

# Southeastern Thailand



Welcome to the past, present and future of tourism in Thailand. Pulsating and brazen, Pattaya is where the Thai tourism miracle began a few short decades ago, and legions of visitors continue to be lured by its addictive grab-bag of sun-drenched hedonism and tacky twilight. The island getaways of Ko Samet and Ko Chang showcase the present, as their humble backpacker origins are overlaid with a glossy patina of flashier resorts: on busy weekends and public holidays, local travellers join Bangkok expats to commandeer the sunlight and the limelight. Just a zippy speedboat ride from rugged Ko Chang, tiny islands like Ko Wai and Ko Mak flag the future, as pioneering travellers join Thai tourists who've known about these pristine getaways for years.

And the change is ongoing. Sultry Pattaya is trying to reinvent itself with a family-friendly face. Development proceeds on Ko Chang, but amid the new luxury spas and poolside bars, it remains a breeze to escape to the island's rugged jungle interior and reassert your sense of adventure.

Beyond the coastal and island extremes of Southeastern Thailand, other less-visited treasures often struggle to be heard above Pattaya's nocturnal preening and the buzzing banana boats of Ko Samet. The spirit of old Siam lingers in the quiet backstreets of Trat and on Sri Racha's ramshackle piers, and Chanthaburi's intriguing history is as precious as the sapphires and rubies traded at its weekly gem market.

And while the region's national parks (including Khao Chamao/Khao Wong and Khao Khitchakut) are among Thailand's smallest, there's more than enough hush and diversity on offer to counter the part paradise/part pandemonium contrast of elsewhere in the region.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Discovering the other side of Thai island life amid the fishing village atmosphere of **Ko Si Chang** (p230)
- Diving into the risqué delights of **Pattaya's** nightlife (p240), then relaxing on the beach before doing it all again the next night
- Losing the crowds and losing yourself in a book on the quieter beaches of **Ko Samet's** (p243) southeastern coast
- Taking your foot off the travel accelerator with a few days doing nothing, soaking up the old-Siam ambience of **Trat** (p253)
- Working up an island-sized thirst and appetite during a jungle trek on rugged **Ko Chang** (p260)



## FAST FACTS

- **Best Time to Visit** November to May
- **Population** 3.6 million

## Climate

Southeastern Thailand experiences a three-season, monsoonal climate: a relatively cool dry season in November and December is followed by a hot dry season stretching from January to May. A hot wet season follows from June to October.

During the wet season, Ko Samet stays unusually dry and is the region's most 'monsoon-proof' island.

## National Parks

The islands of Ko Samet (p243) and Ko Chang (p257) both fall within national parks (the Khao Laem Ya/Mu Ko Samet National Park and Mu Ko Chang Marine National Park, respectively) and are the region's biggest draw cards after Pattaya. Ko Chang is covered in dense, unspoilt forest, and while the island's coastline is developing fast, the interior is rugged and untouched.

Khao Chamao/Khao Wong (p243), Khao Khitchakut (p252) and Nam Tok Phlio (p252) National Parks hold fewer surprises, but are worth a visit for a break from the coastal buzz.

## Getting There & Away

For the majority of travellers, a trip into, and then through, southeastern Thailand is an eastward progression from Bangkok to Hat Lek on the Cambodian border. Air-con buses link the capital with all major towns, and there are flights from Phuket and Ko Samui to Pattaya, and from Bangkok to Trat. A once-daily train service links Bangkok with Pattaya.

If you are coming from northeast Thailand, regular air-con bus services travel to Rayong and Pattaya from Khorat and Ubon Ratchathani.

## Getting Around

Getting around southeastern Thailand is straightforward, with good bus links between all main attractions. Hourly ferries run to the region's main islands throughout the year, although services to the outlying islands of

the Ko Chang archipelago are significantly reduced during the wet season. Tourist mini-buses also provide convenient direct links between main attractions, but are usually more expensive than public transport.

# CHONBURI PROVINCE

## SRI RACHA

ศรีราชา

pop 151,000

Look closely and you can still see Sri Racha's fishing village roots in the labyrinth of rickety piers and pontoons affixed to its waterfront. While modern Thailand encroaches with a jumble of billboards and traffic lights, down on the seafront glimpses of old Siam linger in the restaurants, simple hotels and markets perched above the tide. Hell-for-leather buses are replaced by puttering fishing boats, and locals sit on their decks mending fishing nets in a tropical twilight. Ships waiting to dock at Sri Racha's modern port stud the near horizon, but they're far enough away not to spoil the illusion of days gone by.

Sri Racha is home to the famous *náam phrik sii raachaa* (spicy sauce), a perfect complement to the town's excellent seafood.

## Information

**CafBarNet** (80 Th Sri Racha Nakorn 3; ☎ 9am-9pm) Coffee (30B) and internet (per minute 1B).

**Krung Thai Bank** (cnr Th Surasakdi 1 & Th Jermjompol)

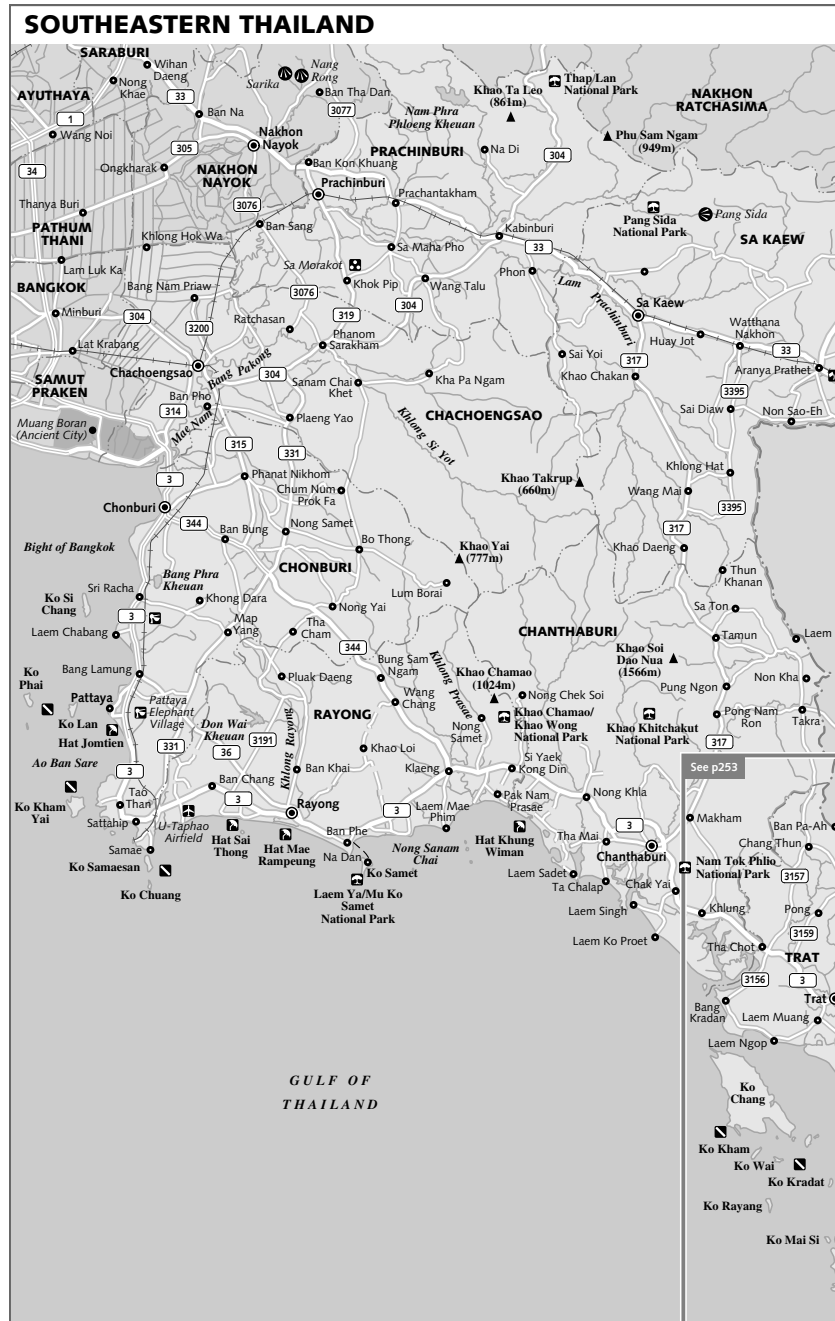
**Post office** (Th Jermjompol) A few blocks north of the Krung Thai Bank.

## Sights

Other than the shambling ambience of the waterfront piers, Sri Racha's sole attraction is **Ko Loi**, a small rocky island connected to the mainland by a long jetty at the northern end of Sri Racha's waterfront. There is a **Thai-Chinese Buddhist temple** (☎ daylight), a low-key festival atmosphere with food stalls and a couple of giant ponds with turtles of every size, from tiny hatchlings to seen-it-all-before seniors.

## Sleeping

Sri Racha is more of a transit point than an overnight stop. The most authentic (read basic) places to stay are the wooden hotels on the piers. There's one flashier spot near the water, but Sri Racha's best hotel is situated further inland.



**Siriwatana Hotel** (☎ 0 3831 1037; 35 Th Jermjompol; s/d 160/200B) Fulfil your dreams of old Siam in this wooden hotel above the sea. The staff move as slowly as their motley array of dogs, but the basic rooms are cheap. Try not to look through the floorboards at the debris washed up by the tide.

**Samchai** (☎ 0 3831 1800; Soi 10; r 260-480B; ♿) Going up in the world, the Samchai has similar ambience with some air-con rooms. There are cheaper fan rooms for 260B, and a store at reception selling everything from fishing supplies to Ovaltine.

**Seaview Sri Racha Hotel** (☎ 0 3831 9000; fax 0 3832 7706; 50-54 Th Jermjompol; r 950B; ♿) You'll pay slightly more for a sea view at this spot near the water with spacious and comfortable rooms. Rooms facing the street can be a tad noisy, but Sri Racha's not Times Square, and a gentle hush settles relatively early.

**City Hotel** (☎ 0 3832 2700; www.citysriacha.com; 6/126 Th Sukhumvit; r 1695B; ♿) The super chilled air-con in reception takes your breath away, but a range of creature comforts including wi-fi internet, a swimming pool and a gym brings it back. Service is slick but friendly, and the slightly austere rooms are softened with a veneer of classy Asian décor.

### Eating & Drinking

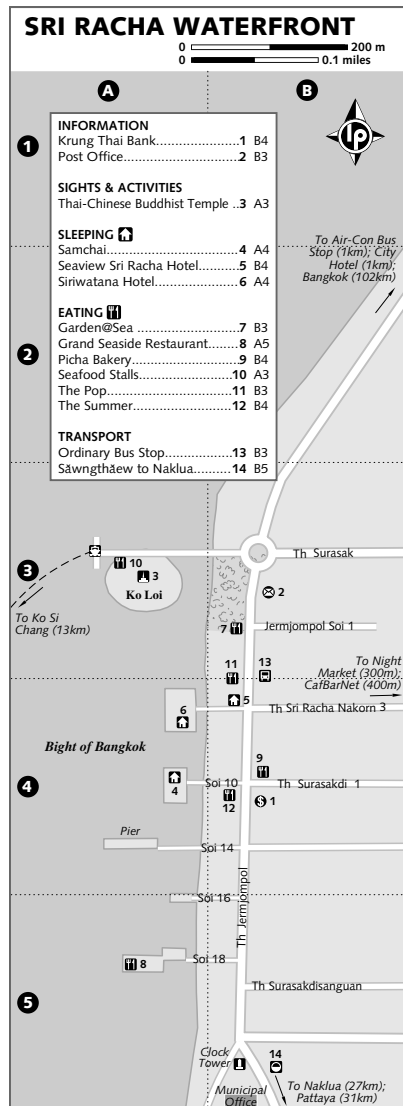
Sri Racha is famous for seafood, and a sprawling night market kicks off around 5pm on Th Sri Racha Nakorn 3.

