 0413; 22/58-60 Soi Pia Th Chumsai; dishes 25-120B; 🍴 lunch & dinner; ♿) This friendly restaurant, on what's commonly called Soi Night Plaza, adds Thai dishes and ice cream to its wonderful Vietnamese menu. There are a few pictures in the menu to help you order.

Mobile Steak (no roman-script sign; ☎ 08 5008 8288; Th Chumsai; dishes 30-159B; 🍴 lunch & dinner) One of Snow White's dwarves welcomes you to this alfresco eatery that serves tasty Thai, as well as slabs of beef, at wooden tables surrounded by pot plants and the sounds of golden oldies.

Most of the city's culinary razzmatazz – and a whole host of cheap eats – can be found at Loei's two **night markets** (🕒 4-10pm), both on the east side of town. Look for the local speciality, *khài ping* (eggs in the shell toasted on skewers).

Getting There & Away

AIR

Nok Air (www.nokair.com) connects Loei to Bangkok (1750B, 1½ hours), Udon Thani (600B, 35 minutes) and Chiang Mai (2550B, two hours 20 minutes) on Fridays and Sundays. Book tickets at **Loei Travel** (☎ 0 4283 0741) in the Loei Palace Hotel.

BUS

The most frequent service is to Udon Thani (ordinary/air-con 60/110B, three hours, every 30 minutes). For Nong Khai (105B, six hours) there are several ordinary buses through the morning and early afternoon; this is a scenic route, but it's easier and faster to go via Udon Thani. There are also four air-con Chiang Mai (438B to 657B, 10 hours) departures daily. Air-con buses to Bangkok's Northern bus terminal (344B, nine to 10 hours) leave frequently, and there are also 24-seat (685B) and 32-seat (521B) VIP services with **Air Muang Loei** (☎ 0 4283 2042) and **999 VIP** (☎ 0 4281 1706).

Getting Around

Sáwngtháew (7B) run from the bus station into town about every five minutes, or you can take a *túk-túk* for 20B.

AROUND LOEI PROVINCE

Phu Kradung National Park

อุทยานแห่งชาติภูกระดึง

Capped off by its eponymous peak, **Phu Kradung National Park** (☎ 0 4287 1333; admission 400B; 🍴 trail to summit 7am-2pm Oct-May) covers a high-altitude plateau, cut through with trails and peppered with cliffs, waterfalls and montane forests. Rising to 1316m, Thailand's second national park is always cool at its highest reaches (average year-round temperature 20°C; dropping as low as 1°C to 2°C at night in December and January), where its flora is more typical of a temperate zone. The maple trees paint some corners red in December and January. Lower down are mixed deciduous and evergreen monsoon forests as well as sections of cloud forest.

A small visitor centre at the base of the mountain distributes detailed maps and collects your admission fee, but almost everything else is on the top. The **main trail** scaling Phu Kradung is 5.5km long and takes about three to four hours to climb (or rather walk – it's not that challenging since the most difficult parts have bamboo ladders and stairs for support). The hike is quite scenic and there are rest stops with food vendors about every kilometre along the way. It's another 3.5km to the main park **visitor centre** (🕒 8am-5pm). You can hire porters to carry your gear balanced on bamboo poles for 15B per kilogram.

The 359-sq-km park is a habitat for various forest wildlife, including elephants, Asian jackals, Asiatic black bears, barking deer, sambars, serows, white-handed gibbons and the occasional tiger. The best place to see them is the **wilderness area**, which can only be entered in April and May. The many waterfalls, including **Tham Yai**, which has a cave behind it, are accessible year-round.

The park is closed to visitors during the rainy season because it is considered too hazardous, being slippery and subject to mudslides. Spending the night atop Phu Kradung is a rite of passage for students, so it gets crowded during school holidays (especially March to May).

SLEEPING & EATING

Atop the mountain there are **camp sites** (per person 30B, 2-person tent hire 150B) and 13 swanky

bungalows (4 people 1600B). There are also several small open-air eateries serving the usual stir-fry dishes for 40B. If you are arriving late in the afternoon, there is one bungalow at the bottom and a few resorts outside the entrance.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Buses on the Loei-Khon Kaen line go to the district town of Phu Kradung (55B, 1½ hours, every half-hour). From Phu Kradung, hop on a *sáwngtháew* (20B) to the park visitor centre at the base of the mountain, 10km away. The last bus back to Loei from Phu Kradung leaves around 8pm.

Tham Erawan

ถ้ำเอราวัณ

High up the side of a beautiful limestone mountain, **Tham Erawan** (donations appreciated; 🍴 daylight hours) is a large cave shrine, featuring a vast seated Buddha. Gazing out over the plains below, the Buddha is visible from several kilometres away and can be reached by a winding staircase of some 600 steps. There's not much to admire in the cave itself, but the views are photogenic and it's a good place to stretch your legs if you happen to be travelling along Rte 210.

The cave is at the back of **Wat Tham Erawan** (🍴 daylight hours), which is 2km north of a turn-off on Rte 210 just across the Nong Bualamphu Province line. A *túk-túk* will shuttle you there for about 20B.

Phu Reua National Park

อุทยานแห่งชาติภูเรือ

Phu Rua means 'boat mountain', a moniker that owes its origins to a cliff that juts out of the peak sort of in the shape of a Chinese junk. At only 121 sq km, **Phu Reua National Park** (☎ 0 4288 1716, reservations 0 2562 0760; admission 400B; 🍴 8am-8pm) isn't one of Thailand's most impressive reserves, but it does offer some dreamy vistas from the summit of the mountain it surrounds. Few visitors do more than make the easy 30-minute hike from the upper visitor centre through pine forest to the summit (1365m), where in December and January temperatures can drop below freezing at night. There are some fine views of a mountain range in Sainyabuli Province, Laos, up here. **Hin San** waterfall is just a 300m walk from the parking area.

If you want solitude, head out from the lower visitor centre. **Huai Phai** waterfall is an

easy 2.5km hike or take a roundabout route to the summit starting down here.

SLEEPING & EATING

The park offers a number of accommodation options, and if they are all full, don't worry, the town seemingly has more hotel rooms than houses. As well as a **camp site** (per person 30B, 2-person tent hire 250B), there are also some comfortable **bungalows** (4 people 1500B) with fan, hot water and fridge, as well as simpler **rooms** (3 people 500B). There are restaurants at both visitor centres.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

The park is about 50km west of the provincial capital on Rte 203. Although buses heading west from Loei can drop you in the town of Phu Reua (ordinary/air-con 40/55B, 1½ hours), you'll have to charter a *sáwngtháew* for around 600B (including a few hours wait) to the park.

Dan Sai & Around

ด่านซ้าย

For 362 days a year, Dan Sai is an innocuous little town, a borderline backwater community where life revolves around a small market and a dusty main street. For the remaining three days, however, it is the site of one of the country's liveliest and loudest festivals.

Falling during the fourth lunar month (usually June), Dan Sai's **Phi Ta Khon Festival** (also called Bun Phra Wet) combines the Phra Wet Festival – during which recitations of the *Mahavessantara Jataka* (past-life stories of the Buddha) are supposed to enhance the listener's chance of being reborn in the lifetime of the next Buddha – with Bun Bàng Fai (Rocket Festival). For those wishing to plunge headlong into Isan life, this curious cross between the drunken revelry of Carnival and the spooky imagery of Halloween is a must-see.

The origins of the Phi Ta Khon Festival are shrouded in ambiguity, but some aspects of the festival appear to be related to tribal Thai – possibly Tai Dam – spirit cults. In fact, the dates for the festival are divined by Jao Phaw Kuan, a local spirit medium who channels the information from Jao Saen Meuang, the town's guardian deity.

INFORMATION

Information centre (☎ 0 4289 1094; Th Kaew Asa; 🕒 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri) In the library by the market.

THE ARRIVAL OF THE SPIRITS

Dan Sai's three-day **Phi Ta Khon** (*phii taa khòhn*) **Festival** – known as Bun Phra Wet in other towns – is one of the most colourful and unique annual events in Thailand. On the first day the village shaman, Jao Phaw Kuan, assisted by his shaman wife Jao Mae Nang Tiam, plus a group of male and female lesser mediums, leads the propitiation of the all-important *tiam*. The *tiam* are a class of spirits similar to the Lao-Thai *khwǎn* (guardian spirits) but perceived to be at a higher level.

Ceremonies begin around 3.30am in a procession from Dan Sai's Wat Phon Chai to Mae Nam Man. Rites are performed at the riverside to coax Phra Upakhut – a water spirit supposedly embodied in an invisible piece of white marble – to join the proceedings. Phra Upakhut is believed to have once been a monk with supernatural powers, who transformed himself into white marble 'to live a solitary and peaceful existence below the water'. The procession – accompanied by the spirit – then returns to the wat, where resident monks receive ceremonial food at around 7am.

Shortly thereafter the summoning of additional spirits takes place at Jao Phaw Kuan's home, which doubles as the most important spirit shrine in Dan Sai. After some incantations and lighting of candles, villagers crawl up to Jao Phaw and Jao Mae, now in states of semitrance, and tie lots of sacred thread on their arms. The attendants also tie sacred thread around one wrist of everyone present. While all this is taking place, free food is served and everyone downs shots of *lào khǎo* (white spirit) to get in the mood for what comes next.

As the thread tying finishes up, the attendants don special costuming and gather in front of the house. Most of the outfits look like something from Shakespearean theatre meant for beggar or jester roles – ragged and tattered but very colourful. To complete the transformation into *phii taa khòhn* (an untranslatable term basically meaning 'Phra Wet spirits'), each attendant dons a huge mask made from a *húat* (crescent-shaped basket used for steaming sticky rice), cut and reshaped to fit atop the head, and a thick sheath from the base of a coconut palm frond. On the typical mask small eye-openings are cut into the palm sheath and a large curving wooden nose added; the whole affair is custom painted, to suit the wearer, with all manner of designs.

Two of the attendants, however, wear tall bamboo frames assembled in vaguely human shapes, covered with white cloth and topped with giant heads standing perhaps 2m above their own heads. One figure is male, the other female, as is obvious from the huge, exaggerated sexual organs attached to the outfits. These are the *phii taa khòhn yài* (big Phra Wet spirits), and exactly what they represent is anyone's guess nowadays. The costumed figures, as well as 'civilians', then begin a boisterous, dance-filled procession – fuelled by more *lào khǎo* – back to the monastery.

Once the cavalcade reaches the wat grounds, the participants begin circumambulating the main *wihān* (large hall) and continue for a couple hours, becoming increasingly rowdy with each turn. There's abundant sexual innuendo and older village women take turns grabbing the lengthy penis of the male *phii taa khòhn yài* and giving it a few good shakes, laughing all the while. The whole thing ends around noon and people stagger back home to sleep it off.

On day two all the locals get into costume and accompany Jao Phaw and Jao Mae in a procession from Chum Chon Dan Sai School to the temple. In earlier years the shaman court rode on wood or bamboo palanquins, but these days they sit on colourful dais in the back of pick-up trucks. Bamboo rockets ride along with them. As on the first day, there's plenty of music and dancing, but this time there are hundreds more participants, and spectators marvel at the many different costume designs cooked up for this year's event. Many of the costumed *phii taa khòhn*, both men and women, carry carved wooden phalli (or a knife or sword with a phallic handle) in one or both hands, waving them about as talismans or using them to tease the crowd while they dance and strut down the street. Tin cans and wooden cowbells hang from some costumes to increase the racket.

Once again, when they reach the wat, the participants dance round the *wihān* for hours, becoming more raucous and spontaneous as the day wears on. At the same time in front of the wat there's live *mǎw lam* (an Isan musical tradition). If it has rained recently, participants will revel in the mud. As one Western observer remarked: 'It's like Woodstock and Halloween rolled into one'. Come late afternoon the bamboo rockets are fired off to the sky.

The celebration ends with a more solemn third day as the villagers assemble at the temple to listen to *Mahavassantara Jataka* recitations (past-life stories of the Buddha) and Dhamma sermons by local and visiting monks. By custom, 13 sermons are delivered in a row.

Has festival photos and free internet. The staff speaks a little English, but if it's not enough, stop by City Hall just up the road.

Krung Thai Bank (Rte 203; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri) Changes dollars and euros only.

Post office (Th Kaew Asa; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, to noon Sat & holidays)

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

On the main road through town, **Wat Phon Chai** (Th Kaew Asa; ☎ daylight hours) plays a major role in the Phi Ta Khon festivities. The small **Dan Sai Folk Museum** (donations appreciated; ☎ 9am-5pm) here features a collection of costumes worn during the celebrations.

Phra That Si Songrak (Rte 2113; ☎ daylight hours) is the most highly revered stupa in Loei Province. The whitewashed Lao-style *chedi* stands 30m high and was built in 1560 as a gesture of unity between the Lao kingdom of Wiang Chan (Vientiane) and the Thai kingdom of Ayuthaya in their resistance against the Burmese. A pavilion in front of it contains a very old chest that supposedly contains an even older carved stone Buddha about 76cm long. You can't wear shoes or the colour red, or carry food or umbrellas anywhere on temple grounds.

Wat Neramit Wiphatsana (☎ daylight hours), on a wooded hill overlooking Phra That Si Songrak, is a gorgeous (it almost looks like a Buddhist-themed resort) meditation wat where most of the buildings are made of unplastered laterite blocks. Famous Thai temple muralist Pramote Sriprom spent years painting images of jataka tales on the interior walls of the *bôt*. The wat is dedicated to the memory of the late Ajahn Mahaphan (also known as Khruba Phawana), a much-revered local monk.

Out of town on Rte 203 near the Km 60 marker is **Chateau de Loei Winery** (☎ 0 4280 9521; www.chateaudeloei.com; ☎ 8am-5pm), Thailand's most respected vineyard. The winery released the first commercially produced Thai wine in 1995 and scooped a silver medal for its Chenin Blanc dessert wine in the 2004 International Wine & Spirits Competition. Visitors are welcome and you can taste its wines, grape juices and brandies back in the main winery building. There is a restaurant and gift-gourmet shop on the main road.

SLEEPING & EATING

As very few people stay in Dan Sai outside the festival season, accommodation is extremely

limited within the town itself, though out on Rte 203 towards Loei there's a good selection if you can spend a little more and have your own transport.

Homestay (☎ information centre 0 4289 1094; per person 150B) The information centre places visitors in homes in nearby villages. The families dote on *faràng* guests and will take you out to give food to the monks in the morning and share other typical daily activities. The information centre can also set you up to stay at Wat Neramit Wiphatsana for a small donation.

Yen Suk Guest House (☎ 0 4289 2281; Rte 203; r 250-600B; ☎) The only guesthouse in town (though another is supposedly coming soon) is a bright orange affair built in 2006. The rooms, including the cheap fan rooms, are fine, but the neighbours give you a very early wake-up call.

Rangyen Resort (☎ 0 4280 9511; www.rangyenresort.com; Rte 203; r 1090-9200B; ☎ ☎ ☎) When you crest the hill, this resort, owned by Chateau de Loei, makes a great first impression. Spread out over several hectares, this pleasant spot boasts a sizable pond, a swimming pool, tennis courts and manicured gardens. The large rooms have nice decorations and the bungalows (sleeping up to 10) have fireplaces. Off-season (April to September) discounts are nearly 50%. There's a big restaurant and a karaoke bar on the premises as the place is geared towards convention business. It's a 10km drive off the highway, so you can forget about using public transport to get here.

Aim Aun (no roman-script sign; ☎ 0 4289 1586; Rte 203; dishes 25-200B; ☎ lunch & dinner) Sizzling Thai favourites, like *kaeng páa* (forest curry), are served under a thatched roof in a garden setting, on the edge of town.

There are a few noodle and rice shops near Wat Phon Chai and a market filled with food stalls opposite the information centre.

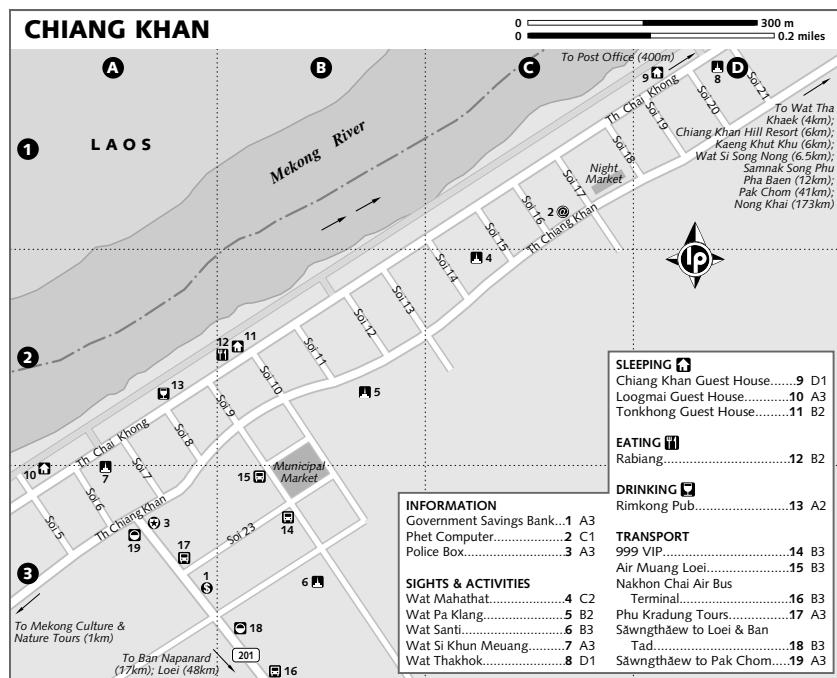
GETTING THERE & AWAY

Thirteen buses from Loei (ordinary/air-con 50/60B, 1½ hours) to Phitsanulok (ordinary/air-con 71/99B, three hours) stop in Dan Sai daily. Buses leaving Dan Sai depart from the entrance of Yen Suk Guest House.

CHIANG KHAN

เชียงคาน

Traditional timber houses line the streets, old ladies sit nattering in their shadow and the Mekong drifts slowly by: if you had an image of a northern riverside town where nothing much



happens and no one seems to care, Chiang Khan may just be it. Pretty and peaceful, with photogenic views of the river and the mountains of Laos beyond, this little town has a good spread of cheap accommodation and makes a restful stopover if you fancy a couple of days of doing...well...nothing.