**Picha Bakery** (☎ 0 3832 4796; cnr Th Jermjompol & Th Surasakdi 1; coffee 30B, snacks 20-40B; ☺) breakfast, lunch & dinner) Baked goodies, excellent coffee and spotless air-con surroundings make this a convenient haven from Sri Racha's busy streets. The iced coffee is especially good.

**The Summer** (☎ 08 6844 3238; Th Jermjompol 100; coffee 20-40B, breakfast 60B; ☺) breakfast, lunch & dinner) A cooked breakfast and a robust espresso will kick start your day in this coffee n' cake place with retro beachy décor. There's loads of Thai travel magazines to give you inspiration.

**Grand Seaside Restaurant** (☎ 0 3832 3851; Soi 18; dishes 60-200B; ☺) lunch & dinner) Refurbished in a colonial style with modern accents, this over-water pavilion is a top spot to enjoy seafood with a relaxing soundtrack of retro lounge music.

**The Pop** (Th Jermjompol; dishes 60-220B; ☺) 5-11pm) More like 'The Rock', this raucous beer hall meets music club boasts a menu ranging from



drinking snacks to full meals. Sunglasses are mandatory for all band members.

Other recommendations:

**Garden@Sea** (Th Jermjompol; drinks 25-50B; ☎ 6am-8pm) A cosy parkside kiosk for drinks and ice cream with pleasant outdoor seating. Try the refreshing green-tea frappé.  
**Seafood stalls** (Ko Loi jetty; dishes 40-160B; ☎ lunch & dinner) Perched on the Ko Loi jetty, these humble spots

specialise in fresh seafood. There is no English menu but it's all good.

## Getting There & Away

Buses to Sri Racha depart from Bangkok's Eastern bus station every 30 minutes from 5.30am to 7pm (ordinary 73B, air-con 94B; 1¾ hours). Ordinary direct buses stop on the waterfront, but through buses and air-con buses stop on Th Sukhumvit (Hwy 3), near the Laemthong Hotel, from where there are tuk-tuk (motorised, three-wheeled pedicab) to the pier (35B). White sawngthæw (small pick-up trucks) to Naklua (north Pattaya) depart from the clock tower throughout the day (30B, 30 minutes). In Naklua catch another sawngthæw (10B) to central Pattaya. Local buses (40B, 30 minutes) run to Pattaya from near the Laemthong Hotel on Th Sukhumvit.

Boat services to Ko Si Chang leave from the end of Ko Loi jetty, (p232).

## Getting Around

Get around town via motorcycle taxi or tuk-tuk for 30B to 40B.

## KO SI CHANG

เกาะสีชัง  
pop 4100

If you're looking for the archetypes of Thai island life – sweeping sandy beaches, coconut groves – you won't find them on this sliver of green in the big blue Ao Krung Thep (Bight of Bangkok). On Ko Si Chang you'll have to settle for a fishing village atmosphere; gentle hills studded with Chinese and Thai temples; and beachfront reminders of a stately royal palace. Enrich your mind through meditation in the limestone caves of the Tham Yai Phrik Vipassana Monastery and exercise your body by paddling a kayak to nearby Bat Island, where there's good snorkelling.

On weekdays you'll have this gentle footfall on the Thai tourist trail all to yourself, but things liven up at the weekend when Bangkok holidaymakers arrive.

## Orientation & Information

The island's one small settlement faces the mainland and is the terminus for the ferry. A bumpy road network links the village with all the other sights.

**Kasikornbank** (99/12 Th Atsadang) Has an ATM and exchange facilities.

**Post office** (Th Atsadang) A further 30m past the Tourist Services Centre.

**Tourist Services Centre** (☎ 0 3821 6201; Th Atsadang; ☎ 9am-4.30pm Mon-Fri) Opposite the Sichang Palace on the main road to the right as you walk up from the pier. Ask for the *Island Welcome* brochure.

**www.koh-sichang.com** An excellent source of local information.

## Sights & Activities

The Buddhist **Tham Yai Phrik Vipassana Monastery** (☎ 0 3821 6104; ☎ dawn to dusk) is built around several meditation caves running into the island's central limestone ridge, and offers fine views from its hilltop *chedi* (stupa). Monks and *māe chii* (nuns) from across Thailand come to take advantage of the caves' peaceful environment, and foreigners wishing to sample monastic life are also welcomed. Studying at the monastery is free of charge (phone ahead to make sure there's room and bring your passport), but you'll be expected to follow the monastery's strict code of conduct. Whether you visit for an hour, or stay a month, leave an appropriate donation (roughly equivalent to basic food and lodging if staying a few days) with the monk or nun who shows you around.

The western side of the island has some OK swimming spots. **Hat Tham Phang** (Fallen Cave Beach) in the southwest has simple facilities with deckchair and umbrella rental. A beach area along the coast by Hat Tha Wang Palace (below) is popular with locals, and the island's best swimming is at **Hat Sai Kaew** to the south.

At the western end of the island (2km from the pier), you can visit **Hat Tha Wang Palace** (Th

Chakra Pong; admission free; ☎ 9am-5pm). The carefully managed lawns are a prime picnic spot for visitors from Bangkok, who share the gardens with foraging white squirrels. The palace was once used by Rama V (Chulalongkorn) over the summer months, but was abandoned when the French briefly occupied the island in 1893. The main throne hall – a magnificent golden teak structure called Vimanmek – was moved to Bangkok in 1910 (p133). The Fine Arts Department has since restored the remaining palace buildings.

Overlooking Hat Tha Wang is a large white stupa that holds **Wat Atsadangnimit** (☎ daylight), a small, consecrated chamber where Rama V used to meditate. The unique Buddha image inside was fashioned more than 50 years ago by a local monk. Nearby is a stone outcrop wrapped in holy cloth, called Bell Rock because it rings like a bell when struck.

Near Wat Atsadangnimit a large limestone cave, **Tham Saowapha** (admission free; ☎ daylight), plunges deep into the island. Have a nosy if you've got a torch.

The most imposing sight is the ornate **San Jao Phaw Khao Yai Chinese Temple** (☎ daylight). During Chinese New Year in February, the island is overrun with Chinese visitors from the mainland. This is one of Thailand's most interesting Chinese temples, with shrine caves, multiple levels and a good view of the ocean. It's east of the town, high on a hill overlooking the sea.

Several locals run **snorkelling trips** to Koh Khaang Khao (Bat Island) on Ko Si Chang's southern tip. A boat for 10 people will cost

## WHAT TO EXPECT IN SOUTHEASTERN THAILAND

We list high-season rates (November to May). Rates for locations near Bangkok (eg Pattaya and Ko Samet) do not vary much on a seasonal basis, but during the week you can expect to negotiate significant discounts. If you're visiting on a busy holiday weekend don't be surprised to be quoted significantly higher rates – in some cases up to 100% more – than the rates quoted here.

- **Budget (less than 700B)** – In Pattaya, competition keeps prices low and for this price you can expect air-con and private facilities with hot water. Rates are sneaking up on the islands and you may have to make do with a beach bungalow and cold showers.
- **Midrange (700B to 1700B)** – In Pattaya throughout the year, and on Ko Chang and Ko Samet out of the peak season, the lower end of this range will secure air-con, private facilities, and maybe even a pool and cable TV. At the upper end, expect all mod cons, especially if you shop around.
- **Top End (over 1700B)** – You can expect a better standard of design and décor. The size of the rooms and the range of facilities will be similar to the higher end of the Midrange category, but expect better service and a more private stay.

around 2500B. Ask at Pan & David Restaurant (below) or the Tiewpai-Park Resort (below).

**Sea kayaks** are available for rent (400B per day) on Hat Tham Phang. A nice paddle is down the coast to Koh Khaang Khao, where there is good snorkelling. Recharge at the **Si Chang Healing House** (☎ 0 3821 6467; 167 Mu 3 Th Makhaam Thaw; ☎ 8am-6pm, Thu-Tue), which offers massage and beauty treatments (400B to 800B) in a garden labyrinth opposite Pan & David Restaurant.

## Sleeping

**Rim Talay** (☎ 0 3821 6237; 38/3 Mu 2 Th Devavongse; r 500-800B, 'houseboats' 1500B; ♿) Behind the Pan & David Restaurant, this waterside spot has simple but clean air-con rooms, and a selection of colourful Thai fishing boats that have been transformed into mini-apartments sleeping up to five people. The bow of each 'houseboat' is a chill-out area with comfy couches.

**Sichang View Resort** (☎ 0 3821 6210; r 890B; ♿) You'll need transport to make this your island base, but the spacious rooms and expansive gardens provide a relaxing getaway. Sunset is special. To get there, follow the road up the hill past the Chinese temple. After 1.5km Sichang View Resort is on your right.

**Sichang Palace** (☎ 0 3821 6276; Th Atsadang 81; r 1050B; ♿) The lobby features an ostentatious display of wooden furniture and carvings, but the modern rooms are not as over the top. You'll pay an extra 200B for a sea view, and nonguests can use the hotel pool for 50B.

Other recommendations:

**Jeff's Bungalows** (☎ 0 3821 6615; r 600B; ♿) Up the hill just past Pan & David Restaurant, these cosy bungalows feature hot showers, cable TV and DVD players.

**Tiewpai-Park Resort** (☎ 0 3821 6084; tom\_tiewpai@hotmail.com; Th Atsadang; r 400-850B; ♿) Spread throughout a quiet glade, this central option with a range of rooms is showing its age a little, but is still good for local information and snorkelling trips.

## Eating

The town has several small restaurants, with simply prepared seafood your best bet. For all restaurants phoning ahead on weekdays is recommended. The restaurant at **Sichang View Resort** features a cliff-top setting and excellent seafood from 180B to 300B. The resort's **Malee Blue Hut Café** does great coffee all day and excellent sundowners.

**Pan & David Restaurant** (☎ 0 3821 6629; 167 Mu 3 Th Makhaam Thaw; mains 40-260B; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner,

Wed-Mon) Former adman David and wife Pan are sociable hosts at the island's best restaurant. You shouldn't get bored by David's Asian anecdotes, but if you do the menu includes Thai food, pasta and burgers, and a tidy little wine list. Finish with homemade ice cream and you'll go to bed a contented traveller.

## Getting There & Away

Boats to Ko Si Chang leave hourly from the Ko Loi jetty in Sri Racha. The fare is 40B each way; the first boat leaves at 7am and the last at 8pm. From Ko Si Chang boats shuttle back hourly from 6am to 6pm. Boats leave promptly. A tük-tük to the ferry from Sri Racha's waterfront hotels is 20B.

## Getting Around

Ko Si Chang has some of Thailand's biggest motorcycle taxis and they'll take you anywhere for 30B to 40B. Island tours are available for around 250B; be prepared to haggle. Motorbikes are available to rent from Tiewpai-Park Resort for 250B per day.

## PATTAYA

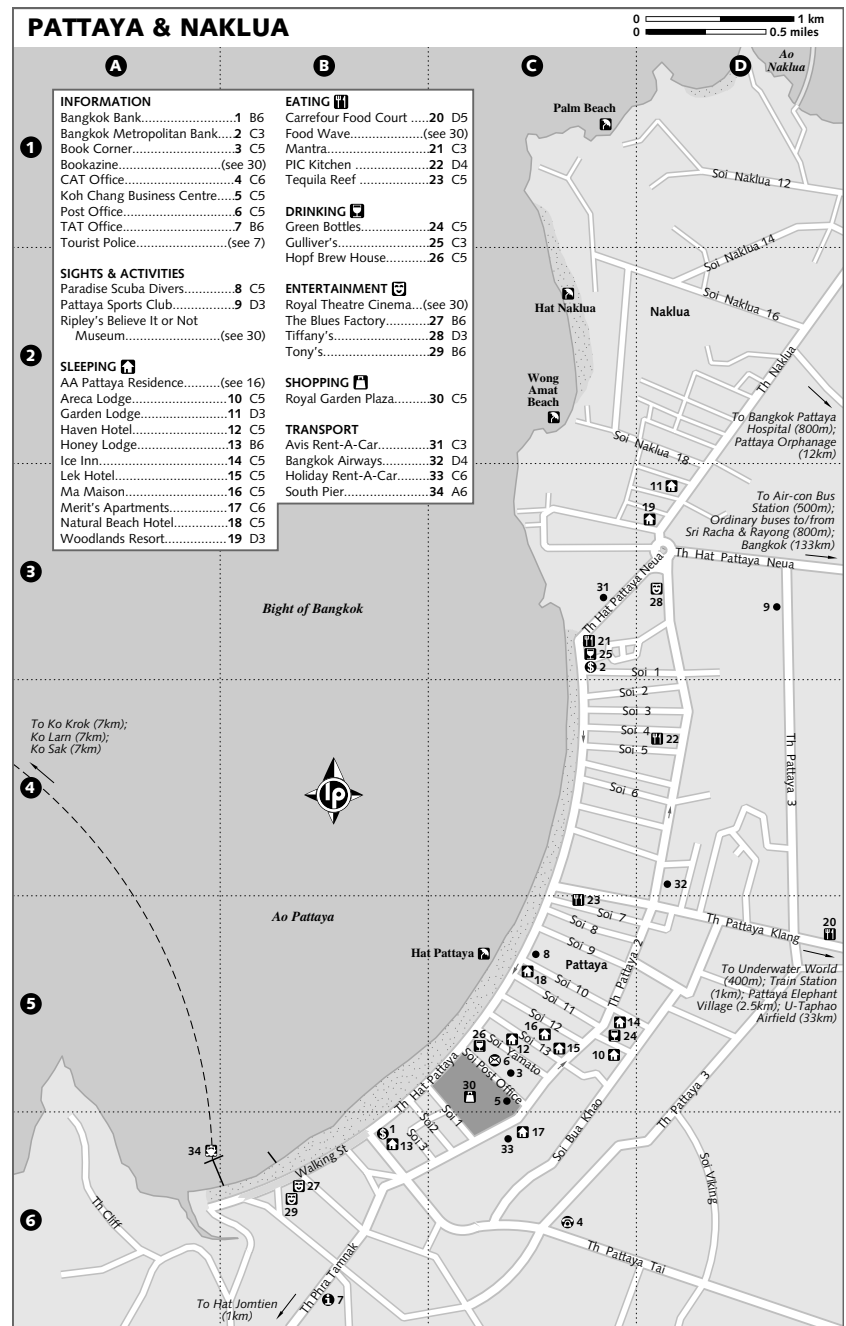
พัทยา

pop 85,000

A heavy-breathing and testosterone-fuelled testament to holiday hedonism, Pattaya has lured tourists for almost four decades, and it's showing no sign of slowing down. And as past visitors move on to more genteel Thai resorts, first-time travellers from Russia and Eastern Europe now air their new passports with a flight in Asia's first and foremost Sin City. Anyone for Pattayagrad?

The cast may be evolving, but the scenery and soundtrack remain the same. The gorgeous half-moon of Pattaya Bay swoops around the headland to (slightly) more refined Hat Jomtien, and delicate sea-breezes whip up a heady cocktail of suntan lotion, fast food, and motorcycle and jet-ski fumes. Wide-eyed package tourists jostle with Indian tailors, ruddy-faced middle-aged Western men, and beachfront fruit and seafood vendors. Thumping beats, cruising 'baht buses' and the commercial hubbub provide an irresistible symphony. And after dark the tourists' eyes open even wider with a stroll past Pattaya's infamous go-go bars amid the sex tourism hub of Walking St.

Pattaya's a stay up late kind of town, but wake up earlier than most and there are ac-



tivities galore to redress your daytime/night-time balance. Hit the dive shops to explore the city's offshore reefs and wrecks, or get some fresh air on world-class golf courses. And if you're here with the family, the kids (and mum and dad), will find plenty to do to make it a real holiday.

The town's wicked essence remains defiantly intact, but around the fringes it's softening and becoming more inclusive. If you welcome it with a dash of confidence and a pinch of adventure, Pattaya's sun-kissed pursuit of happiness might prove irresistible.

## History

US GIs kick-started Pattaya's dramatic transformation from quiet fishing village into throbbing tourist mecca when they ventured down the coast in search of fun and frolics from their base in Nakhon Ratchasima. That was 1959. During the Vietnam War, the flood become a flood as troops on leave arrived to soak up Pattaya's cocktail of sun, sand and sex. Package – and sex – tourists followed, and Southeastern Thailand's golden goose grew fat on the seemingly bottomless pot of dollars pouring into the local economy.

More recently Pattaya is striving to re-position itself as a 'family-friendly' destination, and while the grit, glitz and seedy glamour remain, the 'town that sex built' is now offering more attractions that won't have the kids asking awkward questions.

## Orientation

Curving around Ao Pattaya (Pattaya Bay), Hat Pattaya (Pattaya Beach) is the city's showcase stretch of sand. Th Hat Pattaya (known colloquially as Beach Rd) runs along the waterfront and is lined with hotels, shopping centres and, towards the north, go-go bars. At the southern end of Th Hat Pattaya, 'Walking St' is a semi-pedestrianised jumble of restaurants and nightclubs. The alleyways running between Th Hat Pattaya and Th Pattaya 2 each have their own character: Soi 13 is filled with pleasant, midrange hotels while Soi 3 is the heart of the gay area, dubbed 'Boyztown'. Development is ongoing, and at the time of writing the third street back from the beach, Th Pattaya 3, was awash with the construction of new hotels, bars and restaurants.

If you're after a tad more tranquillity then head to Hat Jomtien, a 6km stretch of attractive beach and cleaner water, 5km south of

### WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Given Pattaya's international appeal, some of the streets are known by both their Thai and English names. We have stuck with the Thai names, although some city maps use the English equivalent. Examples of the Thai street names, with the English equivalent include: Th Hat Pattaya (Beach Rd), Th Hat Jomtien (Jomtien Beach Rd), Th Hat Pattaya Neua (North Pattaya Rd), Th Pattaya Klang (Central Pattaya Rd) and Th Pattaya Tai (South Pattaya Rd). To further confuse matters, while all maps (including ours) agree that the two alleys south of Soi 13 are called Soi Yamato and Soi Post Office, they are respectively labelled Soi 13/1 and Soi 13/2 on street signs.

Hat Pattaya. Hat Naklua, a smaller beach 1km north of Pattaya, is also quiet.

### MAPS

The *Explore Pattaya* magazine, available free from the tourist office, includes a good map.

### Information BOOKSHOPS

**Book Corner** (Map p233; Soi Post Office; ☎ 10am–10pm) English-language fiction and travel guides.

**Bookazine** (Map p233; 1st fl, Royal Garden Plaza, Th Hat Pattaya; ☎ 11am–11pm) Travel books, literature and magazines, with another branch at Hat Jomtien (Map p235).

### EMERGENCY

**Tourist Police** (Map p233; ☎ 0 3842 9371, emergency 1155; tourist@police.go.th; Th Pattaya 2) The head office is beside the Tourism Authority of Thailand office on Th Phra Tamnak with police boxes along Pattaya and Jomtien beaches.

### INTERNET ACCESS

There are internet places around Soi Praisani (aka Soi Post Office), at the Royal Garden Plaza and along Th Pattaya 2. At Hat Jomtien, they pop up regularly along Th Hat Jomtien.

### MEDICAL SERVICES

**Bangkok Pattaya Hospital** (Map p233; ☎ 0 3842 9999; www.bph.co.th; 301 Mu 6, Th Sukhumvit, Naklua; ☎ 24hr) For 1st-class health care.

### MONEY

There are banks all over Pattaya and Hat Jomtien; all have ATMs and most have foreign

exchange booths that stay open late (usually 8pm).

**Bangkok Bank** (Map p233; Th Hat Pattaya)

**Bangkok Metropolitan Bank** (Map p233; Th Hat Pattaya)

### MEDIA

*Explore Pattaya*, a free fortnightly magazine, contains information on events and attractions as well as hotel and restaurant listings. *What's On Pattaya* is a similar monthly publication. *Pattaya Mail* (www.pattayamail.com), a weekly newspaper, covers Pattaya's famed social ills while *Pattaya People* (www.pattayapeople.com), another weekly, is an even racier read.

### POST

**Post office** (Map p233; Soi 13/2)

### TELEPHONE

There are many private long-distance phone offices, charging 12B per minute to the USA, Australia and Europe. Most internet cafés offer Skype.

**Communications Authority of Thailand** (CAT; Map p233; ☎ 0 3842 5301; cnr Th Pattaya Tai & Th Pattaya 3;

☎ 8.30am–4.30pm Mon–Fri, 9am–noon Sat) Southeast of central Pattaya.

### TOURIST INFORMATION

**Tourism Authority of Thailand** (TAT; Map p233; ☎ 0 3842 8750; tatchon@tat.or.th; 609 Muu 10, Th Phra Tamnak; ☎ 8.30am–4.30pm) Located at the northwestern edge of Rama IX Park. The helpful staff have many brochures, including the excellent *Bigmap Pattaya*.

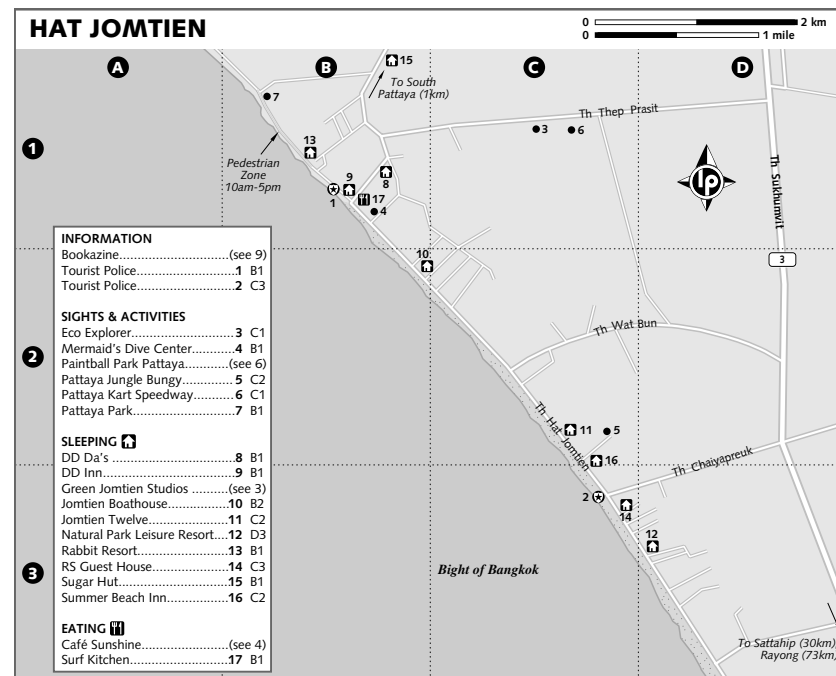
### TRAVEL AGENCIES

Travel agencies all over town offer activities and accommodation around Thailand.