Information

Government Savings Bank (Rte 201; ☎ 8.30am-3.30pm Mon-Fri) Has an ATM, but there are no foreign-exchange facilities in town.

Phet Computer (Th Chiang Khan; per hr 40B; ☎ 10am-11pm) Check your email here.

Police box (☎ 1155; cnr Rte 201 & Th Chiang Khan) On the main road through town.

Post office (Soi 26; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, to noon Sat, Sun & holidays)

Tourist Information Centre (Kaeng Khut Khu; ☎ 9am-5pm) Your guesthouse would be a better source of information on the area.

Sights

TEMPLES

Chiang Khan's wats are modest, but feature a particularly idiosyncratic style of wat ar-

chitecture rarely seen in Thailand. Featuring colonnaded fronts and painted shutters, the *wihān* temples echo the French architectural influences of Laos. A good example in the centre of town is **Wat Pa Klang** (Th Chiang Khan; ☎ daylight hours), which is about 100 years old and features a new glittery superstructure. On the grounds of this wat is a small Chinese garden with a pond, waterfall, and Chinese-style sculptures of Buddha and Kuan Yin. Temple structures at **Wat Santi** (Soi 9; ☎ daylight hours) and **Wat Thakhok** (Th Chai Khong; ☎ daylight hours) are similar to those at Wat Pa Klang (minus the Chinese garden, etc).

Wat Mahathat (Th Chiang Khan; ☎ daylight hours), in the centre of town, is Chiang Khan's oldest temple; the *bòt*, constructed in 1654, has a new roof over old walls, with faded original murals on the front.

Wat Si Khun Meuang (Th Chai Khong; ☎ daylight hours) contains a Lao-style *chedi* and *bòt*, fronted by an unusual mural style, plus a topiary garden.

Wat Tha Khaek (☎ daylight hours) is a lovely and peaceful 600- to 700-year-old temple housing three very old stone Buddha images.

They sit on a ledge over a larger, modern Buddha in the wat's modern *bòt*. The temple is 2km outside town on the way to Kaeng Khut Khu.

Another well-known monastic centre in the area is **Samnak Song Phu Pha Baen** (☎ daylight hours), 12km east of Chiang Khan (no English signage), where monks meditate in caves and on tree platforms.

Activities

KAENG KHUT KHU

แม่น้ำโขง

Next to nobody in Bangkok has ever heard of Chiang Khan, but most know the rapids at **Kaeng Khut Khu** (admission free; ☎ 24hr), a popular spot (at its most beautiful in the dry, hot season) for paddling, picnicking and sunsoaking, about 6km downstream from Chiang Khan. The surrounding park has thatched-roof shelters with reed mats on raised wooden platforms where **food vendors** sell delicious Isan food and drinks into the late afternoon. The local speciality is coconut candy (*má-pròw ków*), and this is also a good place to try *kǎng ten* ('dancing shrimp'), little bowls of live shrimp meant for slurping down just as they come. Sǎwngthǎew rarely come out here, so rent a bike in town.

BOAT TRIPS & TOURS

Most guesthouses listed here arrange boat trips to Kaeng Khut Khu (per person 200B to 300B) or further afield, and the mountain scenery makes these highly recommended. Most guesthouses also rent bikes (200B to 280B for a mountain bike, 50B for a clunker)

and motorcycles (around 200B). Mekong Culture & Nature Tours, which plans to open an office in town, has kayaks for rent (two hours 400B, full-day trip with shuttle 1500B) and, if *faràng* are ever allowed to cross the border here, will offer boat services to Vientiane.

Both Chiang Khan Guest House and Mekong Culture & Nature Tours arranges a host of customised regional tours. Huub at Chiang Khan Guest House can also set you up with a map if you're a do-it-yourselfer.

Festivals & Events

Chiang Khan comes alive during *wan àw k phansǎa*, the end of the **Buddhist Rains Retreat** (Buddhist Lent) in late October and early November. There's a week-long festival that features a parade of large carved wax *prasat* from each of the temples in town, as well as boat races on the river and a carnival with *mǎw lam* (an Isan musical tradition) performances at night.

Sleeping

Chiang Khan Guest House (☎ 08 4282 1691; www.thailandunplugged.com; 282 Th Chai Khong; s/d/t 200/250/300B) Run by a Dutch tour guide (you'll never be short of local info) and his affable Thai wife (you'll never stop laughing), this traditional-style place with shared bathrooms is all creaking timber and tin roofing. Scores of pot plants and bucolic views from the terrace round out the scene.

Tonkhong Guest House (☎ 08 1670 2729; 299/3 Th Chai Khong; s 150, d 200-380B; ☎) Modern modifications have robbed this old wooden place of most of its charm, but the owner scores high marks for bonhomie and it's the homiest

TAI DAM

The village of Ban Napanard, near Chiang Khan, is home to many Tai Dam people who migrated here from Laos sometime around 1885, though their ancient cultural home is in Vietnam.

Locals run a little-known **homestay** (☎ 0 4281 4664; per person 200B) where you get to learn about Tai Dam culture and history and join in village life. The price includes three meals of Tai Dam food, which is similar to Isan food, but with different sauces. Also available, whether you do the homestay or not, is a partial performance of their *Sair Pang* cultural dance show, which colourfully tells the story of a witch doctor healing the sick. The money (1200B) from these shows, which require a few days notice to arrange, goes to maintain a small **Tai Dam Cultural Centre** (admission free, ☎ daylight hours), with an old-style bamboo and thatch house that needed several shows worth of repairs when we last saw it. In their free time, women come down here to weave.

Two sǎwngthǎew make the trip from Chiang Khan (25B, 30 minutes) daily and some guesthouses in Chiang Khan run tours (which may be the more educational option if you don't speak Thai). If you are coming on your own, head down Rte 201 for 5km and then follow Rte 3011 for 11.5km to the village.

choice facing the river. Doors close at 11pm. Cooking classes and massage are available.

Loogmai Guest House (☎ 0 4282 2334; 112 Th Chai Khong; r 300-400B) Combining some minimalist modern artistic styling with oodles of French colonial class, this old school villa offers a handful of sparse but atmospheric rooms, an airy terrace with river views and a real sense of history. The owner leaves the villa at 9pm (you get the key) and chances are you'll have the place to yourself. It also has one 'large room', where there's enough space to swing cats by the dozen. Bathrooms are shared.

Mekong Culture & Nature Tours (☎ 0 4282 1457; mc_n_thailand@hotmail.com; 407 Th Chiang Khan; camp sites per person 100B, r 800-900B; 📍) If you want some Siamese serenity, head 1km upstream to this riverside home with six shared-bath guestrooms and a bungalow in the forest out the back. Rooms are quite pricey for what you get, but you're paying for the setting, and off-season discounts are available. If you are travelling by bus, staff will pick you up in town.

Eating & Drinking

The guesthouses and hotels offer the best dining options.

Rabiang (no roman-script sign; ☎ 0 4282 1532; 299 Th Chai Khong; dishes 30-150B; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) It's not the cheeriest of venues, but the views of the river are pleasant and all the usual Thai favourites are represented on the English-language menu.

Chiang Khan Hill Resort (☎ 0 4282 1285; dishes 25-230B; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) The best views of Kaeng Khut Khu are from the area's only swank resort. Dine riverside, inside, or on a dry-docked boat.

Rimkong Pub (☎ 0 4282 1125; 294 Th Chai Khong; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) French expat Pascal will tell you all you want to know about the area (or the bungalows he rents) over beer or breakfast.

Entertainment

Chiang Khan Guest House (☎ 0 4282 1691; www.thailandunplugged.com; 282 Th Chai Khong; 🍴 lunch & dinner with advance notice) On weekends and school holidays this place can organise a *ponglang* show (2000B) with local students, who keep all the cash to put towards their studies.

Getting There & Away

Sǎwngthǎew to Loei (30B, 1¼ hours) depart about every 15 minutes from a stop on Rte 201, while nine buses (36B, 45 minutes) leave

from Nakhon Chai Air's bus terminal about 100m further south.

No transport runs direct to Nong Khai, so you'll have to get out of town to catch the bus headed there from Loei. It may be possible to take a *sǎwngthǎew* to Pak Chom (25B, one hour), but these only run if they're full, and they rarely fill up these days since the road is in terrible shape (though you could always just buy up the remaining seats). The surer option is to take the Loei *sǎwngthǎew* south to Ban Tad (20B, 30 minutes) and get the bus there. Ask at your guesthouse if things have changed.

Three companies make the run to Bangkok (about 10 hours) daily from their own offices. **Air Muang Loei** (☎ 0 4282 1002; Soi 9), with an office at a pharmacy, has two buses (1st/2nd class 479/372B) each morning at 8am and again at 6.30pm. **999 VIP** (☎ 0 4281 1706; Soi 9) includes ordinary services (193B) at 6pm and 6.50pm, and a 24-seat VIP (540B) at 6.30pm. **Phu Krading Tours** (☎ 0 9696 2845; Rte 201) charges 372B for its 6.30pm trip.

If you're heading west and you've got your own wheels, consider following the seldom-seen back roads along Mae Nam Heuang; they will eventually deposit you in Dan Sai.

NAKHON PHANOM PROVINCE

Lao, Vietnamese and, in the capital, Chinese influences dominate Nakhon Phanom, a province bordered by the Mekong and dotted with Lao-style *thāt*. Though just about every person you see working in the rice fields or herding buffalo along the road is ethnically Thai, most wear the conical Vietnamese-style straw hats. It's not a region bristling with attractions, but there are plenty of fine river views, and the colossal Wat Phra That Phanom, in That Phanom, is an enchanting talisman of Isan culture.

NAKHON PHANOM

นครพนม
pop 31,700

In Sanskrit-Khmer, Nakhon Phanom means 'city of hills'. Unfortunately, they're all across the river in Laos. But that doesn't stop you from admiring them. With fabulous views across the Mekong to the undulating, sugarloaf peaks on

the other side of the border, this slightly scruffy little provincial capital can sure sell its postcards. The bad news is that there's not a whole lot to do once you've written them.

Information

Bangkok Bank (Lotus Department Store; Th Nittaya; 🕒 10am-8pm) Changes cash only. There are many more banks, open normal banking hours, in the town centre that also do travellers cheques.

Crab Internet (Th Si Thep; per hr 10B; 🕒 8.30am-10pm)

Immigration office (☎ 0 4251 1235; Th Sunthon Wijit; 🕒 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri) For visa extensions.

Main post office (Th Sunthon Wijit; 🕒 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat, Sun & holidays)

North By North-East Tours (☎ 0 4251 3572; www.north-by-north-east.com; 746/1 Th Sunthon Wijit;

🕒 9am-5pm Mon-Sat) Specialises in bird-watching and other ecotours, especially across the river in Laos' mountains. It can also help arrange volunteer placements in the area.

TAT (☎ 0 4251 3490; www.tourismthailand.org; Th Sunthon Wijit; 🕒 8.30am-4.30pm) The handiest thing it has is a rough City Tour map that leads you past a few grand old buildings.

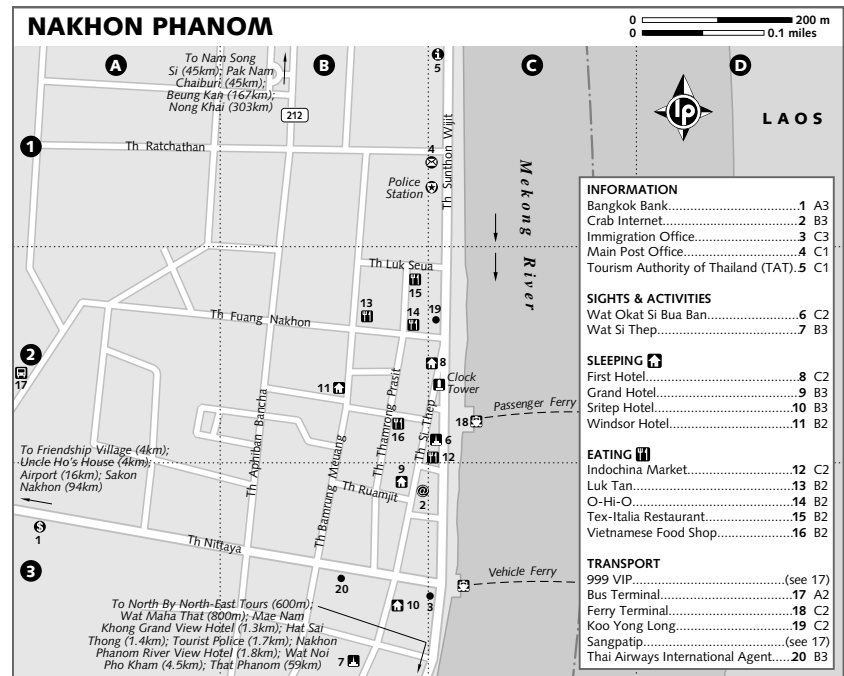
Tourist police (☎ 1155; Th Sunthon Wijit) In the park next to the Nakhon Phanom River View Hotel.

Sights

Most of Nakhon Phanom's wats feature bas-relief carvings on the exterior walls, a distinctive temple style that spilled over from the Lan Xang kingdom in southern Laos around the 17th century. Later a vivid French influence crossed the Mekong. One good example is **Wat Maha That** (Th Sunthon Wijit; 🕒 daylight hours), founded along with the city in the 6th century. Its 24m-tall, gold and white Phra That Nakhon *chedi* resembles the second *chedi* built at That Phanom.

Wat Okat Si Bua Ban (Th Sunthon Wijit; 🕒 daylight hours) predates the town and also has a touch of Chinese influence. The *wihān* houses Phra Taew and Phra Tiam, two sacred wooden Buddha images, and the murals show the story of them floating across the Mekong from Laos.

The interior murals of the *bòt* at **Wat Si Thep** (Th Si Thep; 🕒 daylight hours) show the *jataka* along the upper portion, and kings of the Chakri dynasty along the lower part. On the back of



the *bòt* is a colourful triptych done in modern style.

The *bòt* at **Wat Noi Pho Kham** (Th Si Thep; ☎ daylight hours), just off the highway bypass south of town (turn at the lumberyard), has bas-relief carvings inside and out and a 12m-tall Buddha in the subduing mara posture sitting on top.

The Vietnamese community in Ban Na Chok, about 4km west of town, has restored the simple wooden house where Ho Chi Minh lived (1928–29) and planned his resistance movement. There are a few more Ho Chi Minh displays, some labelled in English, around the block from **Uncle Ho's House** (donations appreciated; ☎ daylight hours) at the **Friendship Village** (donations appreciated; ☎ 8am–5pm) community centre.

From February to April **Hat Sai Thong** (Golden Sand Beach) rises just south of the Mae Nam Khong Grand View Hotel.

If you are coming from or heading to the north along Hwy 212, take a short break at **Nam Song Si**, 45km north, where the greenish water of Huay Songkham meets the muddy brown Mekong. The highway road sign calls this the 'Two Bi-Coloured River'.

Sleeping

First Hotel (☎ 0 4251 1253; 16 Th Si Thep; r 160–300B; 🍽) Set back slightly from the road, this bare-bones place has little decoration, but at least offers some peace and quiet.

Grand Hotel (☎ 0 4251 1526; 210 Th Si Thep; r 190–390B; 🍽) 'Grand' is a popular euphemism for 'modest' among Thailand's budget hotels. This is no duff option though, and while the interior is rather spartan, potted plants and animal sculptures bring a lick of colour and the rooms are perfectly comfortable.

Windsor Hotel (☎ 0 4251 1946; 272 Th Bamrung Meuang; r 250–400B; 🍽) Housed in a rather intimidating concrete block, this is nevertheless one of the friendlier options in town. The rooms are functional – and the fan rooms are a bit noisy – but remain quite good value.

Sritep Hotel (☎ 0 4251 2395; 197 Th Si Thep; r 320–500B; 🍽) This twin-towered hotel is one of the few in town that sits squarely in the midrange. Rooms are ever so ordinary, but it's not bad for the night. The city's only cinema shares the parking lot.

Mae Nam Khong Grand View Hotel (☎ 0 4251 3564; www.mgvhotel.com; 527 Th Sunthon Wjijt; r 700–2600B; 🍽) The town's former chart-topping hotel has a little less pizzazz than the Nakhon

Phanom River View, but since it's also priced a little bit less you can't really go wrong. There's a pleasant terrace overlooking the river, plus the staff are helpful and polite.

Nakhon Phanom River View Hotel (☎ 0 4252 2333; Th Sunthon Wjijt; r 900–2700B; 🍽) This place is a bit of a hike south of the centre, but it's the town's glossiest hotel, with fresh, well-appointed rooms and the usual business-class amenities. All rooms deliver on the name's promise.

Eating

There are plenty of restaurants along the river, but most of the better eateries are back in the centre of town.

Indochina Market (Th Sunthon Wjijt; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) The food court's 2nd-floor terrace has choice seats that frame the mountain views.

Luk Tan (no roman-script sign; ☎ 0 4251 1456; 83 Th Bamrung Meuang; buffet 69–89B; ☎ dinner) This quaint little spot oozes quirky charm, with tables made from old sewing machines and a carefully constructed model train built into the wall. Quirkiest of all is the food; an American home-style buffet featuring mashed potatoes and a salad bar.

Vietnamese Food Shop (no roman-script sign; ☎ 0 4251 2087; 165 Th Thamrong Prasit; dishes 25–100B; ☎ lunch & dinner) With coloured lights and Ronaldinho posters, this little corner shop takes a half-hearted attempt at being fashionable, but the food stays classic, serving the same family recipes, including *namnuang* (assemble-it-yourself pork spring rolls) and spicy Thai salads, for over 50 years now.

O-Hi-O (☎ 0 4252 1300; 24 Th Fuang Nakhon; dishes 30–220B; ☎ dinner; 🍽) This airy bar/eatery has plenty of wood, food (the usual Thai, Isan and Chinese), rivers of whisky and movies on the big screen.

Tex-Italia Restaurant (☎ 0 4251 5516; Th Thamrong Prasit; dishes 55–289B; ☎ lunch & dinner; 🍽) What does a Thai woman who fell in love with Italian food while cooking in Bangkok and then moved to Texas do when she returns home? Open this little restaurant-bar. There are no culinary fireworks, but some of the East-meets-West mergers are fun; and the pool table is free.

Pak Nam Chaiburi (no roman-script sign; ☎ 0 4257 3037; dishes 25–200B; ☎ lunch & dinner) This bucolic restaurant right at the confluence of Nam Song Si serves fish on a shaky wooden

deck. The food is fine and the scenery is superb.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Thai Airways doesn't fly to Nakhon Phanom, but the **THAI agent** (☎ 0 4251 2494; 85 Th Mittaya; ☎ 8am–5pm Mon–Fri, to 1pm Sat & Sun) sells tickets for **PB Air** (☎ in Bangkok 0 2261 0222; www.pbair.com), which flies daily to/from Bangkok (one way 2905B).

BOAT

Between 8am and 6pm, you can catch a boat (one way 60B) from the **ferry terminal** (Th Sunthon Wjijt) across the Mekong to Tha Khaek in Laos. Thirty-day visas are *usually* available at the border.

BUS

Nakhon Phanom's **bus terminal** (☎ 0 4251 3444) is east of the town centre, down Th Fuang Nakhon. From here buses head to Nong Khai (ordinary/air-con 160/205B, five hours, nine daily until 11.30am); Udon Thani (ordinary/air-con 90/164B, five hours, 17 daily) via Sakon Nakhon (ordinary/air-con 47/85B, 1½ hours); and Mukdahan (ordinary/air-con 52/94B, two hours, hourly) via That Phanom (ordinary/air-con 27/49B, one hour).

999 VIP (☎ 0 4251 1403) and **Sangpatip** (☎ 0 4252 0411), both with terminals at the airport, together send three VIP buses to Bangkok (32/24 seat 664/820B, 13 hours) daily.

Getting Around

Túk-túk drivers want 100B per hour, which is about how long it takes to visit Ban Na Chok and Wat Noi Pho Kham. A better bet is renting a bike from **Koo Yong Long** (☎ 0 4251 1118; 363 Th Sunthon Wjijt; per hr/day 10/50B; ☎ 6.30am–7pm).

RENU NAKHON

เรณูนคร

The village of Renu Nakhon is known for cotton weaving and there are many places around the village where you can watch the process. The local Phu Thai, a Thai tribe separate from mainstream Siamese and Lao, make and market their designs here. The finished products are sold in the big **handicrafts market** on the grounds of **Wat Phra That Renu Nakhon** (☎ daylight hours), as well as at a string of nearby shops. The temple's 36m tall *thâat* is a replica of the second *chedi* built in That Phanom and is considered very holy.

During local festivals, the Phu Thai sometimes hold folk-dance performances called *fáwn lám phu thai*, which celebrate their unique heritage.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

The turn-off to Renu Nakhon is only 8km north of That Phanom, so you could visit Renu on the way there from Nakhon Phanom or even make it a day trip from That Phanom. From Rte 212, it's 7km west on Rte 2031 (20B by túk-túk from the junction). To charter a túk-túk from That Phanom costs around 150B, though the price will rise if you want them to show you around and bring you back.

THAT PHANOM

วัดพนม

Towering over the small town, the spire of the colossal Lao-style *chedi* of Wat Phra That Phanom is one of the region's most emblematic symbols and one of the great flagpoles of Isan identity. In comparison, the little town of That Phanom itself is rather forgettable. Divided neatly in two, with the older half to the east, next to the river, it does, however, make a relatively peaceful base for exploring the wider region.

Information

Jane Internet (45 Th Phanom Phanarak; per hr 20B; ☎ 8am–9pm)

Siam Commercial Bank (Th Chayangkun; ☎ 8.30am–3.30pm Mon–Fri) Offers an ATM, foreign exchange and Moneygram wire-transfer services.

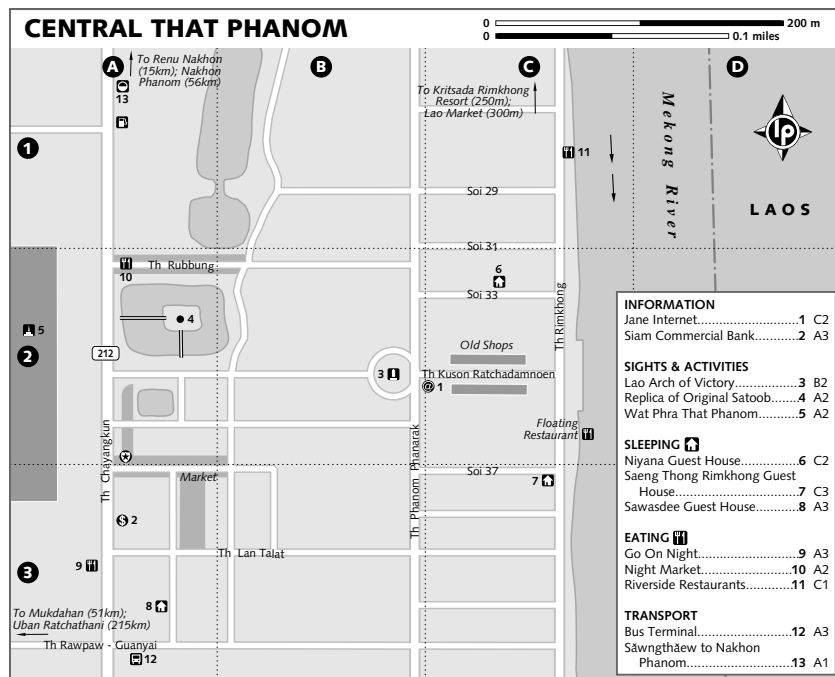
Sights

WAT PHRA THAT PHANOM

วัดพระธาตุพนม

Wat Phra That Phanom (Th Chayangkun; ☎ 5am–8pm) is a potent and beautiful symbol of Isan identity and has at its hub a *thâat*, or Lao-style *chedi*, more impressive than any in present-day Laos and highly revered by Buddhists all over Thailand. The *thâat* is 53m high and a five-tiered, 16kg gold umbrella laden with precious gems adds 4m more to the top. Surrounding it is a cloister filled with Buddha images and behind the wat is a shady park.

Many Thais truly believe the legend that the Lord Buddha came to Thailand and directed that one of his breast bone relics be enshrined in a *chedi* to be built on this very site – and so it was, eight years after his death



in the 5th century BC. Some historians date the first construction, a short **satoob** (there's a replica of it in a pond in front of the temple) to the 6th century BC. Modifications have been routine since then, but there have been four major constructions. The first *thâat* was 24m tall and went up in the 1st century BC, and it was raised to 47m in 1690 – you'll find copies of this design all over Isan. The current design was built in 1941, but it toppled during heavy rains in 1975 and was rebuilt in 1978. A large **museum** (☎ 8.30am-4pm) tells both the legend and history of the *thâat*, and also displays a hodge-podge collection of pottery, gongs, statues, US presidential commemorative coins and many other old items.

OTHER SIGHTS

Hundreds of Lao merchants cross the river for a **market** (☎ 8.30am-noon Mon & Thu) north of the pier. Exotic offerings include Lao herbal medicines, forest roots and animal skins. The maddest haggling occurs just before the market closes, when Thai buyers try to take advantage of the Lao's reluctance to carry unsold merchandise back home.

The short road between Wat Phra That Phanom and the old town on the Mekong River passes a large **Lao arch of victory**, which is a miniature version of the arch on Th Lan Xang in Vientiane (which leads to Vientiane's Wat That Luang). The short stretch of Th Kuson Ratchadamnoen between the arch and the river is interesting, with a smattering of French-Chinese architecture that is reminiscent of old Vientiane or Saigon and many shops selling Vietnamese foodstuffs. A couple of the old shop interiors are nearly museum-quality timeless.

Festivals & Events

During the **That Phanom Festival** in February visitors descend from all over Isan and Laos to pay respect to the *thâat*. The streets fill with market stalls, many top *mǎw lam* troupes perform and the town hardly sleeps for 10 days.

Sleeping & Eating

Few tourists stick around town very long, so there are only a handful of sleeping options. During the February That Phanom Festival accommodation rates soar and rooms are booked out a month in advance.

Niyana Guest House (☎ 0 4254 0880; 65/14 Soi 33; r 140B) The town's backpacker original has moved into new digs, but it's just as chaotic as ever. Undoubtedly the friendliest and most helpful place in town, it's little more than someone's house with an English school on the ground floor – with all the good and bad that goes with that. Rooms are spartan, but kind of cosy; bathrooms are shared. Bike rental costs 40B per day.

Saeng Thong Rimkhong Guest House (no roman-script sign; ☎ 0 4254 1396; 507 Th Rimkhong; r 250B) This so-so place steals the centre ground, with less sparkle than Kraitsada and less atmosphere than Niyana. It's fine for a night's sleep though.

Sawasdee Guest House (no roman-script sign; ☎ 0 4254 0148; off Th Lan Talat; r 400B; ☎) This brand-new place just a stone's throw from the bus stop has a motel-style strip of well-appointed rooms.

Kraitsada Rimkhong Resort (☎ 0 4254 0088; www.kraitsadaresort.com; 90-93 Th Rimkhong; r 400-600B; ☎) The shiny rooms at this resort are a mix of sterile modern rooms and traditional wood-style buildings, which are more atmospheric outside than in. Many of the rooms are colossally and have separate sitting rooms. Call and someone will pick you up at the bus stop.

Go On Night (no roman-script sign; ☎ 0 4254 1014; 419 Th Chayangkun; dishes 50-200B; ☎ lunch & dinner) There is no English menu, but most ingredients are on display so just point and let them serve it, Thai or Chinese style. They don't stop stir-frying until 3am or 4am.

Every evening a small **night market** (☎ 3-9pm) takes over Th Robbung. Also come night-fall, lots of small **riverside eateries** (Th Rimkhong), perched on stilts and ablaze in fairy lights, open their doors between the pier and Kraitsada Rimkhong Resort. They are all much of a muchness foodwise – although some turn the karaoke machine up louder than others – so have a wander and pick your place.

Getting There & Away

From the bus terminal on the south side of town there are regular services to Ubon Ratchathani (ordinary/air-con 102/178B, 4½ hours, hourly) via Mukdahan (ordinary/air-con 28/50B, one hour), Sakon Nakhon (ordinary/air-con 38/68B, 1¼ hours, hourly) and Nakhon Phanom (ordinary/air-con 27/49B, one hour, five daily). Nakhon Phanom also has regular *sǎwngthǎew* services (36B, 90 minutes, every 10 minutes). Up to six air-con buses go to Bangkok (588B, 10 hours) daily, including a 24-seat VIP service (800B, 5.50pm).

Only Thai and Lao citizens are permitted to cross the river to/from Laos here.

SAKON NAKHON PROVINCE

Many famous forest temples sit deep in the Phu Phan Mountain range that runs across Sakon Nakhon Province, and among Sakon Nakhon's famous sons are two of the most highly revered monks in Thai history. Both Ajahn Man Bhuridatto and his student, Ajahn Fan Ajaro, were ascetic *thūdong* monks who were thought to have attained high levels of proficiency in Vipassana meditation and are widely recognised among Thais as having been *arahants* (fully enlightened beings). Although born in Ubon Ratchathani, Ajahn Man spent most of his later years at Wat Pa Sutthawat in Sakon Nakhon.

SAKON NAKHON

เทศบาลนคร
pop 68,000

Workaday Sakon Nakhon is primarily an agricultural market and Th Ratpattana is chock-a-block with shops selling farming equipment. And though the city centre is the usual concrete mess, neighbourhoods on the fringes are full of old wooden houses, and this is where you will find the two historic temples of Wat Phra That Choeng Chum and Wat Pa Sutthawat, the town's main attractions.

Information

Bangkok Bank (Th Makkhalai, Lotus Department Store; ☎ 10am-8pm) Has an ATM and exchange services (cash only). Plenty of banks in the town centre keep regular banking hours.

CT Com (no roman-script sign; 1871/12-13 Th Prem Prida; per hr 15B; ☎ 8.30am-10pm) Surf the web here.

Police station (☎ 1155; Th Makkhalai)

Post office (Th Charoen Meuang; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, to 9am-noon Sat, Sun & holidays)

Sights

WAT PA SUTTHAWAT

วัดป่าสุทธาวาส

The grounds of Wat Pa Sutthawat, on the southwestern outskirts of town, are essentially a shrine to two of Thailand's best-known monks. Most famous of all is Ajahn Man Bhuridatto who died here in 1949. The final resting place of Ajahn Man's personal effects, the



Ajahn Man Museum (donations appreciated; ☎ 8am-6pm), bizarrely looks a bit like a modern Christian church, with arches and etched-glass windows. A bronze image of Ajahn Man, surrounded by flowers, sits on a pedestal at the back

Ajahn Lui Chanthasaro, who died in 1989, was one of Ajahn Man's most famous students and King Rama IX designed the *chedi* that holds the **Ajahn Lui Museum** (donations appreciated; ☎ 8am-6pm). Ajahn Lui's likeness, also surrounded by flowers, is in wax.

Both museums showcase all the monks' worldly possessions, as well as photographs and descriptions of their lives; Ajahn Man's displays, signed in English, give a good description of a typical monk's life.

WAT PHRA THAT CHOENG CHUM

วัดพระธาตุเชิงชุม
The most visible highlight at **Wat Phra That Choeng Chum** (Stupa of the Gathering of the Footprints; Th Reuang Sawat; ☎ daylight hours) is the 24m-high Lao-style *chedi*, which was erected during the Ayutthaya period over a smaller 11th-century Khmer *prang*. It was built over four Buddha footprints where, legend has it, four different incarnations of Lord

Buddha had a meeting. To view the *prang* you must enter through the adjacent *wihāan*. If the door to the *chedi* is locked, ask one of the monks to open it; they're used to having visitors.

Also on the grounds are a Lan Xang-era *bòt* and a *wihāan* built in the cruciform shape reminiscent of Lanna styles found in northern Thailand. *Liuuk nimit* (spherical ordination-precinct markers that look like cannonballs and are buried under the regular boundary markers that surround most *bòts*) are lined up near the *wihāan*. The wax castles carved during the Buddhist Rains Retreat (Buddhist Lent) resemble the top of the west gate, and next to the east gate is the base for an original Khmer Shivalingam (phallic object).

WAT PHRA THAT NARAI JAENG WAENG

วัดพระธาตุนารายณ์เจงเวง
About 5km west of town at Ban That, this wat (known as Phra That Nawaeng, a contraction of the words Narai Jaeng Waeng) has a 10th- to 11th-century Khmer *prang* in the early Bapuan style. Originally part of a Khmer-Hindu

(Continued from page 516)

complex, the five-level sandstone *prang* is missing most of its top, but still features a reclining Vishnu lintel over its northern portico and a dancing Shiva over its eastern one. This is not a particularly evocative temple, but it's the most complete Khmer ruin in the province.

To get here by public transport catch *sǎwngthǎew* 3 (8B) heading north on Th Ratpattana from the bus terminal, get off at Talat Ban That Nawaeng and walk 500m north.

OTHER SIGHTS

The **city monument** (Th Ratpattana) at the northwestern corner of town was obviously inspired by Vientiane's Patuxai or That Phanom's gate. The arch-like structure consists of four thick cement pillars standing over a bowl filled with *naga*.

Across the park from the monument, little **Sa Pan Kom** (Khmer Bridge; Th Sai Sawang) was once part of a Khmer road leading to Wat Phra That Narai Jaeng Waeng.

Along the eastern and northern edges of town is **Nong Han**, Thailand's largest natural lake. Fishermen, who tie up their boats behind Saphang Thong Park, will take you out sightseeing, including a stop to visit the monks on **Ko Don Sawan** (Paradise Island), the lake's largest island. The going rate is 500B for as long as a tank of gas lasts; the Dusit Hotel can help make arrangements. *Don't* swim in the lake: it's infested with liver flukes, which can cause a nasty liver infection known as opisthorchiasis.

The freshwater **aquarium** (☎ 0 4271 1447; Th Sai Sawang; admission free; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm) at the Sakon Nakhon Fishery Station displays fish from Nong Han, as well as the Mekong and Songkram rivers. There is a pitiful little crocodile pond nearby.

Festivals & Events

The end of the **Buddhist Rains Retreat** (Buddhist Lent) in late October/November is fervently celebrated in Sakon, with the carving and display of wax castles in Ming Meuang Field the highlight. The festival also features demonstrations of *muay-boron*, the old, bare-knuckle style of Thai boxing.

Sleeping

Araya 2 (☎ 0 4271 1054; 354 Th Prem Prida; r 150-250B) This basic concrete bolthole is inching towards decrepit, but it won't break your budget.

Somkiat Hotel (☎ 0 4271 1740; 1348 Th Kamjat Phai; r 200-400B; ☎) The Somkiat is no beauty queen, but for just a few baht more it takes the tiara from Araya. The fan rooms in the main building have the hot water turned on only during the winter. The air-con rooms at the back are motel style and fronted by carparks.

Dusit Hotel (☎ 0 4271 1198; www.dusitsakhon.com; 1784 Th Yuwaphattana; r 400-700B; ☎) This old-timer has the loveliest lobby and cheeriest staff in town. The most expensive rooms have some character built in while the rest are more ordinary, but each price category offers good value. The restaurant is pretty good and there's free wi-fi in the lobby.

MJ (☎ 0 4273 3771; 399/2 Th Khu Meuang; r 630-3360B; ☎) Prices have dropped over the years making this place pretty good value, and the facilities (restaurant, cocktail lounge, pub, café, massage, snooker club and karaoke) earn a few extra brownie points as well. If you are in the mood to part with a few extra baht, the superior rooms are well worth the extra.

Eating

Khrua Kwan Im (Jae) (no roman-script sign; ☎ 0 4271 1599; Th Prem Prida; dishes 25-50B; ☎ breakfast & lunch) This simple place distinguishes itself by offering veggie versions of many Isan favourites, like *láap* (a super-spicy salad).