**Ko Chang Business Centre** (Map p233; ☎ 0 3871 0145; Soi Post Office; ☎ 9am–midnight) Specialises in trips to Ko Chang and Ko Samet.

### Dangers & Annoyances

Remember sex tourism is a booming industry in Pattaya and large sections of the city are chock full of go-go bars and strip clubs. This seedier side of Pattaya is hard to avoid, especially at night, and if you are travelling with young children prepare yourself for some awkward questions.



## Sights & Activities

### BEACHES

**Hat Pattaya** is the city's showcase stretch of sand, sporting sunbathers, souvenir sellers, and buzzing jet skis and speedboats. The sand is reasonably clean and the water is calm. If you get bored there's good shopping over the road.

**Hat Jomtien**, about 1km south of Pattaya, stretches for 6km and is quieter than its northern neighbour. You're relatively removed from Pattaya's sex scene at this beach. At the northern end of the beach, **Hat Dongtan** is a hub for gay travellers.

**Hat Naklua**, a smaller beach north of Pattaya, is quiet and a good choice for families.

The islands of **Ko Larn**, **Ko Krok** and **Ko Sak** are around 7km offshore and have some popular beaches – especially **Hat Ta Waen** on Ko Larn. Boats leave Pattaya's **South Pier** (Map p233) every two hours between 8am and 4.30pm (20B). The last boat back from Ko Larn is at 5pm. A daytrip including viewing from a glass bottom boat costs 150B.

### WATERSPORTS

Though not home to Thailand's best dive sites, Pattaya's proximity to Bangkok makes it a popular spot to get some underwater action. However, overfishing and heavy boat traffic mean the sites closest to Pattaya can be barren with poor visibility. Nearby Ko Larn, Ko Sak and Ko Krok are good for beginners, while accomplished divers may prefer the outer islands of **Ko Man Wichai** and **Ko Rin**, which have better visibility and marine life. In most places expect 3m to 9m of visibility under good conditions, or in more remote sites 5m to 12m.

Further southeast, the **shipwrecks Petchburi Bremen**, off Sattahip and **Hardeep**, off Samae, have created artificial reefs. The scuttled Thai navy vessel **HMS Khram** sits in 30m of water off Ko Phai, and many operators offer excursions around the sunken hulk.

One of the best dive sites is an old US navy ammunition dump called **Samaesan Hole**. This advanced dive goes down to 87m and has a gentle slope covered with coral where you can see barracuda and large rays. Visibility here is up to 20m on a good day.

A two-dive excursion to most sites averages around 3000B. Snorkellers may tag along for 500B to 800B. Full PADI certification (three to four days), is between 11,000B and 15,000B.

The following established dive shops are popular.

**Mermaid's Dive Center** (Map p235; ☎ 0 3823 2219; www.mermaiddive.com; Soi White House, Hat Jomtien)

**Paradise Scuba Divers** (Map p233; ☎ 0 3871 0567; www.tauchenthailand.de; Siam Bayview Resort, Th Hat Pattaya)

Pattaya and Jomtien have some of the best water-sports facilities in Thailand with **water-skiing** for 1200B per hour; **parasailing** 250B to 300B (about 10 to 15 minutes); and **windsurfing** for 500B an hour. **Game fishing** is also possible, with the rental rates for boats, fishing guides and tackle all reasonable. Hat Jomtien is the best for windsurfing because you're less likely to run into parasailors or jet skis.

### SPORTS

Pattaya offers many sports including **bowling**, **snooker**, **archery**, **target-shooting**, **softball**, **horse-riding** and **tennis**. Most are available at the **Pattaya Sports Club** (Map p233; ☎ 0 3836 1167; www.pattayasports.org; 3/197 Th Pattaya 3) or can be organised by hotels. **Golf** packages can be booked through **East Coast Travel & Golf Organisation** (☎ 0 3830 0927; www.pattayagolfpackage.com).

### VOLUNTEERING

At the **Pattaya Orphanage** (☎ 0 3871 6628; volunteer@redemptorists.or.th) volunteers are needed to care for more than 50 children under the age of three; teach English to older children; and work in a drop-in centre for street kids. The well-run orphanage is an uplifting balance to the Sin City streets of Pattaya. Volunteers are expected to commit to at least six months, but shorter stays are considered on a case-by-case basis. Food and accommodation is provided.

You can spend from one to four weeks working with elephants and mahouts, in rehabilitation after being forced to work in the city, at the **Elephant Mahout Project** run by **Eco Explorer** (Map p235; ☎ 0 3830 3941; www.ecoexplorerthailand.com; 217/7 Soi 15 Thaprasit Rd; per week incl food & accommodation £300). An average day might include an early start to bathe and feed the elephants, followed by training to develop your own skills as a mahout. A four-week stay will allow you to form closer bonds with the elephants and the mahouts.

### Sleeping BUDGET

There's a huge number of sleeping options. Weekends and holidays get crowded and

### PATTAYA FOR CHILDREN

**Ripley's Believe It or Not Museum** (Map p233; ☎ 0 3871 0294; 2nd fl, Royal Garden Plaza, Th Pattaya 2; adult/child 370/270B; ☎ 11am-11pm), puts a Disneyesque spin on the world's oddities and includes high-tech theme rides.

Budding Michael Schumachers (and petrolhead dads) should head to **Pattaya Kart Speedway** (Map p235; www.karting-thailand.com; ☎ 0 3842 2004; 248/2 Th Thep Prasit Soi 9; ☎ 9am-6pm), where you can race go-karts around an impressive 800m loop. Prices start at 300B for 10 minutes in a 10HP kart. There's a down'n'dirty off-road circuit and the littlest ones will enjoy the 'baby karts' on a 400m beginners' track.

At nearby **Paintball Park Pattaya** (Map p235; ☎ 0 3830 0608; 248/10 Muu 12, Th Thep Prasit; 50 bullets starting at 450B; ☎ 9am-6pm), older kids can vent their frustration at being on holiday with their uncool parents. If the kids don't behave then threaten them with the 50m jump at **Pattaya Jungle Bungy** (Map p235; ☎ 08 6378 3880; www.thaibungy.com; Soi 14, Th Hat Jomtien; jumps 1500B; ☎ 9am-6pm).

**Pattaya Park's** (Map p235; ☎ 0 3836 4129; www.pattayapark.com; 345 Th Hat Jomtien; adult/child 100/50B; ☎ 8.30am-6pm) bustling Water Park has three different ways to exit its 55-storey tower. Once the kids (and Mum and Dad) have recovered, get them all excited again on the roller coaster and dodgems at Pattaya Park's Funnyland Amusement Park.

Escape the heat and sun at **Underwater World** (☎ 0 3875 6879; Th Sukhumvit; adult/child 360/180B; ☎ 9am-6pm) with acrylic tunnels making up a walk-through aquarium. It's 200m south of the Tesco-Lotus shopping centre on the main road south.

The **Pattaya Elephant Village** (☎ 0 3824 9818; www.elephant-village-pattaya.com) is a nonprofit sanctuary for former working elephants. There's a 2.30pm elephant show (adult/child 500/400B) which demonstrates training techniques, and one-hour (adult/child 900/700B) and 3½-hour (adult/child 1900/1300B) elephant treks. The elephant village is 7km off Th Sukhumvit.

many budget options fill up, but on quieter weekdays, many hotels and guesthouses offer discounts.

### Pattaya

The cheapest guesthouses are in south Pattaya, along Th Pattaya 2, the street parallel to Th Hat Pattaya. Most are clustered near Soi 6, 10, 11 and 12. Expect better value if you splash out a little more on a midrange place though.

**Ice Inn** (Map p233; ☎ 0 3872 0671; www.pattayacity.com/iceinn; 528/2-3 Th Pattaya 2; r 250-650B; ☎ ) Ice Inn is the best value in town. Upstairs the rooms are clean and modern, and come with air-con or fan; downstairs things get funkier with an internet café and a gallery full of contemporary art and Asian antiques.

**Honey Lodge** (Map p233; ☎ 0 3842 9133; fax 0 3871 0185; 597/8 Muu 10 Th Pattaya 2; r 550B; ☎ ) Somehow they manage to squeeze in cable TV, air-con, and a swimming pool for the budget traveller. Ask for an upstairs room as the downstairs rooms are a bit dark.

**Merit's Apartments** (Map p233; ☎ 0 3842 6258; fax 0 3842 6258; 215/47-50 Th Pattaya 2; r 800B; ☎ ) Good value air-con rooms in a quiet lane just off bustling Th Pattaya 2.

### Hat Jomtien

Explore the area around Soi 3 and 4 for good value budget guesthouses.

**RS Guest House** (Map p235; ☎ 0 3823 1867; Th Hat Jomtien; r 500B; ☎ ) With small but clean rooms at the quieter southern end of the beach, RS Guest House is a good value haven away from the bright lights.

**DD Inn** (Map p235; ☎ 0 3823 2995; ddinn@hotmail.com; 410/50 Muu 12, Th Hat Jomtien; r 550-600B; ☎ ) At the northern end of the beach, this spot bedecked with Aussie paraphernalia sits in an arcade filled with travellers cafés and bars. Rooms are simple and clean, but all you'll need after a night on the town.

**DD Da's** (Map p235; ☎ 0 3823 3585; d.d.dahouse02@hotmail.com; 406/357 Muu 12 Thapraya Rd; r 600B; ☎ ) Slightly away from the beach, but with clean rooms and a restaurant downstairs, DD Da's is a good value option near Jomtien's nightlife.

### MIDRANGE

Pattaya has many midrange hotels, with competition keeping standards high and prices (relatively) low. Hotels tend to age fast in Pattaya, so watch out for the latest openings which may be offering special deals. At the

time of writing several new hotels were being built on Th Pattaya 3, the third road back from the beach.

## Pattaya

**Natural Beach Hotel** (Map p233; ☎ 0 3842 9239; naturalbeach@excite.com; 216 Muu 10, Soi 11; r 750-950B; 🍷 🍷) Infused with a low-key relaxed ambience that's nicely at odds with the surrounding hubbub of Pattaya, the Natural Beach delivers a pretty garden, a shady swimming pool and tidy rooms with an unintentional 1970s retro feel.

**Lek Hotel** (Map p233; ☎ 0 3842 5552; lek\_hotel@hotmail.com; 284/5 Th Pattaya 2; r 850-1200B; 🍷 🍷) The Lek is popular with return visitors, who come back for the central location, bigger than normal rooms, and good value breakfast (110B) and dinner (60B) buffets. The doormen are a great source of local information. Ask for a quieter room away from the street.

**Area Lodge** (Map p233; ☎ 0 3841 0123; www.area.lodge.com; 198/23 Muu 9, Soi Diana Inn, Tha Pattaya 2; r incl breakfast 1090B; 🍷 🍷) With stylish rooms, two pools and a Jacuzzi, this place almost gate-crashes into the top-end category. No-one's told the owners though, and for 10 months of the year rooms start at an affordable 1090B. Expect increases of around 50% in December and January.