Ya Yee Suki Shabu (no roman-script sign; ☎ 0 4273 2011; 349 Th Charon Meuang; buffet 89B; ☎ lunch Sat & Sun, dinner daily) Walk the buffet line at this colourful Chinese place and cook up your creations at your table, or order some scrumptious Thai and Chinese food off the menu.

Green Corner (☎ 0 4271 1073; 1773 Th Ratpattana; dishes 35-250B; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner; ☎) The first choice for a fix of *faràng* food really distinguishes itself with its Thai and Isan choices – mao berry juice, Chiang Mai pork sausage, spicy catfish salad – and we've never seen ants' egg omelettes on an English-language menu before.

Sakon Nakhon's biggest night market, the **Night Plaza** (Th Khu Meuang), has an excellent selection of food, but it's all bagged up for takeaway and the action starts to fade around 8pm. If you want to sit down and stay out late, hit the **Talat Suanluk Night Market** (Th Tor Pattana) in the thick of the city's nightlife district.

Shopping

OTOP Center (☎ 0 4271 1533; Th Sukkasem; ☎ 8.30am-5pm) Has a good selection of natural-dyed,

(Continued on page 525)

hand-woven fabrics and clothes dyed with indigo and other natural colourants. You can also pick up mao-berry and black-ginger wines here and in many other shops, hotels and restaurants.

Getting There & Away

Phu Sakon (☎ 0 4271 2259; 332/3 Th Sukkasem; ☎ 8.30am-5pm) is the agent for **PB Air** (☎ in Bangkok 0 2261 0222; www.pbair.com), which flies once or twice daily to/from Bangkok (one way 2745B, one hour).

Buses serve Ubon Ratchathani (ordinary/air-con 125/225B, five hours, eight daily), That Phanom (ordinary/air-con 38/68B, 1¼ hours, 14 daily), Nakhon Phanom (ordinary/air-con 47/85B, 1½ hours, hourly), Udon Thani (ordinary/air-con 78/109B, 3½ hours, every half-hour), Khon Kaen (ordinary/air-con 92/166B, four hours, five daily) and Bangkok's northern bus terminal (air-con/32-seat VIP 360/540B, 11 hours, every half-hour).

There are also departures for Udon Thani (every half-hour) and Khon Kaen (six daily) from the Esso petrol station north of the bus terminal, while **999 VIP** (☎ 0 4271 2860) has 24-seat buses to Bangkok (715B, 8.30am, 7.30pm, 7.45pm) from its office on the road out of town.

AROUND SAKON NAKHON

Ajahn Fan Ajaro Museum

พิพิธภัณฑ์พระอาจารย์มหาอาจโร

Ajahn Fan Ajaro, a famous student of Ajahn Man, lived at Wat Pa Udom Somphon in his home district of Phanna Nikhom from 1963 until his death in 1987. His **museum** (donations appreciated; ☎ 8am-5pm), inside a *chedi* with a triple-layer lotus design, commemorates his life with the usual display of relics, photos and worldly possessions. Unlike Wat Pa Sutthawat, which has become a *wat thiaw* (tourist wat), this is still a strict forest meditation monastery, so only those with a serious interest in Buddhism should walk back to the adjacent monastery. The museum is 40km from Sakon Nakhon toward Udon Thani on Hwy 22, then 1.5km north of Ban Phanna on Th Srisawadwilai.

Phu Phan National Park

อุทยานแห่งชาติภูพาน

Swathed in forest and tumbling over the pretty Phu Phan mountains, **Phu Phan National Park** (☎ 08 1263 5029, reservations 0 2562 0760; free admission; ☎ 24hr) remains relatively undeveloped and

isolated – it's no surprise that the area once provided cover for Thai resistance fighters in WWII and People's Liberation Army of Thailand (PLAT) guerrillas in the 1970s. **Tham Seri Thai** (Seri Thai Cave) was used by the Thai Seri (Thai underground resistance; see p35) during WWII as an arsenal and mess hall. As well as being a stomping ground for barking deer, monitor lizards and monkeys, the 645-sq-km park also hosts a few elephants.

There are two main places to visit. **Pha Nang Moem** is a vista point just 700m from the visitor centre and you can climb down to **Lan Sao E** plateau just below it. **Nam Tok Kam Hom**, one of four petite falls along a 600m stretch of stream (the water is only from August to October), is 9km north (near Thailand's largest kilometre pillar). Seldom-visited **Tang Pee Parn** natural rockbridge can be reached by 4WD. A park guide is recommended for trekking deep into the gorgeous mountains in the south end of the park; if you want to do it yourself, discuss your plans at the headquarters before setting out. For spending the night, there is a **camp site** (per person 30B, 3-person tent hire 150B) and eight **bungalows** (4 people 500B) available.

Both of the principal attractions sit right off Rte 213 and any Kalasin-bound bus (ordinary/air-con 20/25B, 45 minutes, every 40 minutes) from Sakon Nakhon will drop you off or shuttle you between them.

Talat Klang Dong Sang Kaw

ตลาดกลางดงสร้างข้าว

Twenty-five kilometres past Phu Phan National Park on Rte 213, **Talat Klang Dong Sang Kaw** (Sang Kaw Jungle Market) stocks custard apples and other foods grown on small village farms, but it's best known for the products gathered sustainably in the surrounding forest, like fruits, roots, honey, insects, bird nests (for good luck – well, not for the birds) and mushrooms. There are also locally produced whiskies and mao-berry wines.

YASOTHON & MUKDAHAN PROVINCES

YASOTHON

ยโสธร

pop 23,000

Yasothon Province has little of interest to the average traveller, though people looking

to nose a little deeper into Isan culture will want to peek at Phra That Kong Khao Noi and purchase some pillows in Ban Si Tham. The provincial town of Yasothon saves all of its fireworks for the annual Rocket Festival, which completes a trifecta of Isan icons. The city has nothing to offer outside the official whizz-bang period of late May and neither looks nor acts like a capital city. In fact, it barely feels like a city at all.

Sights

PHRA THAT KONG KHAO NOI

พระธาตุทองข้าวเหนียว

A rather sinister myth surrounds **Phra That Kong Khao Noi** (Small Rice Basket Stupa; ☎ daylight hours), a brick-and-stucco *chedi* dating from the late Ayuthaya period found along Hwy 23 about 9km out of town towards Ubon. According to one legend (which is taught to school children around the country as an example of why it's important to keep your emotions in check) a young, and no doubt ravenously hungry, farmer who had toiled all morning in the hot sun murdered his mother here when she brought his lunch to the fields late – and in the smallest of sticky-rice baskets. The farmer, eating his lunch over his mother's dead body, realised that the small basket actually contained more sticky rice than he could manage to eat. To atone for his misdeed, he built a *chedi*.

Or perhaps not. Others say it was built by people who were travelling to Phra That Phanom to enshrine gold and gems, but got to Ban Tat Thong and learned they were too late, so they built this *chedi* instead.

Further complicating matters, many claim that the real Small Rice Basket Stupa is a little further north in the back of Wat Ban Sadow, located 7km east of Yasothon on Rte 202. All that remains is the base; when the original tumbled over shortly after the redeemed son's death, locals built another petite *chedi* next to it.

BAN SI THAN

บ้านศรีฐาน

Residents of **Ban Si Than** can't leave their work behind when they go to sleep – this is a pillow-making village. Almost everywhere you look as you walk through the village (and most of those surrounding it, too) you'll see people sewing, stuffing or selling *mawn khit* (pillows decorated with diamond-grid *khit* patterns),

most famously the triangular *mawn khwuan* (literally 'axe pillow'). They couldn't possible meet demand without using machine-made fabric, but most of the shops in town also stock some of the old-style hand-woven pillows. Prices here are almost half what you'll pay elsewhere in Thailand, and this is also one of the few places you can buy them unstuffed (*yang mai sai nun*; literally 'no kapok inserted'), which makes the big ones viable as souvenirs.

If you want to see monkeys, have someone point you to **Don Ling**, 4km out of town at Ban Tao Hi.

Ban Si Than was set to launch a **homestay programme** (☎ 08 7243 2278) when we last stopped by; call for details. The village is 20km from Yasothon, then 2.5km south of Rte 202 from Ban Nikom. Any Amnat Charoen bus can drop you at the junction (30B, 45 minutes) where a motorcycle taxi will zip you in for about 20B.

OTHER SIGHTS

In town, **Phra That Phra Anon** (Th Wariratchadet; ☎ daylight hours), also known as Phra That Yasothon, at Wat Mahathat is a highly venerated Lao-style *chedi*. It's said to be more than 1200 years old and to enshrine holy relics of Phra Anon (Ananda), the Buddha's personal attendant monk and one of his chief disciples. The scripture hall, dating to the 1840s, sits on stilts in a pond.

Wat Sing Th (Th Uthai Rammarith; ☎ daylight hours) is rather ordinary, but the block fronting its south side is a treasure-trove of classic Chinese shophouses.

Festivals & Events

The **Rocket Festival** (Rin Bang Fai) rain and fertility rite is celebrated on the second weekend of May. Rocket Festivals are held to herald the rainy season across Isan, but nowhere as fervently as in Yasothon where it involves local dances, parades and rocket-launching contests. The largest rockets, called *bang fai saen*, are packed with 120kg of nitrate. Those whose homemade rockets fail to launch get tossed in the mud.

Sleeping & Eating

In Town Hotel (no roman-script sign; ☎ 0 4571 3007; 614 Th Jangsanit; r 220-380B; 🍽️) This place, on the main road through town, is far enough south that it almost loses the rights to its name, but

for Yasothon, it's far better than the budget average.

Yasothon Orchid Garden (no roman-script sign; ☎ 0 4572 1000; 219 Th Prachasamphan; r 400-450B; ☎) The eye-catching exterior hides some fairly drab rooms at this newly built place by the old bus terminal, but it makes a reasonable midranger.

JP Emerald Hotel (☎ 0 4572 4848; 36 Th Prapa; r 800-1600B; ☎) The lobby is lovely (even with the tacky plastic greenery) and the rooms comfy, but they are a bit behind on the upkeep of everything in between. Still, you could do a lot worse at these prices and the staff is at the top of their game. It's at the Roi Et end of town.

Rim Chi (no roman-script sign; ☎ 0 4571 4597; dishes 50-200B; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Enjoy superb Isan and Thai food and bucolic Chi River views from either the shady terrace or your own thatched-roof raft. It's 700m west of Krung Thai Bank.

For some more colourful eats, head to the dually misnamed **Night Barza** (Th Jangsanit; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner), on the north end of downtown, or the proper **night market** (Th Wariratchadet), one block north.

Getting There & Away

Until a new bus terminal is built most buses stop at random points around town. Only Khorat (ordinary/air-con 169/220B, five hours, 14 daily) buses and **999 VIP** (☎ 0 4571 2965) to Bangkok (32/24 seat 449/595B, 8pm/8.30pm) use the current terminal on Th Rattanakhet. Most regular air-con rides to Bangkok (350B, nine hours, 26 daily) leave from two spots near the Night Barza: one on Hwy 23 and one just north of it on Th Wariratchadet. Khon Kaen (ordinary/air-con 70/155B, 3½ hours, nine daily) buses stop 500m south of the old terminal, while Ubon Ratchathani (ordinary/air-con 50/90B, 1½ hours, 20 daily) buses are nearby, in front of Mitsubishi on Hwy 23.

MUKDAHAN

มุกดาหาร
pop 34,300

On the banks of the Mekong, directly opposite the Lao city of Savannakhet, Mukdahan is one of the region's prettier towns. Known for its riverfront Talat Indojoin (Indochina Market), which stretches under as well as along the riverfront park, Mukdahan is mainly a trade

centre and on weekends, when the market really kicks off, you'll wonder how the locals manage to find time to do anything but trawl the Chinese, Vietnamese, Thai and Lao stalls.

The December 2006 opening of the Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge 2 formalised Mukdahan's status as a trade hub, but the city has not gone bridge crazy like Nong Khai did when that Mekong span was planned, and Savannakhet has reaped most of the economic reward.

Information

Bangkok Bank (Hwy 212, Lotus Department Store; ☎ 10am-8pm) Changes cash only, but many banks in the centre of town open regular banking hours and exchange travellers cheques.

Huanam Hotel (☎ 0 4261 1137; 36 Th Samut Sakdarak; per hr 30B; ☎ 6am-10pm) Check your email here. It sometimes stays open later than 10pm.

Immigration office (☎ 0 4261 1074; 2 Th Song Nang Sathit; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, to noon Sat) Visa extensions are available here.

Main post office (Th Phitak Santirat; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat, Sun & holidays)

Police station (☎ 1155; Th Phitak Santirat)

Sights

One of the most oddly out-of-place landmarks in all of Thailand, **Ho Kaeo Mukdahan** (☎ 0 4263 3211; Th Samut Sakdarak; admission 20B; ☎ 8am-6pm) is a 65m-tall tower built for the 50th anniversary of King Rama IX's ascension to the throne. The nine-sided base has a good museum with displays (labelled in English) on typical Isan village life and the eight ethnic groups living in the province. There are great views and a few more historical displays in 'The 360° of Pleasure in Mukdahan by the Mekong' room up at the 50m level. The ball on the top holds a locally revered Buddha image supposedly made of solid silver.

The 2m tall Phra Chao Ong Luang Buddha image at **Wat Si Mongkhon Tai** (Th Samron Chaikhongthi; ☎ daylight hours) is older than the city itself and, according to one of the legends associated with it, was unearthed during Mukdahan's construction. The striking ceramic-encrusted northern gate was built as a gesture of friendship by the city's Vietnamese community in 1954.

Wat Yod Kaeo Sivichai (Th Samron Chaikhongthi; ☎ daylight hours) just down the street stands out for having its enormous Buddha inside

a glass-walled *wihāan*, and not one, but two small-sized copies of Phra That Phanom.

Festivals

The **Mukdahan Red Cross Fair**, held from 9 to 15 January in the field fronting the Provincial Hall, is a chance to see the dances and clothing of Mukdahan's eight ethnic groups, though this aspect has been de-emphasised in recent years in favour of a more ordinary carnival and trade fair.

Sleeping

Bantomkasen Hotel (no roman-script sign; ☎ 0 4261 1235; 25/2 Th Samut Sakdarak; r 140-250B; ☎) From the outside this place looks just like your usual concrete block, but louvred doors and wooden floors give it some back-in-the-day charm. And, if you don't want to squat on the pot, have a look at several rooms before taking a key.

Huanam Hotel (☎ 0 4261 1137; 36 Th Samut Sakdarak; r 150-320B; ☎) At first glance you might think the posted prices are a bait-and-switch ploy. It turns out the rooms just aren't quite as slick as the lobby. They are, nonetheless, good

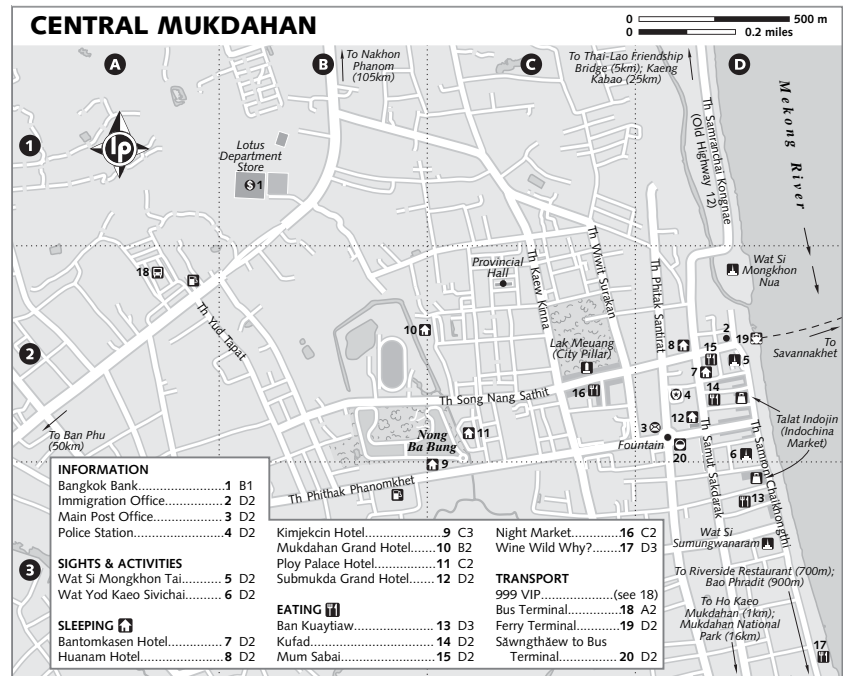
value in a good location. Mountain bikes are available for rent per day for 100B.

Kimjekcin Hotel (☎ 0 4263 1041; 40/5 Th Phitak Phanomkhet; r 250-350B; ☎) This travelling-salesperson's favourite is completely ordinary, except for the low prices. Rooms at the back have a limited view of the lake.

Submukda Grand Hotel (☎ 0 4263 3444; 72 Th Samut Sakdarak; r 500B; ☎) This shiny new tower was erected in 2006 to cash in on the expected rise in tour-bus business that the bridge might bring. Rooms are boxy, but they're good.

Mukdahan Grand Hotel (☎ 0 4261 2020; 78 Th Song Nang Sathit; r 900-2500B; ☎) A little less 'Grand' than the Palace, this upmarket outfit nevertheless offers high standards (a swimming pool is planned) and some of the most cheerful staff on the circuit. The restaurant sometimes serves Phu Thai cuisine, though it differs very little from regular Isan food.

Ploy Palace Hotel (☎ 0 4263 1111; www.ploypalace.com; 40 Th Phitak Phanomkhet; r 1050-3000B; ☎) With business coming through at a trickle, rooms at this executive sleepeasy are good value. There's plenty of marble and wood for that 'swanky' feel, a decent spread of creature



comforts (including a sauna, swimming pool and rooftop restaurant) and some friendly staff. For something out of the ordinary, ask for the 9th-floor rooms with beehives on the balcony.

Eating

Ban Kuaytiaw (no roman-script sign; ☎ 08 1523 3595; 5/1 Soi Jaeng Waeng; dishes 20-35B; ☺ breakfast & lunch) Nothing fancy, but the cooks whip up tasty *khào phật* (fried rice) and noodle soups under a thatch roof.

Wine Wild Why? (☎ 0 4263 3122; 11 Th Samron Chaikhongthi; dishes 40-130B; ☺ lunch & dinner) Housed in an atmospheric wooden building right on the river, this romantic little spot serves delicious Thai food and has bags of character, though the wine list is history. The sociable owners, transplants from Bangkok, just add to the charm.

Kufad (no roman-script sign; ☎ 0 4261 2252; 36 Th Samut Sakdarak; dishes 20-150B; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This spic-and-span Vietnamese café is rightly quite popular; and the picture menu takes the guesswork out of ordering.

Bao Phradit (no roman-script sign; ☎ 0 4263 2335; 123/4 Th Samron Chaikhongthi; dishes 20-160B; ☺ dinner) It's a bit of a yomp south of the centre, but this is a real Isan restaurant, where crickets are as likely to be on the daily specials board as catfish and many ingredients are gathered from the forest. It's got a peaceful wood-and-thatch riverside deck.

Riverside Restaurant (☎ 0 4261 1705; 103/4 Th Samron Chaikhongthi; dishes 65-180B; ☺ lunch & dinner) About 200m before Bao Phradit, this popular spot offers an eager legion of attentive staff, great views from a garden terrace and is chock-a-block with tanks filled with examples of the kinds of Mekong River fish it has in the kitchen – if you don't want to eat the fish, it's almost worth just coming here for a biology lesson. The menu lists (in English) the many styles in which the chefs can cook it up for you, plus some non-fish dishes.

Mum Sabai (☎ 0 4263 3616; 1 Th Song Nang Sathit; dishes 35-250B; ☺ lunch & dinner; ♿) There's a good spread of Japanese, Thai, Isan and Western food and a few combos, such as sirloin steak with Isan sauce in this spotless diner.

Night market (Th Song Nang Sathit; ☺ 5pm-10pm) Particularly good for eating Isan classics, like *kài yàng*, *sôm-tam* and deep-fried insects. You'll also find *khào jii* (Lao baguette sandwiches) and *pàw-piá* (Vietnamese spring rolls), either fresh (*sòt*) or fried (*thàwt*).

Getting There & Away

BOAT

Even with the bridge, boats continue to connect Mukdahan's **ferry terminal** (☎ 0 4261 4926) with Savannakhet, Laos, though the frequency of the service may soon be reduced. There are nine ferries daily during the week (9am to 4.30pm), eight on Saturday (9.30am to 4.30pm) and six on Sunday (9.30am to 3pm). Tickets cost 50B each way. Thirty-day Lao visas are available on arrival.

BUS

Mukdahan's **bus terminal** (☎ 0 4261 1421) is on Rte 212, west of town; to get there from the centre, take a yellow *sáwngtháew* (8B) from Th Phitak Phanomkhet near the fountain. There are regular buses to Nakhon Phanom (ordinary/air-con 52/93B, two hours, every 40 minutes) going via That Phanom (ordinary/air-con 28/50B, one hour), and also service to Khon Kaen (air-con 155B, 4½ hours, every half-hour), Ubon Ratchathani (ordinary/air-con 80/144B, 3½ hours, every 45 minutes) and Yasothon (air-con 104B, two hours, 13 daily).

For Bangkok's northern terminal (364B, 10 to 11 hours) there are frequent air-con departures throughout the day until 8.45pm, and **999 VIP** (☎ 0 4261 1478), with offices at the terminal, runs a 32-seat VIP bus (571B, 7.20pm) and three 24 seaters (760B, 8.30am, 8pm, 8.15pm).

For Laos, 12 daily buses cross the bridge to Savannakhet, Laos (45B, 40 minutes), between 7am and 5.30pm.

AROUND MUKDAHAN Mukdahan National Park

อุทยานแห่งชาติมุกดาหาร

Although little more than a speck of a reserve at just 48 sq km, hilly **Mukdahan National Park** (☎ 0 4260 1753, reservations 0 2562 0760; admission 400B; ☺ 5am-6pm), also known as Phu Pha Thoep National Park, has some beautiful landscapes and is scattered with unusual mushroom-shaped **rock formations**. The main rock group, known as both Phu Pha Thoep and Hin Thoep, sits immediately behind the visitor centre, and wildflowers bloom from October to December.

Besides the rock formations there are several cliff-top views where pretty much only forest is visible around you and **Nam Tok Phu Tham Phra**, a scenic waterfall with a grotto atop

it holding hundreds of small **Buddha images**. It only takes a couple of hours on the well-marked trails to see all of these. **Than Fa Mue Daeng**, a cave with 5000-year-old hand paintings, is an 8km walk through the forest and must be visited with a park guide; you might see flying squirrels, barking deer, wild boar, monkeys or civets along the way.

For accommodation, you have a choice of **camping** (camp sites per person 30B, 3-person tent hire 80B) or simple rooms in **bungalows** (500B) that can sleep seven.

The park is 15km south of Mukdahan off Rte 2034. *Sáwngtháew* (15B, 20 minutes) to Amphoe Don Tan (which leave from the bus terminal in Mukdahan every half-hour) pass the turn-off to the park entrance, and for an extra 20B the driver will take you the remaining 1.5km to the visitor centre. The less frequent Kham Marat buses also pass the park entrance and the 4pm service is your last guaranteed ride back to town, though hitching shouldn't be tough.

Old Highway 212

หนองแกก-บ้านนาโพธิ์

Old Highway 212 (Nong Ak Na Po Yai), which never strays far from the Mekong, offers a lovely look at traditional Thai life and makes a fantastic bike trip. Leaving Mukdahan you'll follow a long line of fish farms on the river before passing the 1.6km long **Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge 2**. This is the widest reach of the Mekong along the Thai border, so this bridge stretches over 400m more than the Friendship Bridge 1.

At the Km 12 mark, where the greenish Chanode River meets the muddy Mekong (if you're lucky, you'll see men unloading their fish traps here), is **Wat Manophiro** (☺ daylight hours), one of Mukdahan Province's oldest temples. The original *bòt*, now a *wihāan*, was built in 1756 in Lan Xang style with a bas-relief front and painted wooden eave brackets. It holds many ancient Buddha images, including eight carved into an elephant tusk.

Wat Srimahapo (☺ daylight hours), sometimes called Wat Pho Si, is another 5km north. You'd never expect its tiny *bòt* to be worth a look, but inside, elaborately carved beams hold up the tin roof and interesting naive murals cover the walls. The Buddhas that greet you have holes cut over their hearts to receive blessings, and a couple of long boats are stored here between races.

After a further 7km you'll pass the modern, glass-walled **Church of Our Lady of the Martyrs of Thailand** (☺ daylight hours Mon-Sat, 7am mass on Sun), locally called Wat Song Khan, built in 1995 to commemorate seven Thai Catholics killed by the police in 1940 for refusing to renounce their faith. Wax sculptures of the martyrs lie under glass in back.

Just beyond the church is **Kaeng Kabao**, a stretch of rocky shore and islets, turning to rapids when submerged during the rainy season. A variety of restaurants have set up on and along the river here making this a good place to refuel before riding back to Mukdahan. During April its waters are clean enough for swimming and inner-tubing.

Ban Phu

บ้านฝู

Ban Phu is a quaint village in the shadow of Phu Jaw Kor Puttakiri where wooden houses and the Phu Thai dialect still dominate – no matter how boned up you are on your Isan, Thai or Lao, expect a few verbal trip ups here. Of all Isan's minority groups, the Phu Thai, who trace their heritage to southern China, near the Laos and Vietnam border, are known for having clung closest to their culture. Most villagers still don traditional duds for festivals and funerals, and all children wear the old-style clothes to school every Thursday. This is a well-known silk- and cotton-weaving village and you'll find a loom under most of the 300 houses. Most women supply *mát-mii* designs to meet demand, but the little shop in front of the temple stocks some traditional designs.

The village **homestay programme** (☎ 08 9570 8161; per person per day 250B) is designed for large groups, but all are welcome and Khun Anan, who speaks some English, can help set you up. The typical programme is three days and two nights, including meals, and lets you get involved in daily life: cooking, weaving and farming, for example. If you want some adventure with your culture, someone can take you up the mountain and into a cave.

Ban Phu is 50km west of Mukdahan via Rtes 2042 and 2370. The only direct public transport is a lone *sáwngtháew* that heads to/from Mukdahan (40B, 90 minutes) early every morning, but buses go throughout the day to Nong Sung (air-con 60B, 90 minutes), where you can get a motorcycle taxi (50B) or hire a *sáwngtháew* (about 100B) for the last 6km.

UBON RATCHATHANI PROVINCE

This varied province, famous across Thailand for its forest wats, pushes down into the tri-border region where Laos, Thailand and Cambodia come together. To bolster the region's tourist profile TAT has labelled this the 'Emerald Triangle' in recognition of its magnificent green landscapes and drawing obvious – but rather hopeful – parallels with northern Thailand's 'Golden Triangle'. However successful this may be, Ubon remains one of the region's more attractive cities, while the surrounding countryside has plenty to entertain the rustic rover. Phu Chong Nayoi and Pha Taem National Parks are two of Isan's remotest corners.

History

Ubon's Mae Nam Mun and Mae Nam Chi river basins were centres for Dvaravati and Khmer cultures many centuries ago. Following the decline of the Khmer empires, the area was settled by groups of Lao in the late 18th century and they founded the capital city. By the early Ratanakosin era it had become part of *monthon* Ubon, a southeastern Isan satellite state extending across what are now Surin, Si Saket and Ubon Provinces – as well as parts of southern Laos – with Champasak, Laos, as *monthon* capital. Today the Lao influence in the province dominates the Khmer.

UBON RATCHATHANI

อุบลราชธานี
pop 115,000

Survive the usual knot of choked access roads and Ubon will reveal an altogether more attractive face. Racked up against Mae Nam Mun, Thailand's second-longest waterway, the southern portions of the city have a pedestrian, sluggish character rarely found in the region's big conurbations. Temples pepper the surrounding area, the urban push-and-shove is easily escaped and despite the quick-time march of modernisation, a deep sense of Isan identity continues to live on. Few cities in Thailand reward aimless wandering as richly as Ubon.

A US air base during the Vietnam era, 21st-century Ubon is primarily a financial, educational and agricultural market centre for

eastern Isan. With the nearby Thai-Lao border crossing at Chong Mek drawing a steady stream of foreigners, Ubon is an increasingly popular travel destination. The hotel scene is glum, but there are plenty of good restaurants and well-stocked stores that offer a chance to enjoy the good life before heading off into rural Laos.

Orientation & Information

Most of the activity in Ubon takes place to the north of Mae Nam Mun and east of the main north-south thoroughfare, Th Chayangkun/Th Uparat. The train station, more places to stay and a good few restaurants are south of the Mae Nam Mun in Warin Chamrap.

EMERGENCY & MEDICAL SERVICES

Saphasit Prasong Hospital (☎ 0 4524 0074; Th Saphasit) Has a 24-hour casualty department.

Tourist police (☎ 1155; Th Suriyat) Directly behind the police station.

INTERNET ACCESS

Internet Pirch (382 Th Phrom Rat; per hr 10B; ☎ 9am-11pm)

MONEY

Bangkok Bank (Th Chayangkun, Lotus Department Store; ☎ 10am-8pm) Only changes cash. There are many more banks that are open normal business hours in the town centre and take travellers cheques.

POST

Main post office (Th Si Narong; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat, Sun & holidays)

TOURIST INFORMATION

TAT (☎ 0 4524 3770; www.tourismthailand.org; 264/1 Th Kheuan Thani; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm) Has information about Ubon, as well as Si Saket and Yasothon Provinces.

TRAVEL AGENCIES

Sakda Travel World (☎ 0 4524 3560; Th Phalarangrit; ☎ 8am-6pm) Books plane tickets, rents cars and leads tours.

Sights & Activities

UBON NATIONAL MUSEUM

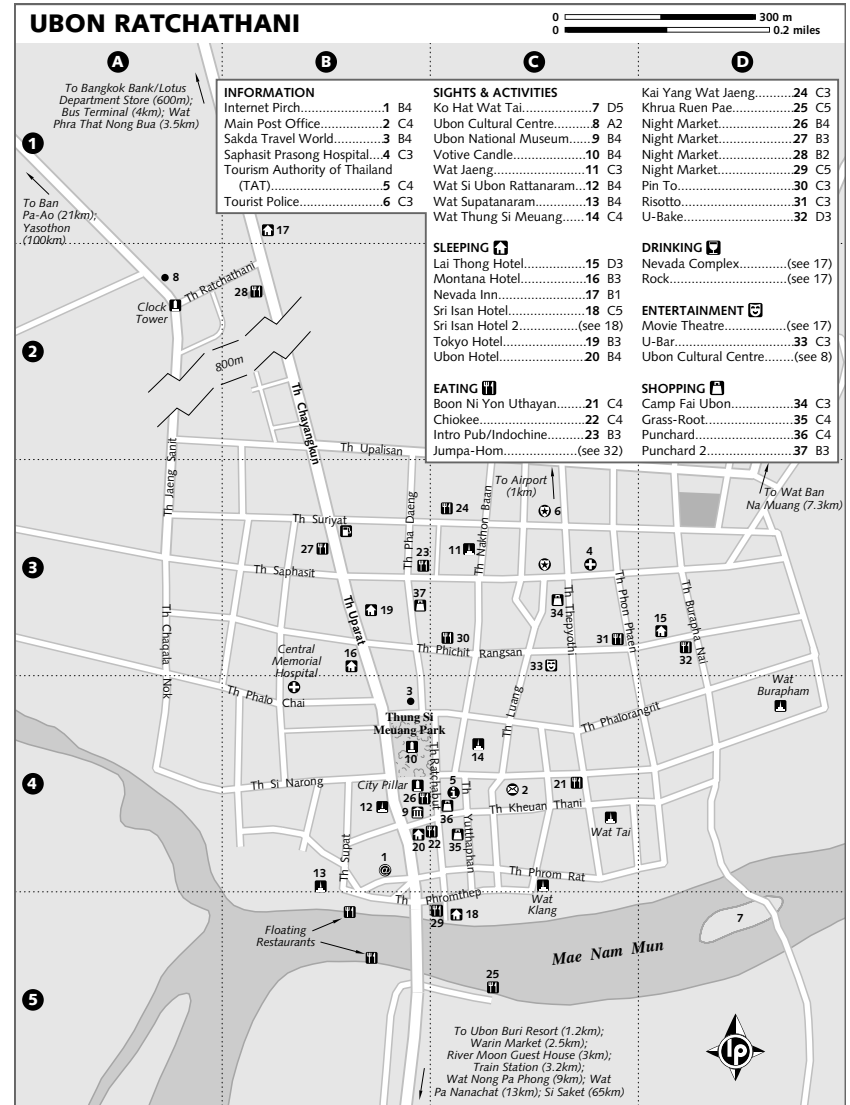
พิพิธภัณฑสถานแห่งชาติอุบลราชธานี

Once you've dropped your bags in the hotel and slipped on a clean shirt, your first stop in town should be the informative **Ubon National Museum** (☎ 0 4525 5071; Th Kheuan Thani; admission 30B; ☎ 9am-4pm Wed-Sun). Occupying a pretty former palace from the Rama VI era, this is the spot to

come to swot up on background information before venturing out into the wider province. And there's plenty on show, from Buddhist ordination-precinct stones from the Dvaravati period and a 2500-year-old Dong Son bronze drum to Ubon textiles and betel-nut sets. The museum's most prized possession is a 9th-century Ardhhanarisvara, a composite

statue combining Shiva and his consort Uma into one being; one of just two ever found in Thailand.

Just north of the museum is **Thung Si Meuang Park**, the centrepiece of which is a huge concrete replica of an elaborate **votive candle**. The park is the venue of Ubon's annual Candle Parade (see p535).



UBON CULTURAL CENTER

ศูนย์วัฒนธรรมอุบลราชธานี

The **museum** (☎ 0 4535 2000; Th Jaeng Sanit; admission free; 🕒 8.30am-4pm) in the lower level of the striking Ubon Cultural Centre, a seven-story contemporary Isan-design tower at Rajabhat University, is more scattershot than the National Museum, but there are some interesting cultural displays, particularly houses and handicrafts. There is also a whole lot of wax sculptures.

WAT THUNG SI MEUANG

วัดทุ่งศรีเมือง

Wat Thung Si Meuang (Th Luang; 🕒 daylight hours) was built during the reign of Rama III (1824-51) and has a *hăw trai* (Tripitaka library) in good shape. Like many *hăw trai*, it rests on tall, angled stilts in the middle of a small pond, surrounded by water to protect the precious scriptures from termites. Nearby, the interior of the little *bôt* is painted with 200-year-old murals depicting the life and culture of the day.

WAT PHRA THAT NONG BUA

วัดพระธาตุหนองบัว

The richly adorned *chedi* at **Wat Phra That Nong Bua** (🕒 daylight hours) is an almost exact replica of the Mahabodhi stupa in Bodhgaya, India; and a much better copy of the subcontinental original than at Wat Jet Yot in Chiang Mai, which is also purported to be a Mahabodhi reproduction. The *jataka* reliefs on the outside of the *chedi* are very good. Two groups of four niches on each side of the four-sided *chedi* contain Buddhas standing in stylised Gupta or Dvaravati closed-robe poses. It is the only square stupa in Ubon Province, unless you count the older one it was built over. The domed *bôt* also copies its Bodhgaya counterpart. It is near the bus terminal on the outskirts of town; take *săwngthăew* 10.

WAT BAN NA MUANG

วัดบ้านนาเมือง

Also known as Wat Sa Prasan Suk, **Wat Ban Na Muang** (🕒 daylight hours) stands out for three unique things. Most famously, the *bôt* sits on a boat – a ceramic encrusted replica of King Rama IX's royal barge *Suphannahong*, complete with a sculpted crew, to be precise. The *wihăan* also has a boat-shaped base, this time the prince's personal craft and this one is surrounded by an actual pond. These were

not just artistic endeavours, rather the water represents our desires and the boats represent staying above them. The commissioner of these creations, Luang Pu Boon Mi, died in 2001 and his body is on display behind glass in the big hall next to the boat *bôt*. Finally, to reach all of these, you must pass under an immense statue of Airavata, Hindu God Indra's three-headed elephant mount. The temple is 5km northwest of town, 1km off the ring road; *săwngthăew* 8 passes it.