**Ma Maison** (Map p233; ☎ 0 3871 0433; www.maisonhotel.com; Soi 13; r 1100B; 🍷 🍷) Sip your *pastis* around *la piscine* (swimming pool) at this very French low-rise oasis. The French management can be a bit snooty to non-French speakers, but just wear your Inspector Clouseau disguise and you should be OK. You can hitch your laptop to its wi-fi network.

**Haven Hotel** (Map p233; ☎ 0 3871 0988; www.haven-hotel.com; 185 Soi 13; r 1100B; 🍷 🍷) Just over the road from Ma Maison, this stylish mid-ranger has 15 rooms around a pretty pool. All rooms have DVD players and stereos, so it's a handy spot to try out the bootleg movies and CDs you were lured into buying the night before.

**AA Pattaya Residence** (Map p233; ☎ 0 3842 3403; aaresidence@yahoo.com; 109/20 10 Soi 13; r 1350B; 🍷) Near Ma Maison, the rooms in this newish high-rise border on flash. You'll pay a little more than other nearby midrange accommodation, but the increase in standards is significant. Use the skills you've perfected buying bootleg DVDs to bargain them down to a midweek or off season rate of 900B.

## Naklua

**Garden Lodge** (Map p233; Th Naklua; ☎ 0 3842 9109; fax 0 3842 1221; r 1100B; 🍷 🍷) Escape the hype and hustle of Pattaya in one of town's best value midrange options. There's no skimping on the garden atmosphere with fishponds and leafy pavilions, and the tour desk at reception offers a raft of day trips.

## Hat Jomtien

Head to the southern end of the beach for a quieter and more family-friendly atmosphere. It's popular with Thai tourists, who come for fresh seafood on weekends.

**Summer Beach Inn** (Map p235; ☎ 0 3823 1777; fax 0 3823 1778; Th Hat Jomtien; r 750B; 🍷) Popular with holidaying Thais, this slightly ageing spot with Miami Beach Art-Deco styling offers good value rooms a short distance from the beach.

**Green Jomtien Studios** (Map p235; ☎ 0 3830 3941; www.ecoexplorerthailand.com; 217/7 Soi 15 Thep Prassit Rd; r incl breakfast 850B; 🍷) Attached to the Elephant Mahout Project (p236), this place about 1km from the beach also offers spotless rooms in a quiet residential neighbourhood. Booking ahead is recommended as volunteers at the project also stay here.

**Jomtien Boathouse** (Map p235; ☎ 0 3875 6143; www.jomtien-boathouse.com; 380/5-6 Th Hat Jomtien; r 1050B; 🍷) You're only metres from the beach, but you might find it hard to leave the cosy downstairs pub with interesting antique maps. Upstairs a nautical theme drifts into the comfortable rooms, some with balconies and sea views.

**Jomtien Twelve** (Map p235; ☎ 0 3875 6865; jomtientwelve@gmail.com; 240/13 Soi 12 Th Hat Jomtien; r 800-1250B; 🍷) The lobby promises urbane designer delights, but the rooms are slightly less impressive. It's popular with weekend-ing Bangkok yuppies. Next door there is an elegant *café*/restaurant.

**Natural Park Leisure Resort** (Map p235; ☎ 0 3823 1561; www.naturalparkresort.com; 412 Th Hat Jomtien; r 1800B, bungalow 5000B; 🍷 🍷) At the quieter southern end of the beach, Natural Park has leafy grounds filled with birdsong, a Mediterranean-style resort building and lovely (but more expensive) Thai-style family bungalows.

## TOP END

Pattaya is popular with package tourists and convention goers, so there are plenty of top-end options. Rooms are often cheaper when booked through a Bangkok travel agency, or via the internet. There are plenty of standard

high-rise resorts, but the following three offer something different.

## Naklua

**Woodlands Resort** (Map p233; ☎ 0 3842 1707; www.woodland-resort.com; 164/1 Th Naklua; r incl breakfast 2900-3900B; 🍷 🍷) Low key but sophisticated, Woodlands Resort is set around tropical gardens with two swimming pools, and is good for families. The rooms are light and airy with teak furniture, and include high speed internet, and CD and DVD players.

## Hat Jomtien

**Rabbit Resort** (Map p235; ☎ 0 3830 3303; www.rabitresort.com; Dongtan Beach, Hat Jomtien; r 4600-5900B, villas (up to four people) 9900-10,600B; 🍷 🍷) Rabbit Resort has stunning bungalows and villas set in beachfront forest at the northern end of Jomtien. Furnishings showcase Thai design and art, with wooden floors and handmade, rustic textiles. Bathrooms are especially stylish with accents of riverstone and granite.

**Sugar Hut** (Map p235; ☎ 0 3825 1686; www.sugar-hut.com; 391/18 Muu 10, Th Thapraya; 1-/2-room villa 7000/11,700B; 🍷 🍷) Amid overgrown jungle-like grounds, the Sugar Hut's Thai-style villas and bungalows are gathered around shaded fish ponds and winding paths patrolled by peacocks and rabbits. Décor is a delicious combo of Asian chic and rustic seclusion. If you grow weary of your romantic hideaway, there are three swimming pools, a spa and sauna, and an atmospheric restaurant.

## Eating

Western food rules the roost in Pattaya, and while there are plenty of Thai restaurants, the taste of authentic Thailand is sometimes lacking. Whether you want schnitzel, samosas or smorgasbord, you'll find it amid the many eateries. Head to south Pattaya around Walking St for the best selection of seafood restaurants.

**Carrefour Food Court** (Map p233; Th Pattaya Klang; 🍷 11am-10pm) In the absence of a decent night market, head to the food court under the Carrefour supermarket. The Thai food is authentically spicy and dishes start from 30B.

**Food Wave** (Map p233; Th Hat Pattaya; dishes 40-120B; 🍷 11am-11pm) Atop the Royal Garden Plaza shopping mall, this expands the food court concept with a wider range of cuisines, including Japanese, Vietnamese and Italian. There's also Starbucks if you, like, really, really need an organic soy latte. You'll find other fast

food chains you didn't know you were missing downstairs.

**Surf Kitchen** (Map p235; ☎ 0 3823 1710; Th Hat Jomtien; dishes 80-260B; 🍷) breakfast, lunch & dinner) A cosmopolitan team combines with very good chefs to keep Surf Kitchen at the top of relaxed dining options on Jomtien Beach. The Thai food is authentic in all the right places and the talented kitchen staff are skilled at Western food as well.

**PIC Kitchen** (Map p233; ☎ 0 3842 8374; 10 Soi 5, Th Pattaya 2; dishes 110-290B; 🍷) lunch & dinner) This teak-lined place has an intimate atmosphere with open-sided rooms, cushions and low wooden tables. Excellent Thai food is the main draw, and live jazz bubbles away upstairs every night from 8pm at the Jazz Pit.

**Café Sunshine** (Map p235; Th Hat Jomtien; dishes 100-300B; 🍷) breakfast, lunch & dinner) With its shady garden, Café Sunshine is a haven from the tropical heat. It's especially recommended for breakfast, and if you time it right you'll still be there when happy hour kicks off at a ridiculously early 10am.

**Tequila Reef** (Map p233; ☎ 0 3841 4035; Soi 7, Th Hat Pattaya; dishes 220-310B; 🍷) lunch & dinner) Mexican cantina meets Californian surf shack in this buzzy restaurant that dispenses Pattaya's best margaritas. It's popular with the lads from the United States navy who probably know a thing or two about a good burrito.

**Mantra** (Map p233; ☎ 0 3842 9591; Th Hat Pattaya; dishes 240-800B; 🍷) dinner Mon-Sat, brunch & dinner Sun; 🍷) Cool like a chic Shanghai bordello, Mantra's terrific bar is swathed in raw silk and the expansive dining room is draped in dark wood. The menu combines Japanese, Thai and Indian flavours, and there's a big cocktail list and more than 20 wines by the glass. Even if you don't eat there, it's worth popping in for a classy drink.

## Drinking

Despite the profusion of noisy, identikit beer bars, go-go bars and nightclubs (p240), there are still some good places for a no-strings-attached drink.

**Hopf Brew House** (Map p233; ☎ 0 3871 0650; Th Hat Pattaya 219; 🍷) 3pm-1am Sun-Fri, 4pm-2am Sat; 🍷) Moodily authentic in dark wood, the Hopf Brew House is a haven for middle-aged beer aficionados and splurging Scandinavian backpackers. A very drinkable pilsener and wheat beer are brewed on site, and both are cheaper before 8pm when the live music starts. Huge wood-fired pizzas and only slightly smaller

schnitzels are recommended to soak up the liquid hospitality.

**Gulliver's** (Map p233; ☎ 0 3871 0641; Th Hat Pattaya; 🕒 11.30am-2am; 🍷) At the northern end of Pattaya, Gulliver's has pool tables, free wi-fi internet, and a big Thai and Western menu. Before 7pm, take advantage of happy hour with discounted beer and cocktails. Outside the action spills onto tables around an ornamental pool. Don't get too close if you've had an extended happy hour.

**Green Bottles** (Map p233; ☎ 0 3842 9675; 216/6-20 Th Pattaya 2; 🕒 11am-2am; 🍷) Charming cosy and retro (you can even request your favourite songs from the band), Green Bottles has been on the scene since 1988 and is one of Pattaya's more traditional pubs. The dim lights mean it's good for easing into another night's carousing with an early evening hair of the dog.

## Entertainment

Merry-making in Pattaya, aside from the sex scene, means everything from hanging out in a video bar to dancing all night in a south Pattaya disco. The best place to start is Th Hat Pattaya. At its southern end, this main drag becomes 'Walking St' a semi-pedestrianised area with bars and clubs for every predilection. Nearby, 'Pattaya Land' encompasses Soi 1, 2 and 3 and is packed with go-go bars. The many gay bars on Soi 3 are announced by a sign reading 'Boytown'. Around Hat Dong-

tan at the northern end of Hat Jomtien there is another burgeoning gay scene.

## CLUBS & CABARETS

**Tony's** (Map p233; ☎ 0 3842 5795; www.tonydisco.com; 139/15 Walking St; admission free; 🕒 8.30pm-2.30am; 🍷) You'll either love or hate this supernova monument to nocturnal nirvana. A pumping neon-saturated disco, magic shows, karaoke and pool tables blend seamlessly with good value buffet food, strong cocktails and Tony's own beer. The following day you can even repent at Tony's own gym.

**Tiffany's** (Map p233; ☎ 0 3842 1700; www.tiffany-show.co.th; 464 Mu 9, Th Pattaya 2; admission 500-800B; 🕒 6pm; 🍷) Established in 1974, Pattaya's leading transvestite cabaret is a remarkably chaste affair, oozing old-school showbiz charm and covering the globe in a fast-paced show lasting 75 minutes. The absolutely fabulous parade of sequins, satin and surprises begins at 6pm, 7.30pm and 9pm.

**The Blues Factory** (Map p233; ☎ 0 3830 0180; www.thebluesfactorypattaya.com; Soi Lucky Star; admission free; 🕒 8.30pm; 🍷) Off Walking St, Pattaya's best venue for no-nonsense live music features at least two bands every night, and a hassle-free atmosphere just metres from the heavier hype of Walking St.