WAT JAENG

วัดแจ้ง

Wat Jaeng (Th Nakhon Baan; 🕒 daylight hours), built around the time of the city's founding, has a little Lan Xang-style *sim* (*bôt*). The carved wooden veranda depicts Airavata and two mythical lions. The *bôt* next to it is the typical Isan mix of Thai and Lao styles.

WAT SI UBON RATTANARAM

วัดศรีอุบลรัตนาราม

The *bôt* at **Wat Si Ubon Rattanaram** (Th Uparat; 🕒 daylight hours) was built to resemble Bangkok's Wat Benchamabophit, but it's the 7cm-tall Topaz Buddha inside that most people come to see. Phra Kaew Busarakham was reportedly brought here from Vientiane at Ubon's founding and is the city's holiest possession. It sits behind glass high up the back wall, all but out of sight; there are binoculars available to get a closer look, and the image directly in front of the largest Buddha is a copy.

WAT SUPATANARAM

วัดสุปถนาราม

Called **Wat Supat** (Th Supat; 🕒 daylight hours) for short, the unique *bôt* at this riverside temple, built between 1920 and 1936, features a mix of Khmer, European and Thai styles. In contrast to other Thai- or Lao-style temple structures of the region, the *bôt* is made entirely of stone, like the early Khmer stone *prasat*, and the roof corners display dragons. On display inside is one of Thailand's oldest-surviving Khmer stone carvings, a lush stone lintel dating to the 7th century. The largest wooden bell in Thailand hangs near the front.

KO HAT WAT TAI

เกาะหาดวัดไต้

Picnicking families flock to this island in Mae Nam Mun during the hot, dry months of February, March, April and May. There

are beaches for swimming and sunbathing. A makeshift bamboo bridge connects it to the northern shore.

WARIN CHAMRAP DISTRICT TEMPLES

The famous monk and meditation master Ajahn Cha was quite a name in these parts. He founded the two well-known forest monasteries detailed below, and students of his have opened a long list of temples across Thailand, and even about a dozen in Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand.

Known for his simple and direct teaching method, the venerable *ajahn* (teacher), a former disciple of the most famous northeastern teacher of them all, Ajahn Man, died in January 1992, aged 75. His funeral, held at Wat Nong Pa Phong, drew thousands of followers from around the world.

Wat Nong Pa Phong

วัดหนองป่าพง

Peaceful **Wat Nong Pa Phong** (🕒 daylight hours) is known for its quiet discipline and daily routine of work and meditation. Dozens of Westerners have lived here over recent decades, and several still do, but if you have an interest in Buddhism you'll be steered to Wat Pa Nanchat unless you are fluent in Thai. The wat features the *chedi* where Ajahn Cha's ashes are interred and a large **museum** (admission free; 🕒 8am-4.30pm) displaying an odd assortment of items, from Ajahn Cha's worldly possessions to world currencies to a foetus in a jar. The temple is about 10km past the river – take *săwngthăew* 14 from the Warin Market.

Wat Pa Nanchat

วัดป่านาธรรมชาติปทุมวาชัย

Wat Pa Nanchat (www.watpahnanchat.org; Ban Bung Wai, Amphoe Warin, Ubon Ratchathani 34310; 🕒 daylight hours) is a Western-oriented wat, opened in 1975 specifically for non-Thais, and English is the primary language. Those with a *serious* interest in Buddhism and previous meditation experience are welcome to apply (write using the above address or the website) to stay here. Guests must follow all temple rules (including eating just one meal a day, rising at 3am, and shaving heads and eyebrows after the third day). During the March-to-May hot season, monks go into retreat and overnight guests aren't usually accepted.

There is nothing really to see here, but visitors are welcome to drop by. A senior monk

is available most days after the 8am meal to answer questions. A *săwngthăew* from Warin Market or any Si Saket bus can drop you on Hwy 226, about 500m from the entrance. The wat is in the forest behind the rice fields.

Festivals & Events

Ubon's **Candle Parade** (Hae Tian) features gigantic, elaborately carved wax sculptures and is a part of Khao Phansa, a Buddhist holiday marking the commencement of *wan awk phansăa*, the Rains Retreat (Buddhist Lent) in July. You can see the floats the rest of the year on most temple grounds, where they are kept until it's time to melt them down for the next parade. The festival is very popular with Thai tourists and the city's hotel rooms are often all booked for the event.

Sleeping**BUDGET**

River Moon Guest House (☎ 0 4528 6093; 43 Th Sisaket 2; r 120-150B) Parts of this rustic, wooden spot are falling apart, the chairs in the lounge are from an old train and old musical instruments lean against the walls – yet somehow it all adds up to pretty cool. It's about 200m from the train station in Warin Chamrap. Facilities are shared.

Sri Isan Hotel 2 (☎ 0 4525 4544; 60 Th Ratchaburi; r 160-350B; 📶) This older, dishevelled place, hidden behind its flashier sister sleeper, is, for the price, one of the city's better budget hotels.

Tokyo Hotel (☎ 0 4524 1739; 360 Th Uparat; r 220-600B; 📶) Besides being a popular though dour midranger, the Tokyo is a good budget bet in the centre of Ubon, with the highest-priced rooms in a new tower and some relatively humble air-con and fan affairs in the old.

Ubon Hotel (☎ 0 4524 1045; 333 Th Kheuan Thani; r 280-700B; 📶) The plain Jane of Ubon's hotels is too old and tired to recommend as the midranger it wants to be, but the budget fan rooms offer reasonable value, and the balcony views from upper floors are a nice bonus.

MIDRANGE

Montana Hotel (☎ 0 4526 1748; 179/1-4 Th Uparat; r 400B; 📶) The focal point of this central hotel is the 'VIP' Piano Karaoke Bar, and the porter is an enthusiastic 'boom-boom' salesman. But if you can escape the potential shenanigans down below, you'll find the rooms are spotless and well appointed, with little balconies, TV and fridge.

Nevada Inn (☎ 0 4531 3351; 436 Th Chayangkun; r 550-800B, ste 1500B; 🍷) North of the centre, ensconced in the city's busiest entertainment complex, the lower-level rooms have wooden floors and frilly bedspreads giving it a fair amount of va-va-voom for the price – but only by Ubon's low standards. If you are looking to move up the price range, you'd probably be better off moving across the parking lot to its big brother, the Nevada Grand.

☎ **Sri Isan Hotel** (☎ 0 4526 1011; www.srisanhotel.com; 62 Th Ratchabut; r 550-1300B; 🍷 📺) The exception to the rule of Ubon's typical uninspired midrangers, this bright, cheerful place is full of natural light, which streams down through the atrium and gives the lobby an open, airy feel. The rooms, which come with fridge and TV, are small and the décor is a little twee – a knitted toilet roll cover wouldn't be out of place – but standards are high and an orchid comes gratis on every pillow.

TOP END

Ubon Buri Resort (☎ 0 4526 6777; www.ubonburiresort.com; Th Srimongkol; r 1140-1330B, bungalow 1500B, ste 2500B; 🍷 📺 📺) This bona fide, self-contained resort is the place to come if you're planning on staying in Ubon without really *being* in Ubon. With rooms and bungalows set in acres of lush, tropical greenery, Isan folk-art styling and tip-top staff, this is Ubon's best-value top-ender. It's just off the main road between Ubon and Warin Chamrap.

Lai Thong Hotel (☎ 0 4526 4271; www.laithongho.tel.net; 50 Th Phichit Rangsang; s/d 1200/1300B, ste 3000B; 🍷 📺 📺) A tourist office favourite, this swanky spot offers attentive staff, all the usual 'executive' facilities and the odd token nod to traditional Isan design. There is a 3rd-floor outdoor swimming pool.

Eating

Boon Ni Yon Uthayan (☎ 0 4524 0950; Th Si Narong; per plate 15B; 🍷 breakfast & lunch) One of Ubon's most famous restaurants has an impressive vegetarian buffet under a giant roof. Most of the food is grown organically just outside the city.

U-Bake (☎ 0 4526 5671; 49/3 Th Phichit Rangsang; chocolate cake 40B; 🍷 lunch & dinner; 🍷 📺) The French-Lao influence means Ubon is more accustomed to pastries than many parts of Thailand and U-Bake is as good as it gets. It shares a water-and-plant filled wooden deck with its sister restaurant, Jumba-Hom.

Kai Yang Wat Jaeng (☎ 08 1709 9393; 228 Th Suriyat; dishes 20-100B; 🍷 lunch) It looks like a tornado whipped through this no-frills spot, but the chefs cook up a storm of their own. This is considered by many to be Ubon's premier purveyor of *kai yang*, *sôm-tam*, sausages and other Isan food.

Intro Pub/Indochine (☎ 0 4524 5584; 168-170 Th Saphasit; dishes 40-100B; 🍷 lunch & dinner; 🍷) It's difficult to see the wood for the trees at this popular two-in-one place – the exterior of the timber building is cloaked by leaves. The deliciously fresh Vietnamese food is served downstairs in Indochine until 6pm, when the action and the chefs move to the slightly swankier Intro Pub venue above. The menu – featuring favourites such as *ban hoi thit nuong* (grilled pork with vermicelli) – remains the same, but you get live music upstairs after dark.

Chiokee (☎ 0 4525 4017; 307-317 Th Kheuan Thani; dishes 25-160B; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Offering a slightly incongruous blend of East (dark-wood styling and a decorative Chinese shrine) and West (Heinz ketchup and white tablecloths), this popular spot whips up a wide range of dishes, from eel soup to English breakfasts.

Pin To (no roman-script sign; ☎ 0 4524 4473; 298-300 Th Phichit Rangsang; dishes 40-180B; 🍷 lunch & dinner; 🍷) This snug, wooden diner has oodles of cosy character, live music in the evening, a scattering of tables on the street out the front and a reasonable selection of Thai food. The cooking is not the ace card, but it remains a pleasant spot for an after-dinner beer and snack.

Khrua Ruen Pae (no roman-script sign; ☎ 0 4532 4342; dishes 60-250B; 🍷 lunch & dinner) One of four floating restaurants on Mae Nam Mun, Krun Ruen Pae serves up tasty food and a relaxed atmosphere. You can drive here (exit to the west and then go under the bridge) but it's easier to find if you walk.

Risotto (☎ 08 1879 1869; Th Phichit Rangsang; dishes 70-300B; 🍷 lunch & dinner; 🍷) The dining room can't pull off an Italian vibe, but the kitchen offers a dash of *la dolce vita*. Risotto makes one of the best pizzas in Isan.

Jumba-Hom (☎ 0 4526 0398; 49/3 Th Phichit Rangsang; dishes 65-1500B; 🍷 dinner; 🍷) Sharing premises with U-Bake, this restaurant serves pricey Thai, Chinese and Western cuisine.

Ubon has many small **night markets** (🍷 4.30pm-midnight) rather than one large one. The *tàlàt yài* (big market) down by the river is much smaller than the market up Th Ratch-

abut next to Thung Si Meuang or the market on Th Uparat north of the Tokyo Hotel.

Entertainment

U-Bar (☎ 0 4526 5141; 97/8-10 Th Phichit Rangsang; 🍷 6pm-1am) This has long been Ubon's ubertrendy (well, for Isan anyway) nightspot. It offers hip styling, plenty of shiny, happy people and a drink called Blue Kamikaze, which is served out of a sinister-looking slush machine behind the bar. The bands (and they get some pretty good ones) usually kick off around 9pm and the club is packed soon after.

Ubon Cultural Centre (☎ 0 4535 2000; Th Jaeng Sanit) There are sometimes Isan song and dance performances here.

Ubon's nightlife nexus is the **Nevada Complex** (Th Chayangkun), a multibar and restaurant area anchored by a seven-screen **movie theatre** (☎ 0 4531 3351) and the **Rock** (☎ 0 4528 0999; 🍷 10pm-2am), a rough and ready dance club that doesn't get going until midnight.

Shopping

Grass-Root (☎ 0 4524 1272; 87 Th Yutthaphan; 🍷 9am-6pm) The speciality of Ubon Province is natural-dyed, hand-woven cotton and you'll find a fantastic assortment here.

Camp Fai Ubon (☎ 0 4524 1821; 189 Th Thepyothi; 🍷 8am-8pm Mon-Sat) Signed as Peaceland, this is another good place for hand-woven cotton.

Punchard (☎ 0 4524 3433; 158 Th Ratchabut; 🍷 8am-8pm Mon-Sat) and **Punchard 2** (☎ 0 4526 5751; 156 Th Pha Daeng; 🍷 9.30am-8.30pm) stock a wider array of handicrafts. Shop carefully though, prices are high.

Getting There & Away

AIR

THAI (www.thaiairways.com) has three daily flights to/from Bangkok (one way 2700B), while **Air Asia** (www.airasia.com) has one flight (1650B).

BUS

Ubon's **bus terminal** (☎ 0 4531 6085) is north of the town centre, just off Th Chayangkun – take săwngthăew 2, 3 or 10. Buses link Ubon with Bangkok's northern terminal (air-con 411B, eight hours) frequently. **Nakhonchai Air** (☎ 0 4526 9777), with an office at the terminal, has VIP buses to Bangkok (594B, 10 daily), Rayong (687B, 14 hours, five daily) and Chiang Mai (960B, 17 hours, four daily). Other fares to/from Ubon are in the table on right.

BUSES TO/FROM UBON

| Destination | Fare (B) | Duration (hr) |
|-----------------------------------|----------|---------------|
| Kantharalak (for Khao Phra Wihan) | | |
| ordinary | 37 | 1½ |
| Khon Kaen | | |
| ordinary | 147 | 4½ |
| air-con | 230 | |
| Khorat | | |
| ordinary | 155 | 7 |
| air-con | 279 | |
| Mukdahan | | |
| ordinary | 80 | 3 |
| air-con | 144 | |
| Pakse, Laos | | |
| air-con | 200 | 3 |
| Roi Et | | |
| ordinary | 82 | 3 |
| air-con | 148 | |
| Sakon Nakhon | | |
| ordinary | 125 | 5 |
| air-con | 225 | |
| Si Saket | | |
| ordinary | 40 | 1¼ |
| air-con | 59 | |
| Surin | | |
| ordinary | 80 | 3 |
| air-con | 144 | |
| Yasothon | | |
| ordinary | 50 | 1½ |
| air-con | 90 | |

Phibun (25B, 1½ hours, hourly) and Khong Jiam (60B, three hours, five daily) buses stop briefly at the Warin Market after leaving the terminal, but they're sometimes already full when they get there.

TRAIN

The **train station** (☎ 0 4532 1004) is in Warin Chamrap; săwngthăew 2 connects it to Ubon.

The Ubon express leaves Bangkok nightly at 8.30pm, arriving in Ubon at 6.35am the next day while the Bangkok-bound train leaves Ubon at 6.30pm arriving at Hualamphong station at 5.25am. Nine other trains also make the run throughout the day taking just as long, except the 2.50pm express service that makes the trip in 8½ hours.

Fares for 1st-class air-con sleeper/2nd-class fan sleeper/2nd-class seat/3rd-class seat are 1180/471/221/95B.

These train services also stop in Khorat (1st/2nd/3rd class 268/133/58B, six hours).

Getting Around

Numbered and colour-coded *sǎwngthǎew* (8B) run throughout town. The free city map TAT hands out has the routes marked. A normal túk-túk trip will cost about 40B and a *sǎmláw* will be about 20B.

The Lai Thong Hotel rents mountain bikes for 200B per day.

AROUND UBON RATCHATHANI PROVINCE

Ban Pa-Ao

บ้านผาอำเภอ

Ban Pa-Ao, northwest of Ubon on Hwy 23, is a silk-weaving village, but it is best known for producing brass and bronze items using the lost-wax casting method. Between December and July you can see workers making bowls and bells at a cooperative workshop in the centre of the village – most people work in the rice fields the rest of the year. There's a village-run **homestay programme** (☎ 08 1967 0225; per person per night incl 2 meals 500B), which offers the chance to try silk weaving.

Ban Pa-Ao is 3km off the highway, near the Km 19 pillar. Buses to Yasothorn pass this way and a motorcycle taxi from the highway will cost about 15B.

Phibun Mangsahan to Khong Jiam

พิบูลมังสาหาร/โขงเจียม

Visitors often stop in the dusty town of Phibun Mangsahan to see a set of rapids called **Kaeng Sapheu**, just downstream of the Mae Nam Mun river crossing. The rocky islets make 'Python Rapids' rise only from end of January until June, but the shady park here makes it a pleasant stop year-round. It's got a Chinese temple, several simple restaurants (most serving frog skins and fish) and countless souvenir shops. Many fishermen work here and they'll take you on **boat trips** (per hour 400B, all day 1500-1800B) where you can see many birds and visit island wats. Phibun Mangsahan is also the location of the Ubon **immigration office** (☎ 04544 1108; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri), where visa extensions are available. The office is 700m south of the bridge on the way to Chong Mek.

The villages just over the bridge, as you drive east to Khong Jiam along Rte 2222, are famed for forging iron and bronze **gongs**, both

for temples and classical Thai-music ensembles. You can watch the gong-makers hammering the flat metal discs and tempering them in rustic fires at many houses and simple roadside shelters. Small gongs start at around 500B and the huge 2m gongs fetch as much as 200,000B. People make many drums and cymbals around here too.

Five kilometres before Khong Jiam you can cross the Pak Mun Dam to little **Kaeng Tana National Park** (☎ 0 4540 6886, reservations 0 2562 0760; admission 200B; ☎ 6am-6pm). After circling thickly forested Don Tana, linked to the mainland by footbridge, Mae Nam Mun roils through the beautiful namesake rapids, which lie underwater during the rainy season. The island has a beach at the north end and the 2km cliff-top trail to **Lan Pha Phueng** viewpoint is serene. Bikes cost 50B per hour and, if you call a day in advance, park staff can arrange canoe rental (per hour 100B) and horseback riding. Five kilometres south of the **visitor centre** (☎ 8am-6pm) is **Nam Tok Tad Ton**, a wide waterfall just a 300m walk from the road. There is a **camp site** (per person 30B, 2-person tent hire 150B) and restaurant by the rapids. The park is 14km from Khong Jiam; there is no public transport.

Khong Jiam sits on a picturesque peninsula at the confluence of the Mekong and Mun Rivers, which Thais call **Mae Nam Song Si** (Two Colour River) after the contrasting coloured currents formed at the junction. Huge conical fish traps are made here for local use; they look very much like the fish traps that appear in the 3000-year-old murals at Pha Taem National Park (p539). You can charter long-tail boats to take you out to Mae Nam Song Si (300B, up to 10 people), Kaeng Tana (600B) or Pha Taem (1200B).

This can cross the Mekong to Laos and though this is not an official crossing for foreigners, it is possible to persuade the Lao immigration police (all it takes is 50B) to let you visit the market in the Lao village across the river. First you should get a border pass from Thai immigration, which officials will give you if you are polite and dressed nice.

SLEEPING & EATING

There are a few passable places to stay in Phibun Mangsahan, but Khong Jiam offers better options.

Phiboonkit Hotel (☎ 0 4544 1201; 65/1-3 Th Phiboon, Phibun Mangsahan; r 200-300B; ☎) In the centre of town, midway between the bus stop and the

bridge, this is your usual, slightly chaotic, budget hotel.

Apple Guest House (☎ 0 4535 1160; 267 Th Kaewpradit, Khong Jiam; r 150-300B; ☎) Down a tiny little alley, the Apple has old wooden buildings with bathrooms shared between two rooms, and concrete rooms below with private bathroom for the same price. Both are pretty basic.

Mongkon Guest House (☎ 0 4535 1352; 595 Th Kaewpradit, Khong Jiam; r 200-800B; ☎) From the simple fan rooms to the four cute wooden cottages, this place near the highway is a good choice for any budget. It rents bikes (per day 100B) and motorcycles (per day 200B).

Tohsang Khong Jiam Resort (☎ 0 4535 1174; www.tohsang.com; Khong Jiam; r 2000-2500B, villas 3000-6000B; ☎) The glitz and gloss at this large resort-spa are a little incongruous for this stretch of rural Thailand, but this looming place holds all the aces in the posh-accommodation stakes. It's 3km out of town, in a lush garden on the south bank of Mae Nam Mun.

Tom Reung Ruang (no roman-script sign; ☎ breakfast & lunch) This ramshackle shop right at the bridge in Phibun is famous for *saalaapao* (large Chinese buns), *nàng jip* (small pork-filled wraps) and *nàng kòp* (frog skin, usually fried). Thais visiting Pha Taem National Park like to stop here to stock up on these items (5B each)

There are plenty of simple restaurants in Khong Jiam, some floating down on the Mekong. The row of **food vendors** (☎ 6am-midnight) in front of market, at the junction of the highway and the main road, is the closest thing Khong Jiam has to a night market.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Five Khong Jiam buses leave Ubon (50B, three hours) daily; you can also take a Phibun bus (25B, 1½ hours) and continue by *sǎwngthǎew* (30B, one hour, every half-hour) from the bridge, which is about 1km (10B by túk-túk) from the Khong Jiam bus stop.

Pha Taem National Park

อุทยานแห่งชาติผาแต้ม

Up the Mekong from Khong Jiam is a long stone cliff named Pha Taem – the centrepiece of **Pha Taem National Park** (☎ 0 4526 6333, reservations 0 2562 0760; admission 400B; ☎ 24hr). From the top you get an amazing bird's-eye view of Laos, and you can see the first sunset in Thailand. Down below, reached via a trail, the cliff

features prehistoric rock paintings that are at least 3000 years old. Mural subjects include fish traps, *plaa bèuk* (giant Mekong catfish), elephants, human hands and geometric designs. The second viewing platform fronts the most impressive pictographs. A cliff-top **visitor centre** (☎ 8am-5pm) contains exhibits pertaining to the paintings and local geology.

Nam Tok Soi Sawan, a 25m-tall waterfall flowing from June to November, is another popular spot. It's a 19km drive from the visitor centre, but it's best reached by the 9km hiking trail tracing the cliff. What the park calls **Thailand's largest flower field** (blooming late October to end of December) lies just beyond the falls. The far north of the park, where roads are so bad they are best travelled on two wheels, holds many more waterfalls and wonderful views. **Pa Cha Na Dai** cliff serves Thailand's first sunrise. Scattered across the 340-sq-km park are several areas called **Sao Chaliang**, mushroom-shaped stone formations similar to Phu Pha Thoep in Mukdahan National Park.

Pha Taem has **camp sites** (per tent 30B, 2-person tent hire 150B) and six **bungalows** (6-bed with fan 1200B, 4-bed with air-con 2000B). Vendors sell snacks and beverages near the visitor centre.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Pha Taem is 18km beyond Khong Jiam via Rte 2112, but there's no public transport there. The best way to get there on your own is to rent a motorcycle in Khong Jiam, which will set you back 150B to 200B.

Chong Mek & the Emerald Triangle

ช่องเม็ก/สามเหลี่ยมมรกต

South of Khong Jiam, at the end of Rte 217, is the small trading town of **Chong Mek** on the Thai-Lao border, the only place in Thailand where *faràng* can cross into Laos by land (that is, you don't have to cross the Mekong). The southern Lao capital of Pakse is about 45 minutes by road from Vangtao, the village on the Lao side of the border, where you can now buy a 30-day visa on the spot. Buses crossing here wait for passengers to complete the paperwork. The border is open from 6am until 6pm, but Lao border officials charge a 40B 'overtime' levy/bribe (it doesn't appear to be an official charge) if you arrive before 8am or after 4pm or anytime on a weekend. They also try to extract a 50B 'stamping fee' no matter what the hour.

Thai travellers come to Chong Mek to browse through cheap goods from China, Vietnam and Laos. Foreign visitors won't find much of interest to purchase here, unless they're in the market for toiletries (from China), camouflage clothing (from Vietnam) or CDs (from Laos), though skirts and fabrics are priced very low. If you get here after hours, the **Nonthaveth & Ounchith Guest House** (☎ 0 4548 5237; r 200-500B; ♿) is clean and friendly, though the fan rooms are a little overpriced.

About 5km west of Chong Mek is the northeastern shore of the huge **Kheuan Sirinthon** reservoir, an impoundment of a Mae Nam Mun tributary. Local aquaphiles and picnickers frequent a recreation area on forested hills near the dam at its northern end.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Sǎwngthǎew run between Phibun and Chong Mek (35B, one hour) every 20 minutes. There is no public transport between Chong Mek and Khong Jiam; you must go through Phibun or hire a tǔk-tǔk for about 400B. If you are continuing on to Pakse, catch a bus (50B) on the Lao side.

Phu Chong Nayoi National Park

อุทยานแห่งชาติภูจองงอย

Stretching across the 'Emerald Triangle', the jungle-clad intersection of the Lao, Thai and Cambodian borders, is the little-known **Phu Chong Nayoi National Park** (☎ 0 4541 1515, reservations 0 2562 0760; admission 400B; ♿ 24hr), one of Thailand's wildest parks and healthiest forests. Fauna includes barking deer, monkeys, gibbons, Malayan sun bears, Asiatic black bears, black hornbills, red jungle fowl and the endangered white-winged ducks. Elephants and tigers often cross over the border into the park.

The park's primary attraction is **Nam Tok Huay Luang**, which plunges 40m over a cliff in two separate but parallel streams. A short trail leads to the top, and you can walk down 272 steps to the bottom. Another 170m downstream is little **Nam Tok Pa On La-Oe**, also a pretty picture. You can swim below both, though they dry up around March. Rangers love taking visitors on short **bamboo raft trips** (price negotiable) above the falls where they insist you might see a python; but water levels are often too high or too low to make the trip,

especially from February to April. At the far end of the 687-sq-km park, there are superb vistas of the surrounding countryside (it looks a lot like the view from Pha Taem cliff, but with jungle instead of the Mekong at the bottom of the valley) from atop **Pha Hin Dang**. It's a 50km drive from the main park entrance and then a 2km hike.

Stargazing is superb here, so consider spending the night. There are four three-bed **bungalows** (600B) with hot water and electricity, plus a **camp site** (per person 30B). During our visit there was no tent hire, but this may change. A couple of restaurants operate on weekends and holidays only, but park staff will cook for overnight guests with advance notice. Snacks and drinks are available daily.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

From Ubon catch one of the three morning buses to the town of Najaluay (60B, three hours). From Najaluay, tǔk-tǔk can be hired for about 300B for the return journey to Nam Tok Huai Luang with a short wait. If you have your own wheels, the turn-off to the park is 9km beyond Najaluay, and Huai Luang is another 11km after the turn-off.

features 300 elephants showing their skills and taking part in a battle re-enactment. Tickets start at 40B, but VIP seats, which get you closest to the action, English commentary and guaranteed shade cost 500B. Arguably the festival's best event is the free buffet for the elephants and parade on the Friday before the big show.

Just outside the capital city you'll find more elephantine entertainment and some interesting handicraft villages. Further afield are some ruins worth the effort to reach for those with a history habit.

Information

Microsys (Th Sirirat, Surin; per hr 15B; ♿ 24hr) You can access email here.

Post office (Th Tanasan, Surin; ♿ 8.30am-4.30 Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat, Sun & holidays)

Ruamphet Hospital (☎ 0 4451 3192; Th Thesaban 1, Surin)

Siam Commercial Bank (Th Sratara, Surin; ♿ 10.30am-8pm) Has ATM and exchange facilities inside Surin Plaza shopping centre.

Sights & Activities

BAN THA KLANG

บ้านตากวาง

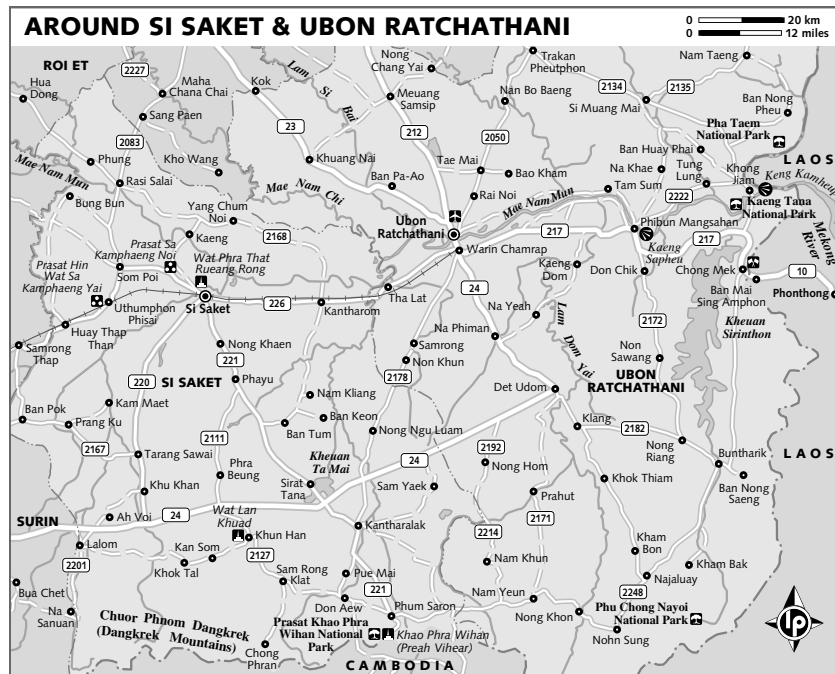
To see Surin's elephants during the low season, visit the **Elephant Study Centre** (☎ 08 1879 2773; donations appreciated; ♿ 9am-5pm) in Ban Tha Klang, about 50km north of Surin. Displays inside and out discuss elephants and elephant training, and dozens of the performers at the annual festival live here – some in traditional Sui homes sheltering both elephants and humans. There are one-hour **shows** (donations expected) daily (except during the festival, but there are plans to change that) at 10am and 2pm.

The village hosts an **Elephant Parade**, with all the pachyderms brightly painted, around May's full moon, for the new monks' ordination ceremony.

Buses from Surin (30B, two hours) run hourly. If you are driving, take Rte 214 north for 40km and follow the 'Elephant Village' signs down Rte 3027.

CRAFT VILLAGES

There are many silk-weaving villages in easy striking distance of Surin town. By far the most famous is **Ban Tha Sawang**, where **Chansoma** (☎ 08 1726 0397) makes exquisite brocade fabrics incorporating threads coated in silver



SURIN & SI SAKET PROVINCES

The adjacent provinces of Surin and Si Saket are dotted with Angkor-era Khmer ruins. Most are now looking rather tatty, but Khao Phra Wihan ranks among the northeast's best attractions.

The region's towns are rather less interesting, but Surin in particular makes a comfortable base for exploring the temples and provides the backdrop for the raucous Annual Elephant Roundup, held each November.

SURIN & AROUND

สุรินทร์

pop 41,200

Quiet Surin doesn't have much to say for itself until November, when the provincial capital explodes into life for the **Annual Elephant Roundup** when giant scrums of pachyderm come to town – you'll never see so many well-dressed tuskers. The city celebrates for 10 days, but the massive crowds come on just the last weekend for the main event, which

or gold. You can't buy them here – they are only made to order; prices start at 30,000B per metre – but the weaving process, which takes two to three months, is mighty impressive. Four women, including one sitting on a floor below the others, work the loom simultaneously. Dozens of other shops selling more typical silks serve the masses disgorged by a steady stream of tour buses. The village is 8km west of the city via Rte 4026, and *sǎwngthǎew* (12B, 20 minutes) run regularly from the market in Surin.

Ban Khwao Sinarin and **Ban Chok**, next door neighbours 18km north of Surin via Rtes 214 and 3036, are known for silk and silver respectively, though you can buy some of both in each village. One of the silk specialities is *pha hole*, a distinctive tightly woven *mát-mii*. Also popular is *yok daw*, a much simpler brocade style that requires up to 35 footpedals on the looms. Neither fabric style is readily available in other parts of Thailand, and prices here (as well as in other Surin villages) can be over 50% cheaper. The silver standout is *prakueam*, a Cambodian style of bead brought to Thailand by Ban Chok's ancestors many centuries ago. You can see both products being made at shops and homes in the villages, and Khun Manee, who runs **Phra Dab Suk** (☎ 08 9865 8720) on the main drag, often takes customers (or non-customers for a small fee) out to see the entire silk-weaving process, from cocoon to loom. *Sǎwngthǎew* go from Surin (20B, 1½ hours) hourly.

The residents of **Ban Buthom**, 14km out of Surin on Rte 226, on the way to Sikhoraphum, weave sturdy, unlacquered rattan baskets, including some rather flat ones that pack well.

PRASAT TA MEUAN

ปราสาทตามเือน

The most atmospheric – and most difficult to reach – of Surin's temple ruins is a series of three sites known collectively as **Prasat Ta Meuan** (admission free; ☎ 6am–5pm) in Amphoe Ban Ta Miang on the Cambodian border. It lines the ancient route linking Angkor Wat to Phimai.

The first site, **Prasat Ta Meuan** proper, was built in the Jayavarman VII period (AD 1181–1210) as a rest stop for pilgrims. It's a fairly small monument with a two-door, 10-window sanctuary constructed of laterite blocks; only one sculpted sandstone lintel over the rear door remains.

Just 300m south, **Prasat Ta Meuan Toht**, which is said to have been the chapel for a 'healing station' or 'hospital' like Prang Ku outside Chaiyaphum, is a bit larger. Also built by Jayavarman VII, the ruins consist of a *gopura*, *mondop* and main *prang*, which are surrounded by a laterite wall.

Nearly a kilometre further south, next to the army base at the end of the road, is the largest site, **Prasat Ta Meuan Thom**, which pre-dates the other two sites by as much as two centuries. Despite a somewhat haphazard reconstruction, this one nearly justifies the effort it takes to get here. Three *prangs* and a large hall are built of sandstone blocks on a laterite base and several smaller buildings still stand inside the wall. Many carvings encase the principal *prang*, but the best were pried or blasted away and sold to unscrupulous Thai dealers by the Khmer Rouge who occupied the site in the 1980s. A stairway on the southern end drops into Cambodian territory. Land mines and undetonated hand grenades still litter the thick jungle surrounding the complex, which is why the red signs (in Thai only) warn you of 'danger'.

The sites begin 10.5km south of Ban Ta Miang (on Rte 224, 23km east of Ban Kruat) via a winding road used by far more cows than cars. You need your own transport to get here, and a visit is more convenient from Phanom Rung Historical Park (p468) than from Surin town.

OTHER KHMER-TEMPLE RUINS

The southern reach of Surin Province along the Cambodian border harbours several minor Angkor-period ruins, including **Prasat Hin Ban Phluang** (admission 30B; ☎ 7.30am–6pm), 33km south of Surin. It's just a solitary sandstone *prang* with most of its top gone sitting on a laterite base that once held three; but some wonderful carvings, including a lintel above the entrance with the Hindu god Indra riding his elephant, Airavata, make it worth a trip. It was probably built in the 11th century and a U-shaped moat rings it. The site sits 600m off Rte 214; the turn-off is 1.5km south of Hwy 24. Any vehicle bound for the border can drop you nearby, but it's easier to get to the town of Prasat and hire a motorcycle taxi there.

A larger Khmer site is seen 30km north-east of town at **Prasat Sikhoraphum** (admission 30B; ☎ 7.30am–6pm), in the town of the same name. Built in the 12th century, Sikhoraphum

features five brick *prang*, the tallest of which reaches 32m. Two of the *prang* still hold their tops, including the central one whose doorways are decorated with stone carvings of Hindu deities following the Angkor Wat style. Locals are keenly proud of this site and sell DVDs of student music and dance shows and T-shirts to raise money for a small museum that would house two Sikhoraphum lintels currently consigned to museums in Surin and Phimai. Sikhoraphum can be reached by bus (20B, one hour) or train (7B, 40 minutes) from Surin town. If driving out here, you may as well take a 300m detour off Rte 226 for a peep at **Prasat Muang Thi** (admission free; ☎ daylight hours), 15km from Surin. The three remaining brick *prang* are in sad shape (one looks like it's ready to topple), but they're so small they're actually kind of cute.