## CINEMAS

**Royal Theatre Cinema** (Map p233; ☎ 0 3842 8057; shop C30, 2nd fl, Royal Garden Plaza, Th Pattaya 2; admission 120B)

## PATTAYA VICE

Pattaya's notoriety for sex tourism revolves around the agglomeration of discos, outdoor 'beer bars' and go-go clubs making up Pattaya's red-light district at the southern end of the beach. Known as 'the village', the area attracts a large number of prostitutes, including *kàthoey* (transvestites), who pose as female hookers and ply their trade among the droves of *faràng* (Western) sex tourists. There is also a prominent gay sex-for-sale scene in Pattaya, especially at nearby Hat Dongtan. This activity is obvious to any visitor, but less overt is the shadowy and sickening child sex trade, and sadly it is not uncommon to see Western men walking with young Thai boys and girls: see also p41.

Traditionally the sex scene was focussed around 'Walking St' at the southern end of the beach, but every year a batch of new beer bars opens, especially along Sois 7, 8 and 9 to the north. A sign at the entrance to Walking St proclaims 'International Meeting Place', and they're not kidding. White prostitutes come from Romania and Moldova (favourites with male Asian sex tourists), and black male prostitutes from Nigeria (primarily servicing female sex tourists from Japan) can all be had in Pattaya. Globalisation is all too evident too with the growing influence of organised crime cartels from as far away as Russia.

Of course, prostitution is just as illegal here as elsewhere in Thailand. But with millions of baht swilling around from money laundering, drug trafficking and diamond trading, let's just say enforcement of the laws against it is cyclic at best.

Get away from the stall holders selling fake designer gear by escaping into the latest make-believe offering from Hollywood.

## Shopping

Thanon Hat Pattaya is lined with stalls selling everything from dodgy DVDs and counterfeit CDs to T-shirts and jewellery. For more serious shopping, head to the **Royal Garden Plaza** (Map p233; Th Pattaya 2; 🕒 11am-11pm).

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

**Bangkok Airways** (Map p233; ☎ 0 3841 2382; www.bangkokair.com; 75/8 Mu 9, Th Pattaya 2; 🕒 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, to noon Sat) links **U-Taphao airfield** (☎ 0 3824 5599) about 33km south of Pattaya, with Ko Samui (one way 3125B, daily) and Phuket (one way 3845B, daily).

### BUS

There are air-con buses to Pattaya from Bangkok's Eastern and Northern bus terminals (124B, two hours, every half-hour from 6am to 9pm). In Pattaya the air-con bus stop is on Th Hat Pattaya Neua, near the intersection with Th Sukhumvit. Once you reach the main Pattaya bus terminal, waiting red *sàwngthàew* will take you to the main beach road for 30B per person. Several hotels and travel agencies run minibuses to addresses within Bangkok, or east to Ko Samet and Ko Chang – the fares start at about 200B. Try **Ko Chang Business Centre** (p235) or ask at your hotel. At the time of writing a direct bus service had commenced from Bangkok's newly opened Suvarnabhumi airport and Pattaya (106B, two hours).

From Sri Racha, you can grab a public bus on Th Sukhumvit to Pattaya (30B, 30 minutes) – in Pattaya, they stop near the corner of Th Sukhumvit and Th Pattaya Neua. From here, you can flag down buses to Rayong (ordinary/air-con 60/93B, 1½ hours). The air-con buses are worth the extra cost.

### TRAIN

One train per day travels between Pattaya and Bangkok's Hualamphong station (third class 31B, 3¼ hours). It leaves Bangkok at 6.55am only on Monday to Friday. The return train departs from Pattaya at 2.20pm. Schedules for this service are subject to change, so check times at **Pattaya train station** (Map p233; ☎ 0 3842 9285) before travelling.

## Getting Around

### CAR & MOTORCYCLE

**Avis Rent-A-Car** (Map p233; ☎ 0 3836 1628; www.avisthai.com; Th Hat Pattaya Neua; 🕒 9am-5pm) has offices at the Dusit Resort.

**Holiday Rent-A-Car** (Map p233; ☎ 0 3842 6203; www.pattayacar-rent.com; Th Pattaya 2; 🕒 9am-5pm), located opposite Royal Garden Plaza, is a cheaper local company and also offers full insurance. Prices for a 1500cc Toyota Vios start at 1150B per day. Discounts are offered for longer periods.

Local travel agents offer Suzuki jeeps from around 1000B per day, but expect to pay through the nose if you have an accident.

Motorcycles cost 150B to 250B per day for a 100cc machine; a 125cc to 150cc will cost around 300B, and you'll see 750cc to 1000cc machines for hire for 500B to 1000B. There are motorcycle hire places along Th Hat Pattaya and Th Pattaya 2.

### SÀWNGTHÀEW

Locally known as 'baht buses', *sàwngthàew* cruise Th Hat Pattaya and Th Pattaya 2 frequently – just hop on, and when you get out pay 10B anywhere between Naklua and south Pattaya, or 30B for as far as Jomtien. Price lists posted in the vehicles state the maximum drivers can charge for any given journey.

Readers have complained about having taken the 10B *sàwngthàew* with local passengers and then having been charged a higher 'charter' price of 20B to 50B. Establish the correct fare in advance. Also don't board a *sàwngthàew* that is waiting empty at the side of the road, as the driver may insist you have 'chartered' the entire vehicle.

At the time of writing a system of 'tourist' minibuses was being trialled in Pattaya on three different routes. One-way tickets are 30B, with one-day passes (90B) and three days passes (180B) also available.

## RAYONG PROVINCE

### PATTAYA TO KO SAMET

From Pattaya, most travellers fast-forward down the coast to the day-time calm and occasional night-time chaos of Ko Samet. The little port of Ban Phe is the jumping-off point for the island, but a brief stop in Rayong is usually on the cards for a change of buses. If you're definitely bound for Samet, it doesn't make much sense to hang around the mainland



beaches, but if you do venture to the other strips of sand and small islands in the vicinity, you'll probably be the only Western face.

For information about travelling to and from Rayong and Ban Phe, see p249.

## Rayong

ระยอง

pop 49,000

For the traveller, the dusty strip of banks, markets and motorcycle dealerships that makes up Rayong holds few surprises. You're most likely to be here taking advantage of its location as a major transport interchange, but if you do arrive too late to secure an onward connection for a boat to Koh Samet, there are a couple of OK hotels.

### INFORMATION

**Krung Thai Bank** (Th Sukhumvit 144/53-55) One of several banks along Rayong's main drag, Th Sukhumvit, with exchange services and ATMs.

**Rayong President Hotel** (☎ 0 3861 1307; Th Sukhumvit) Has internet access (per 10 minutes 5B).

**TAT** (☎ 0 3865 5420; tatyong@tat.or.th; 153/4 Th Sukhumvit; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm) Located 7km east of Rayong on Hwy 3; a worthwhile stop if you have your own transport.

### SLEEPING & EATING

For cheap food, head to the market near the Thetsabanteung cinema or the restaurants and noodle shops along Th Taksin Maharat, just south of Wat Lum Mahachaichumphon. There's food stalls around the bus station.

**Rayong President Hotel** (☎ 0 3861 1307; Th Sukhumvit; r incl breakfast 700B; ☎) There's not much English spoken, but the welcome is friendly and it's quiet at night. From the bus station, cross to the other side of Th Sukhumvit, turn right and after three minutes' walk you'll see a sign pointing down a side street.

**Star Hotel Rayong** (☎ 0 3861 4901; www.starhotel.th.com; 109 Th Rayong Trade Center; r incl breakfast 1500B; ☎) Rayong's ritziest spot is a favourite with business and government honchos who demand a swanky four stars. The rooms are huge, and there is a bowling alley and two swimming pools. From the bus station, walk away from Th Sukhumvit, turn left at the top of the square and the hotel is on your right.

## Ban Phe

บ้านเพ

The little port of Ban Phe is only on the map thanks to its role as a launch pad for nearby

Ko Samet. However, the busy seafood markets near the ferry terminal are worth a peek, and there's a few beaches nearby that are blissfully quiet during the week and make a nice detour before or after a spell on the island.

Check email and make international calls at **Tan Tan Café** (☎ 08 1925 6713; Soi 2; per min 1B; ☎ 7.30am-7pm), down a lane opposite the ferry terminal. There's an ATM outside the 7-Eleven store opposite Christies Guesthouse. Opposite the pier, **Blue Sky Books** (☎ 0 3865 1885; Soi 1; ☎ 10am-7pm) has a good range of English language titles, arranged by genre by a true bibliophile. The array of old Lonely Planet titles is positively archaeological.

### SLEEPING

There are several hotels in Ban Phe in proximity to the pier.

**Hotel Diamond** (☎ 0 3865 1826; fax 0 3865 1757; 286/12 Mu 2; r 350-500B; ☎) The combined efforts of all three sisters will be needed before they understand you, but the welcome is friendly and the rooms clean, if a little dark. Turn left out of the ferry terminal and walk 150m down the main road. It's fine for one night if you miss the last ferry.

**Christie's Guesthouse** (☎ 0 3865 1976; fax 0 3865 2103; 280/92 Soi 1; d/tr 500/700B; ☎) With refurbished rooms and a good restaurant/bar downstairs, Christie's is the most comfortable place near the pier. With a good pizzeria and second-hand bookshop next door you might find yourself missing the ferry on purpose. Breakfast is an additional 100B and it's definitely worth it.

You can also rent one of two tidy air-con rooms at **Tan Tan Café** (☎ 08 1925 6713; Soi 2; 600B).

### EATING

**Christie's Bar & Restaurant** (☎ 0 3865 1976; 280/92 Soi 1; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) With funky tunes and friendly staff, Christie's is where you'll meet other travellers waiting for the ferry. Buy a takeaway baguette sandwich before you board the boat. At night, the bar becomes the regular drinking hole for expats in town teaching English.

**Phe Pizza** (☎ 0 3865 1885; Soi 1; pizza 180-280B; ☎ lunch & dinner) Generous toppings and authentic stringy mozzarella help to compensate for the high(ish) prices. While your pizza is being cooked, see if you can find a good mob thriller in Blue Sky Books next door.

## Around Rayong & Ban Phe

### KHAO CHAMAO/KHAO WONG NATIONAL PARK

อุทยานแห่งชาติเขาชะเมา-เขาวง

Although less than 85 sq km, **Khao Chamao/Khao Wong National Park** (☎ 0 3889 4378; reserve@dnp.go.th; admission 400B; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm) is famous for limestone mountains, high cliffs, caves, dense forest and waterfalls. Secreted in the rugged landscape are tigers, wild elephants and bears. It is inland from Ban Phe, 17km north of the Km 274 marker off Hwy 3. To get to the park, take a sawngthäew from Ban Phe to the marker for 40B, and another sawngthäew (20B) to the park.

You can stay at a camp site (per person 50B) or rent a 2-person bungalow (600B to 800B). To book, email reserve@dnp.go.th, or phone ☎ 0 2562 0760.

### ISLANDS & BEACHES

**Ko Man Klang** and **Ko Man Nok**, along with **Ko Man Nai** to the west, are part of Laem Ya/Mu Ko Samet National Park. This official status hasn't kept away all development, only moderated it. Ko Man Nai is home to the Rayong **Turtle Conservation Centre** (☎ 0 3861 6096; ☎ 9am-4pm), which is a breeding place for endangered sea turtles and has a small visitors centre that describes their life cycle. Ask at Christie's Bar & Restaurant (opposite) about visiting from Ban Phe, or join a boat tour from Ko Samet (p245).