The ruined **Prasat Phumpon** (admission free; ☎ daylight hours) in Amphoe Sangkha (9km south of Hwy 24 on Rte 2124; veer right through the village at the fork in the road), dating from the 7th or 8th century, is the oldest Khmer *prasat* in Thailand; though that is its only claim to fame and you will likely be disappointed by this simple brick *prang*.

Surin can also be used as a base to visit the Khmer ruins at Phanom Rung about 75km southwest of Surin in Buriram Province (see p468).

SURIN NATIONAL MUSEUM

พิพิธภัณฑสถานแห่งชาติสุรินทร์

As has been the case ever since this museum, about 5km south of town on Rte 214, was constructed in 2000, the best guess anyone can give for when it will open is 'next year'. Displays will focus on Surin's ethnic groups, including the Suai, the region's renowned elephant herders, and the province's Khmer ruins.

VOLUNTEERING

Starfish Ventures (☎ 0 4453 0601; www.starfishventures.co.uk; Th Thrayong, Mu 6) runs four projects in Surin that require as little as a two-week commitment. The most popular is a nursing programme where nurses or nursing students visit village health clinics. Also available year-round is a school development programme to renovate and construct buildings; those who can paint fun pictures for young children on the walls are especially welcome. English teachers for grades 1 to 6 can work during

the school year (June to September and November to February) and a conservation programme, mostly involving tree planting, runs in July and August.

All work is done in surrounding villages, but volunteers get private rooms in the provincial capital. Starfish also has volunteering opportunities in other Thai cities; see Responsible Travel (p45) for more information.

Tours

Pirom, at Pirom-Aree's House (see below), offers a wide range of tours, from a half-day in Ban Tha Klang and the craft villages (per person 1200B with four people) to a four-day Isan immersion (per person per day with four people 2100B) from the back of his Land Rover. All the well-known Khmer temples (and many others) are also available. Prices are high, but the tours are good.

Saren Travel (☎ 0 4452 0174; sarentour@yahoo.com; 202/1-4 Th Thesaban 2; ☎ 8am–5pm Mon–Sat) offers customised day tours in and around Surin Province from 1500B. It is planning to create audio-tour CDs for those who want to drive themselves.

Sleeping

The hotels fill up fast during the Elephant Roundup (and prices skyrocket), so book as far in advance as you can.

☐ **Pirom-Aree's House** (☎ 0 4451 5140; Soi Arunee, Th Thungpo, Surin; r 120-200B) The location, 1km west of the city, is a little inconvenient, but the new setting for this long-time budget favourite can't be beat. Simple wooden rooms (all with shared bathroom) in two new houses and a shady garden overlook an old flower-filled rice paddy. Aree cooks some pretty good food and Pirom is one of the best sources of information on the region.

Ban Tha Klang Homestay (☎ 08 1879 2773; per person 250B) The price of this village homestay programme includes three meals and a little elephant time. For 1000B more you can spend a whole day working with them.

Sangthong Hotel (☎ 0 4451 2009; 279-281 Th Tanasan, Surin; r 80-500B; ☎) This labyrinthine older property is run with jet-engine precision by smiling staff. The 125 rooms range from some rachitic shared-bathroom cheapies on the roof to large and comfy midrangers. Air-con starts at 240B.

Phetkasem Hotel (☎ 0 4451 1274; 104 Th Jit Bamrung, Surin; r 690-850B; ☎) It's a bit frumpier than

the Majestic, but this reasonable midranger scratches good-value terrain and features Bond-villain-meets-Benidorm architecture and plenty to keep you occupied, including an adjacent movie theatre.

Surin Majestic Hotel (☎ 0 4471 3980; www.surinmajestic.net; 99 Th Jit Bamrung, Surin; r 800-1800B, ste 3000B; 🍷 🍷 🍷) This shiny new top-ender, which sits right behind the bus terminal, has plenty of extras, like a fitness centre. The rooms are nothing special, but aren't bad for the price.

Eating

Surin Chai Kit (no roman-script sign; Th Tanasan; dishes 20-60B; 🍷 breakfast & lunch) This no-frills spot whips up a tasty breakfast – try a plate of pan eggs and Isan sausages. The owner wears a welcoming permagrin and speaks enough English to guide you through the Thai menu. It's three doors south of the Sangthong Hotel.

Petmanee 2 (☎ 0 4451 6024; Th Munrasat; dishes 20-80B; 🍷 lunch) This simple spot between Ruamphet Hospital and Wat Salaloi is Surin's most famous purveyor of *sôm-tam* and *kài yâang*. The smaller original is around the corner.

Larn Chang (☎ 0 4451 2869; 199 Th Siphathai Saman; dishes 30-180B; 🍷 dinner) Tasty and low-priced Thai and Isan dishes are served in an old wooden house overlooking a surviving stretch of the city moat, now known as Suan Rak (Love Park), where couples come to hold hands at night. The garden is great, but the rooftop patio is the place to be. It's a shortish walk south of the centre.

Farang Connection (☎ 0 4451 1509; off Th Chit Bamrung; dishes 30-600B; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner; 🍷 🍷) Tucked away behind the bus station, and not far from Surin's surprisingly wild nightlife district, this aptly named British-owned place has a thick list of foreign favourites, like Cornish pasties, weiner schnitzel and BLTs. The liquor list is even more global, and the Thai food is pretty good too.

Surin's principal **night market** (Th Krung Si Nai; 🍷 5-10pm) is just south of the Sangthong Hotel. Two blocks west, vendors fronting the municipal market serve until 2am. Both markets whip up an excellent selection of Thai and Isan dishes, including, as always, barbecued insects.

Getting There & Away

BUS

From Surin's **bus terminal** (☎ 0 4451 1756; Th Chit Bamrung) buses head to/from Roi Et (ordinary

50B, three hours, hourly), Khorat (ordinary/air-con 93/130B, four hours, every half-hour), Si Saket (ordinary 50B, 2½ hours, hourly), Chiang Mai (air-con/VIP 690/960B, 14 hours, seven daily) and Pattaya (air-con/VIP 321/626B, eight hours, nine daily). Most of the frequent buses to Bangkok's northern bus terminal (ordinary/air-con 248/342B, eight hours) also use Surin's bus terminal, including **999 VIP** (☎ 0 4451 5344), which has a 24-seat VIP service (495B, 9.30pm), but one company has an office three blocks west by Surin Plaza shopping mall.

If you are heading to the Cambodian border at Chong Jom, where visas are available on the spot, you have a choice of eight *săwngthăew* (40B, 3½ hours) or eight minibuses (60B, two hours).

TRAIN

Surin is on the Bangkok-Ubon train line and there are nearly a dozen daily services to either destination. A 1st-/3rd-class seat to Ubon (three hours) starts at 140/31B; to Bangkok (eight hours) 1st-/3rd-class prices begin at 346/73B.

Surin can also be reached by train from any other station along the Ubon line, including Buriram and Si Saket.

Getting Around

Surin is a very convenient city for travellers: virtually everything you would want or need is within a few blocks of the bus and train stations. If you don't want to walk, *săamlăw* charge 20B to 30B for a trip around the centre.

Pirom-Aree's House, Saren Travel and Farang Connection all rent cars, plus the latter has motorcycles.

SI SAKET & AROUND

ศรีสะเกษ

pop 42,800

There's not a whole lot to do in the perennially humdrum town of Si Saket, but a visit to the Angkor-period temple complex of Khao Phra Wihan (Preah Vihear in Khmer), just over the border in Cambodia, is more than enough to warrant a visit.

Information

Kasikornbank (Th Khukhan, Si Saket; 🍷 8.30am-3.30pm Mon-Fri) Located south of the train station. Has ATM and change facilities.

Si Saket Tourism Coordination Centre (☎ 0 4561 1283; www.pao-sisaket.go.th; cnr Th Lak Muang & Th

Tepa, Si Saket; 🍷 8.30am-4.30pm) The staff are really enthusiastic about Si Saket; pity the province doesn't have more to promote. There are English-speaking staff on weekdays only.

TP Internet (Th Ratchakanrodchai 3; per hr 15B; 🍷 9am-10pm) Just west of the train station, on the south side of the tracks.

Sights

PRASAT KHAO PHRA WIHAN NATIONAL PARK

อุทยานแห่งชาติเขาพระวิหาร

Just inside Cambodia, and all but inaccessible from that side of the border, Khao Phra Wihan (Preah Vihear in Khmer) is one of the region's great Angkor-period monuments. Straddling a 600m-high cliff on the brow of the Dangrek (Dong Rek) escarpment and accessed via a series of steep stepped *naga* approaches, the large temple complex towers over the plains of Cambodia, offering dreamy views and some beautiful and evocative ruins. Access, however, is a relatively confusing and expensive business.

Claimed by both countries, the temple was finally awarded to Cambodia in a 1962 World Court ruling. But the only access is through Thailand's **Prasat Khao Phra Wihan National Park** (☎ 0 4581 6000; admission 400B; 🍷 8am-5pm, last entry 4pm), where a **visitor centre** (🍷 8am-4pm) marks the path into Cambodia and up to the temple, about 1km away. On the Thai side you have to pay 5B for a border pass (passports are not necessary, but it would be wise to bring it anyway in case things change) and just after the border the Cambodian authorities collect their 200B fee (total cost 605B).

On the Thai side of the border, the 130-sq-km Prasat Khao Phra Wihan National Park contains a number of sights that are worth a peep before tramping over the border to Khao Phra Wihan itself. Near the visitor centre, which includes a model of the temple and some interesting exhibits on its history, the **Pha Mo I Daeng** cliff face features some fabulous views and the oldest bas-relief in Thailand. The relief depicts three figures, sitting below a roughly carved pig (which might represent Vishnu), whose identities are an enigma to archaeologists and art historians. Although they give the general impression of representing deities, angels or kings, the iconography corresponds to no known figures in Thai, Mon or Khmer mythology. Stylistically the relief appears to date back to the Koh Ker (AD

921-45) period of Khmer art, when King Jayavarman IV ruled from his capital at Koh Ker. The carving is on an overhanging section of the cliff and is accessed via a walkway. Across the parking lot is **Nam Tok Khun Si**, a waterfall flowing over a cave large enough to hold an orchestra. There is usually only water in the stream from late June through October, and you should visit with a park ranger because it is assumed land mines are still buried in the area.

Khao Phra Wihan itself was constructed over three centuries under a succession of Khmer kings, beginning with Rajendravarman II in the mid-10th century and ending with Suryavarman II in the early 12th century – it was the latter who also commanded the construction of Angkor Wat. The hill itself was sacred to Khmer Hindus for at least 500 years before the completion of the temple complex, however, and there were smaller brick monuments on the site prior to its construction.

The temple complex is only semirestored and the Cambodians appear to have little interest in completing the job any time soon – which makes one wish the World Court had found in favour of the Thais. During Khmer Rouge occupation, which lasted until Pol Pot's death in 1998, the site suffered from the pilfering of artefacts – lintels and other carvings in particular – although some of this smuggled art has been intercepted and may eventually be returned to the site.

One *naga* balustrade of around 30m is still intact; the first two *gopura* have all but fallen down and many of the buildings are roofless, but abundant examples of stone carving are intact and visible. The doorways to the third *gopura* have been nicely preserved and one (the inner door facing south) is surmounted by a well-executed carved stone lintel depicting Shiva and his consort Uma sitting on Nandi (Shiva's bull) under the shade of a symmetrised tree. A Vishnu creation lintel is also visible on the second *gopura*; in contrast to the famous Phanom Rung lintel depicting the same subject, this one shows Vishnu climbing the churning stick rather than reclining on the ocean below.

The main *prasat* tower in the final court after the summit is in need of major restoration before the viewer can get a true idea of its former magnificence. Many of the stone carvings from the *prasat* are missing while others lie buried in nearby rubble. The galleries surrounding the

prasat have fared better and have even kept their arched roofs.

The area around the temple witnessed heavy fighting between Khmer Rouge guerrillas and the Phnom Penh government, and land mines and artillery pieces still litter the surrounding forest – heed the skull and crossbones signs around the temple and stick to well-trodden paths everywhere else.

Getting There & Away

Route 221 leads 95km south from Si Saket to Phum Saron – 10km before the temple – via Kantharalak. Take a bus first to Kantharalak (40B, 1½ hours) and then pick up a *sáwngtháew* to Phum Saron (30B, 40 minutes); both depart every half-hour. From Phum Saron you'll have to hire a motorcycle taxi to the park; figure on 200B return with a couple of hours waiting time. A truck will cost 400B for four people. Drivers in Phum Saron are well aware that visitors who have already come this far are unlikely to skip visiting the ruins and so hold all the cards in bargaining. Hitching to the park is possible, but could take a long time, especially on weekdays.

You can also catch a bus from Ubon Ratchathani to Kantharalak (37B, 1½, every half-hour) and continue from there as above.

OTHER KHMER RUINS

Thirty kilometres west of Si Saket via Rte 226 in Amphoe Uthumphon Phisai, **Prasat Hin Wat Sa Kamphaeng Yai** (admission free; ☞ daylight hours) features four 11th-century *prang* and two *wihān*. The *prang* (including the main one, which was built of sandstone but restored with brick) have lost their tops, but many lintels and other carvings, some in excellent condition, remain. The ruined sanctuary can be found on the grounds of Wat Sa Kamphaeng Yai's modern successor.

About 8km west of Si Saket on the way to Kamphaeng Noi, on the north side of the highway in a temple with no sign in Thai or English, is **Prasat Sa Kamphaeng Noi** (admission free; ☞ daylight hours). Like many other Khmer ruins in the area, it was built as a healing station by Angkor King Jayavarman VII. These days it is barely more than a pile of laterite blocks.

OTHER SIGHTS

Officially it's Wat Pa Maha Chedi Kaeo, but these days nearly everyone calls it **Wat Lan Khuad** (☞ daylight hours), the 'Million Bottle Temple'. In the 1990s the abbot dreamt of a *prasat*

in heaven made entirely of glass and he longed to copy it. Since that wasn't possible he did the next best thing: he covered nearly every surface of nearly every building, from the *bôt* to the bell tower, of his current temple with glass bottles. The more you look around, the less the name seems like an exaggeration. It's on the west side of Amphoe Khun Han, 12km south of Hwy 24 via Rte 2111.

Wat Phra That Rueang Rong (☞ daylight hours) is another unusual temple. A previous abbot, lamenting the loss of the old ways, built the *bôt* like an oxcart being pulled by two giant cows and created a **museum** (donations appreciated; ☞ 7.30am–5pm) with old tools, musical instruments and the like from the province's four cultures: Lao, Khmer, Suai and Yer. Concrete statues of people on the grounds wear traditional clothes, while oversized animals offer life lessons (lead a bad life and you might come back as a gorilla the next time around). The wat is 7km north of town; take a *sáwngtháew* (10B, 15 minutes) from in front of the train station. The last ride returns to the city at 3pm.

Sleeping & Eating

SI SAKET

Si Saket Hotel (☞ 0 4561 2582; 384 Th Si Saket; r 100–350B; ☞) Just a stone's throw north of the train station, this place isn't bad for the price. Even the cheapest rooms have satellite TV – great if you want to have a TV party, though that money would have been better spent on quality mattresses.

Phrompiman Hotel (☞ 0 4561 2677; 849/1 Th Lak Meuang; r 230–490B; ☞) You won't get the four-star facilities you'd expect at first sight and the fan rooms are a tad rough, but this hotel just west of the train station still offers fantastic value, which is why it is sometimes full.

There are several restaurants just north of the train station and a big **night market** (☞ 5pm–midnight) convenes immediately to the south. There is a more varied roster of restaurants a little further south, principally along Th Ubon.

KANTHARALAK

A *sáamláw* from the bus station to these hotels costs 20B to 30B.

Rose Inn Resort (no roman-script sign; ☞ 0 4566 3310; Th Sinpadit Soi 1; r 250–350B; ☞) The closest lodging to the bus terminal (it's about 1km away down a *soi* next to the Government Savings Bank) doesn't deliver on the sign's promise of

VIP services, but it does have shades to draw around your car so your wife doesn't know you are here with your girlfriend. Rooms are clean and colourful.

SB Hotel (☞ 0 4566 3103; 136 Th Anan Ta Pak Dee; r 250–550B; ☞) The rooms are rather dull, but this family-run place with a coffee shop and bakery out the front is very friendly. It's just south of the main street.

Kantharalak Palace Hotel (☞ 0 4566 1085; 131/35–36 Th Sinpadit; r 300–550B; ☞) This place on the main street through town greets you with an attractive wood-lined lobby, and then serves very ordinary rooms, but the higher-priced offerings are the best the city has to offer.

PRASAT KHAO PHRA WIHAN NATIONAL PARK

The park has a few new air-conditioned **bungalows** (prices unconfirmed at time of writing) and a **camp site** (per person 30B; 2-person tent hire 150B).

There are many restaurants across from the visitor centre, and vendors in the ruins themselves sell drinks and snacks.

Getting There & Away

From Bangkok's Northern bus terminal there are frequent departures to Si Saket (ordinary/air-con 314/423B, eight hours) stopping at either the bus terminal or on Th Si Saket just north of the train station. There are also regular buses to/from Ubon Ratchathani (ordinary/air-con 40/59B, 1¼ hours) and Surin (ordinary/air-con 50/80B, 2½ hours). **999 VIP** (☞ 0 4561 2523), departing from the bus terminal, has 24-seat VIP service (610B) to Bangkok at 7.40pm.

A 2nd-/3rd-class train from Ubon to Si Saket costs 29/13B (1½ hours, six daily); from Bangkok a 2nd-/3rd-class train costs 281/147B (10½ hours, six daily).

There are about a dozen daily trains to Bangkok (2nd-/3rd-class 311/197B, eight to 10 hours) including overnight express service (1st-class air-con sleeper 651B, 10 hours) departing Hualamphong station at 8.30pm and departing Si Saket at 7.30pm. A 2nd-/3rd-class train to Ubon Ratchathani (one hour, 11 daily) costs as little as 139/13B.

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