You can also volunteer to work at the centre by contacting **Starfish Ventures** (www.starfishventures.co.uk; 2 weeks incl accommodation from £595). Activities include monitoring the progress of the turtles, releasing young turtles into the ocean and explaining the project to tourists on day trips from Ko Samet. Accommodation is in a fishing village, and every day you'll go to work in a speedboat across to Ko Man Mai. It's pretty leisurely – you'll be expected to work two to three hours per day for four days a week – and in your downtime there are good beaches nearby to explore and relax on.

**Ko Saket**, a small island near Rayong, is a 20-minute boat ride from the beach of Hat Sai Thong (turn south off Hwy 3 at the Km 208 marker).

**Suan Son** (Pine Park), 5km further down the highway from Ban Phe, is a popular place for Thai picnickers.

**Suan Wang Kaew** is 11km east of Ban Phe and has more beaches, and **Ko Thalu**, across from Suan Wang Kaew, has good diving.

Other resort areas along the Rayong coast include **Laem Mae Phim** and **Hat Sai Thong**. **Hat Mae Rampeung**, a 10km strip of sand between Ban Taphong and Ban Kon Ao (11km east of Rayong), is also part of Laem Ya/Mu Ko Samet National Park. There are relatively frequent sawngthäew to all these beaches, leaving from the eastern edge of Ban Phe. At the weekend, they are busy with weekenders Thais, but during the week you'll have them to yourself. Laem Mae Phim has the best range of options for eating and sleeping.

### SLEEPING

Ko Man Klang and Ko Man Nok offer up-market accommodation packages that include boat transport from the mainland and all meals. These can only be arranged by phone in advance through Bangkok reservation numbers.

**Ko Nok Island Resort** (Bangkok office ☎ 0 2860 3025 www.munnorkislandresort.com; packages per person 3590-4190B; ☎) On Ko Man Nok, this classy resort has one-night, two-day packages in a variety of villas. The island is 15km off Pak Nam Prasae (53km east of Ban Phe).

**Raya Island Resort** (Bangkok office ☎ 0 2316 6717; 1-night, 2-day package per person 1400B; ☎) This comfortable place has 15 bungalows and plenty of hush. It is eight kilometres off Laem Mae Phim (27km east of Ban Phe), on Ko Man Klang.

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

Public transport to the pier departure points for Ko Man Klang and Ko Man Nok can be arranged in Ban Phe. On weekends and holidays there may be sawngthäew out to the piers; otherwise charter a vehicle from the market for around 100B one way – arrange a pick-up for your return.

## KO SAMET

เกาะเสม็ด

What happens when an island blessed with 14 white-sand beaches is just half a day's travel from a Southeast Asian super city? If it's pretty Ko Samet it becomes a weekend and holiday getaway for the good people of Bangkok – locals and expats alike. Toss in the fact that the island is unusually dry (it misses the worst impact of the monsoons) and you've got the geographic equivalent of Miss Popularity. Arrive on a weekend and you may be hit with rate hikes of up to 100%, and you could be



ducking for cover from volleyballs and banana boats on certain beaches.

Ostensibly Ko Samet is a national park, but along the developed northeast coast it's hard to see where your 400B park entrance fee is being invested. The island's ecosystem is overtaxed and it is vital visitors play their part by conserving water and being mindful of rubbish.

If you're willing to venture further south, there are some undeniably gorgeous bays where development is still low-key and come with a relaxed traveller vibe. Ko Samet was originally a backpacker idyll, but accommodation is inching up the price chain, and many simple beach bungalows are being reborn as midrange or even luxury operations.

Weekends and holidays are undeniably fun, with Bangkok students fuelling the nightlife, and you're bound to leave with a whole swag of email addresses from your new Thai friends. Come on a relaxed weekday and the atmosphere will be less frantic, and you're more likely to discover what attracted the original backpackers a few short decades ago.

## History

Ko Samet won a place in Thai literature when classical Thai poet Sunthorn Phu set part of his epic *Phra Aphaimani* on its shores. The story follows the travails of a prince exiled to an undersea kingdom ruled by a lovesick female giant. A mermaid aids the prince in his escape to Ko Samet, where he defeats the giant by playing a magic flute. Formerly Ko Kaew Phitsadan or 'Vast Jewel Isle' – a reference to the abundant white sand – this island became known as Ko Samet or 'Cajeput Isle' after the cajuput tree that grows in abundance here and is highly valued as firewood throughout Southeast Asia. Locally, the *samet* tree has also been used in boat building.

## Orientation

Ko Samet is a T-shaped island. The best beaches and most development are located on the island's eastern shore. A few upmarket hotels are on the west coast, clustered around pretty Ao Prao bay. Na Dan, the island's biggest village and the terminus for the Ban Phe ferry, is on the north coast, facing the mainland. A few low-key sleeping options are on the north coast; it's nice and quiet but the beaches are not that flash.

## Information

Ko Samet is a national park and the entrance fee (adult/child 400/200B) is collected at the main National Parks office – retain your ticket for inspection.

There are three ATMs on Ko Samet, all attached to 7-Elevens. One is at the pier and the other two are near the National Parks office.

There are internet cafés on the road from Na Dan to Hat Sai Kaew; the best is Miss You Café (p248).

Around the island you can check your email at Jep's Bungalows (p246) and Naga's Bungalows (p246) in Ao Hin Hok, and at an unnamed spot at the southern end of Ao Tub Tim. All charge a steep 2B per minute.

A satellite phone for making international calls is located outside the National Parks office visitor centre.

**Ko Samet Health Centre** (☎ 0 3861 2999;

📞 8.30am-8pm Mon-Fri, to 4.30pm Sat & Sun) On the main road between Na Dan and Hat Sai Kaew.

**National Parks main office** (between Na Dan and Hat Sai Kaew) Has another office on Ao Wong Doan.

**Police station** (☎ 1155) On the main road between Na Dan and Hat Sai Kaew.

**Post office** Naga's Bungalows in Ao Hin Khok acts as the island's post office; it also has a small range of secondhand books.

**Samed Booking Center** (☎ 0 3864 4247; 📞 8.30am-5pm Mon-Fri, until noon Sat) Opposite the ferry terminal; makes transport and accommodation bookings.

**Silver Sand** (Ao Phai) Has an OK range of new books in the small, attached minimart.

## Dangers & Annoyances

Ko Samet has been malarial in the past, and while the health centre now claims to have the problem under control, the island is infested with mosquitoes. Cover up and use buckets of repellent.

Ko Samet has a big collection of stray dogs. The crusty curs can be annoying when they park themselves nearby and stare longingly at your food.

Take care on the road leading away from the beach past Sea Breeze Bungalows in Ao Phai, as travellers have reported being robbed in this area.

## Activities

Sailboards, boogie boards, inner tubes and snorkelling equipment can all be rented on the beaches at Hat Sai Kaew, Ao Hin Khok and Ao Phai. Dive operators run trips to nearby

sites; the best diving is at Hin Pholeung, halfway between Ko Samet and Ko Chang. This isolated spot is well away from destructive boat traffic and has two towering underwater rock pinnacles with excellent visibility (up to 30m). Here you can spot large pelagics like manta rays, barracuda, sharks and, if you're lucky, whale sharks.

Two reputable dive operations on the island are **Ploy Scuba Diving** in Hat Sai Kaew, and **Ao Prao Divers** (☎ 0 3864 4100-3; aoprodivers@hotmail.com), based at the Ao Prao Resort and Saikaew Villa.

## Tours

**Jimmy's Tours** (☎ 08 9832 1627) runs tours around Ko Samet and the neighbouring islands. A six-hour boat tour (10am to 4pm) of the neighbouring islets, including the Turtle Conservation Centre (p243) on Ko Man Nai costs 1000B per person (minimum group size of 10 people).

## Sleeping

Ko Samet is evolving. Luxury resorts are being built, simple bungalows are being redeveloped and prices are creeping up. Apart from the flash resorts on Ao Prao and Ao Kiu Na Nok (which charge around 15,000B for a villa), most places are around 350B for a simple bamboo hut and 2000B for an air-con bungalow.

We quote standard weekday rates, which may (it's all about supply and demand) as much as double in price during weekends and holidays. If you do turn up at the weekend, make sure you ask for the reduced weekly rate on the Monday – this reduction is often conveniently forgotten. If you come during the week, always ask for a discount. Most bungalows now provide 24-hour electricity and running water.

In the past many places did not take forward bookings, but that is changing and more places now have websites and email addresses. Note that for some of the more simple places, even if they have phones, they still may not take – or honour – bookings. Be prepared to be flexible, because your chosen accommodation may still operate on a first-come-first-served basis. There are offices and touts offering reservations in Ban Phe, but prices are inflated.

## EAST COAST

The two most developed beaches are Hat Sai Kaew and Ao Wong Deuan. Most other

beaches are still *relatively* quiet, but more resorts were under construction at the time of writing. Accommodation is listed from north to south.

## Hat Sai Kaew

Known as 'Diamond Sand', this is the island's biggest and busiest beach. The sand here is white and relatively clean, but the seafont is lined with hotels, bars and restaurants. It's a favourite for Thais from Bangkok, and at the weekends expect a cacophony of jet skis and karaoke. Accommodation is solid but can be a tad functional.

**Saikaew Villa** (☎ 0 3864 4144; r 700-2550B; ☹) Big rooms or small rooms, fan or air-con, Saikaew Villa conjures up a wide range of accommodation options amid a manicured space that (almost) goes too far with the holiday-camp atmosphere. Don't expect much privacy, but do expect food, drinks and activities all on tap.

**Tonsak Resort** (☎ 0 3864 4212; www.tonsak.com; r 2000-3000B; ☹) At first the faux Wild West log-cabin styling seems odd, but inside the bungalows feel nice'n'natural, with comfy beds and stylish bathrooms. Just metres from the beach, the bar and restaurant is the perfect spot to get your Geronimojo back with a few cocktails.

**Samed Grand View** (☎ 0 3864 4220; www.grandviewgroup.net; bungalow 2000-4000B; ☹) You're paying more for being right on the island's most popular beach, but the white bungalows in a pretty garden are clean and undeniably central. There are also fan rooms from 600 to 800B, so you can save money and spend more time terrorising the beach on a banana boat.

## Ao Hin Khok

At the south end of Hat Sai Kaew, statues of the prince and the mermaid from Sunthorn Phu's epic (see p245) gaze lovingly into each other's eyes. Ao Hin Khok begins here: a pretty stretch of sand, lined with trees and boulders. This is the island's traditional backpacker hub, and while the ambience is slowly moving upmarket, there's still loads of energy from independent travellers to make it a fun spot – especially after dark.

**Naga's Bungalows** (☎ 0 3864 4035; r 350-600B; ☹) Nowhere are Ao Hin Khok's backpacker creds more intact than at Naga's, with a range of fan rooms set into a forested hillside. Before or after a few drinks in the bar, the brave and/or

foolhardy can venture into Naga's own kick-boxing ring.

**Tok's** (☎ 0 3864 4072; r 300-800B; ☹) Same, same, but different (there are some air-con rooms at Tok's). You'll need a torch after dark to negotiate the steep hillside to the simple bungalows – especially if you've been taking part in Tok's regular drinking games.

**Jep's Bungalows** (☎ 0 3864 4112; www.jepbungalow.com; r 600B-2600; ☹) Spearheading the evolution of Ao Hin Khok, the long established Jep's offers rooms ranging from fan bungalows to air-con rooms with satellite TV. Despite the changes, a backpacker spirit lingers with nightly movies, and barbecues in the sea-front restaurant.

## Ao Phai

Around the next headland Ao Phai is another shallow bay with a wide beach, but it can get crowded during the day. After dark, there's fun aplenty.

**Silver Sand** (☎ 08 6530 2147; www.silversandresort.com; r 300-800B, d 1200-2000B; ☹) The white picket fences and manicured gardens look like a collision between *Desperate Housewives* and Disneyland, but the bungalows are clean and comfortable. Thankfully, the after-hours action in the Silver Sands bar can be a tad more disorderly.

**Samed Villa** (☎ 0 3864 4094; www.samedvilla.com; r 1800-2300B; ☹) Exceedingly pleasant bungalows are cached within a riot of tropical vegetation offering a fair degree of seclusion. Unlike some other Thai resorts, the architects allocated a substantial budget to make the inside of some of the rooms as flash as the outside.

## Ao Phutsa

Also known as Ao Tub Tim, this small and secluded beach is popular with return travellers and Bangkok expats.

**Pudsa Bungalow** (☎ 0 3864 4030; r 600-800B; ☹) The nicer bungalows near the beach are trimmed with funky driftwood, but unfortunately are right beside the main footpath from Ao Phai to Ao Phutsa. You might have to put up with overhearing inane alcohol-fuelled conversations late at night. An OK backup if Tubtim is full.

**Tubtim Resort** (☎ 0 3864 4025; www.tubtimresort.com; r 900-1600B; ☹) A range of bungalows, (air-con or cheaper ones with fans), fill a garden that's edging slowly towards jungle status. The restaurant is a good spot to dine with sand between your toes.

## Ao Nuan

This tiny beach is the most secluded place to stay without having to go to the far south of the island.

**Ao Nuan** (r 500-700B) Simple wooden bungalows are concealed among vegetation on a rocky headland, and a funky gazebo/bar/restaurant is packed with books, board games and after dark beats. There's no phone and it doesn't take reservations. Bring along your mozzie repellent.

## Ao Cho

A five-minute walk from Ao Nuan, Ao Cho is undergoing a minor renaissance with the opening of a new resort.

**Ao Cho Grand View** (☎ 0 3864 4219; www.grandviewgroup.net; d 2800B; ☹) It's a bit prim and proper and the garden is overly manicured, but there's lots of friendly smiles from the helpful staff to soften the edges and make you feel at home.

## Ao Wong Deuan

This crescent shaped bay has good nightlife with a chilled after-dark vibe, but your daytime soundtrack may be jet skis and speedboats. Ferries (70B each way) run to and from Ban Phe, with increased services at the weekend.

**Blue Sky** (☎ 08 1509 0547; r 600-800B; ☹) One of the last budget spots on Ao Wong Deuan, Blue Sky has simple bungalows set on a rocky headland. The restaurant does tasty things with seafood, and there are a few tables for romantic seaside dining.

**Samed Cabana** (☎ 08 2260 3592; pariya@hotmail.com; r 2000B) At the quieter northern end of the beach, this has chic Asian stylings, with modern accents including polished concrete floors. With private decks under well-established trees, there's seclusion here from the bar hoppers at the other end of the bay.

**Vongduern Villa** (☎ 0 3865 2300; www.vongduernvilla.com; r 1200-2500B; ☹) Sprawling along the bay's southern edge are bungalows, either near the beach or higher on the clifftop for better views. The Beach Front Bar is a sociable spot for sundowner cocktails, but romantic couples may prefer the subdued ambience of the Rock Front Restaurant.

**Vongdeuan Resort** (☎ 0 3865 1777; www.vongdeuan.com; r 2000-3500B; ☹) The prettiest (and most expensive) options are Thai-style teak houses near the beach, but the concrete bungalows

further back are comfortable, and still allow you to partake of the lush gardens. Unfortunately the staff can be a bit surly.

### Ao Thian

Better known by its English name, Candlelight Beach, Ao Thian has stretches of sand with rocky outcrops. To get here, catch a ferry to Ao Wong Deuan and walk south over the headland.

**Candlelight Beach** (☎ 08 9914 5585; bungalow 900-1200B; 🏠) On the beach, these fan and air-con bungalows have a natural, woody ambience.

**Lung Dam Apache** (☎ 08 1659 8056; bungalow 900-1200B; 🏠) These quirky bungalows look like they've been thrown together from marine debris. With a laid-back atmosphere, you may wish to become marooned for a few days yourself.

**Sang Thian Beach Resort** (☎ 0 3865 3210; www.sangthian.com; r 1500- 1800B; 🏠) There's hill-top views from these up-scale bungalows, and a cosy bar/restaurant stands sentinel above a secluded cove. Larger groups will appreciate the bigger houses – 3500B for up to six people and 4000B for up to eight people.

**Baan Thai Sang Thian Samed** (☎ 08 1305 9408; r 1800-2500B; 🏠) This new place, featuring traditional Thai architecture, represents the evolution of quiet Candlelight Beach away from its backpacker origins. Rooms are resplendent in natural wood and there's a proud heritage feel.

### Ao Wai

The southern reaches of the island are still practically untouched, with only a couple of hotels spread over as many kilometres of coastline. Lovely Ao Wai is about 1km from Ao Thian, but can be reached from Ban Phe by chartered speedboat (300B).

**Samet Ville Resort** (☎ 0 3865 1682; www.sametville.resort.com; r 980-3780B; 🏠) Under a forest canopy, it's a case of 'spot the sky' at the very secluded Samet Ville. It's a romantic spot, but if you do have a fight with your loved one, take advantage of the water sports on offer and cool off in separate kayaks for the day. At dusk, patch things up over cocktails and subdued beats in the beachfront bar. There is a huge range of different fan and air-con rooms for all budgets.

### Ao Kiu Na Nok

Further south, Ao Kiu Na Nok has the island's most upmarket accommodation.

**Paradee Resort & Spa** (☎ 0 2438 9771; www.samedresorts.com; villa 15,000B; 🏠 📺 📺) The price tag is high, but you do get your own self-contained, beachfront villa on probably Ko Samet's best beach. There's gorgeous Thai furniture, a personal swimming pool/Jacuzzi, DVD player, espresso maker – even your own butler. A speedboat from Ban Phe can be arranged – don't even think about catching the ferry. Paradee is promoted as a 'couples only' resort.

### AO PRAO

West-facing Ao Prao gets fabulous sunsets, and offers a smattering of chic hotels for the posh set. Speedboat transfers from the mainland are included (of course).

**Ao Prao Resort** (☎ 0 2438 9771; www.samedresorts.com; r from 5720B; 🏠 📺) This resort opened in the 1990s as the island's first luxury accommodation. It's holding its age well, with private bungalows cascading down a hill to the gorgeous beach. High ceilings create a spacious ambience and there is an excellent restaurant.

### Ao Noi Na

Northwest of Na Dan, the beach at Ao Noi Na is only average, but there is a refreshing solitude with a couple of good places to stay.

**Samed Resort** (☎ 08 5871 1362; www.samed-resort.com; bungalow 600-800B, camping per person 250B) Has comfy fan bungalows and a fairly raucous bar doing its best to kick start an after-hours scene away from the bright lights of the east coast.

**Baan Puu Paan** (☎ 0 3864 4095; r 1000B; 🏠) This English-run spot has a couple of stand-alone huts above the ocean at the end of a pier. Bring a big book – it's a good place to get away.

### Eating & Drinking

Most places to stay have restaurants that moonlight as bars at sunset. The food won't blow you away, but it's OK value, with Thai and Western favourites for around 80B to 130B. Most choice is on Hat Sai Kaew, Ao Hin Khok, Ao Pha and Ao Wong Deuan, but hotels on the remote stretches make sure you won't go to bed hungry. Look for nightly beach barbecues, particularly along Ao Hin Khok and Ao Phai.

Drinking-wise, many places offer nightly 'toss-a-coin' promotions. Basically heads or tails decides if you end up paying for your drink or not. Another favourite is a shared

cocktail bucket of Sangsom rum or Mekhong whiskey. Ao Wong Deuan is slightly more upmarket, but not much.

For seriously cheap eats, check out the food stalls which set up in the late afternoon on the road between Na Dan and Hat Sai Kaew.

**Safari Noodle Stand** (noodles 35B; 🍴 lunch & dinner) This mobile noodle stand plies the road between Na Dan and Ao Phai, serving up delicious meals.

**Miss You Café** (coffee 40-90B; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner; 📺 📺) Located beside the National Parks main office, this spot has 13 different kinds of coffee, and almost as many variations on cake and ice cream. Have a latté as you hitch your laptop to its wi-fi network.

**Rabeang Bar** (Na Dan; dishes 30-100B; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Right by the ferry terminal, this over the water spot has good waiting-for-the-next-boat-to-the-mainland kind of food.

**Jep's** (☎ 0 3864 4112; Ao Hin Khok; dishes 40-150B; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) With Thai, Indian, Mexican and European food, you should find something you like at this sand-between-the-toes spot that also does regular beach barbecues. If not, there are always the drinks specials that may have you imitating the scurrying squirrels in the palm trees above.

**Naga's Bar** (☎ 0 3864 4035; Ao Hin Khok; dishes 60-150B) Next door to Tok's, and same, same but slightly different, with the addition of kick-boxing bouts in its own ring.

**Tok's Little Bar** (☎ 0 3864 4072; Ao Hin Khok; dishes 60-150B) With sticks'n'straw décor, a few locals who fancy themselves as ladykillers, and nightly drinking games, you won't mistake this place for a sophisticated cocktail bar.

**Silver Sand Bar** (☎ 0 6530 2417; Ao Phai; dishes 60-180B; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) As well as a regular menu, Silver Sand offers fresh crepes (sweet and savoury), a juice bar and nightly movies. Once the movies end, the action progresses (regresses?) to cocktail buckets, and reluctant dancing to all those '80s classics you're ashamed to know the words to. There is even a burger bar to appease the midnight munchies.

**Baywatch Bar** (☎ 08 1826 7834; Ao Wong Deuan; kebabs 190-290B; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) With chill-out platforms and Asian umbrellas, this place deserves a visit from the 'Hoff' himself. There's Thai and Western food, including huge kebabs. After a couple of the robust cocktails, overcome the urge to run in slow motion down the beach. At the time of writ-

ing, Baywatch was planning to offer European cheeses, fresh bread and freshly brewed coffee for breakfast.

### Getting There & Away

#### BOAT

#### To Ko Samet

Ferries (one way/return 50/100B, 40 minutes) depart throughout the day from Ban Phe's Saphan Nuan Tip pier – opposite the 7-Eleven, where the buses and sawngthæw stop. Tickets can be bought from a small **tourist information center** (☎ 0 3889 6155; 🕒 7am-5pm) on the pier itself.

From Ban Phe, three scheduled ferries (9.30am, 1.30pm, 5pm) also make the run to Ao Wong Deuan (one way/return 70/110B, one hour). In the high season boats run to other bays if enough people show an interest. Ignore the touts that congregate around the ferry terminal, as they charge inflated prices for boat tickets and will hassle you into pre-booking expensive accommodation – just go straight to the ticket office.

Alternatively, you can charter a speedboat to any of the island's beaches. They are quite expensive (1200B to Na Dan or 1600B to Ao Wai), but they take up to 10 passengers for this price, so it's worthwhile if you're travelling in a group.

#### From Ko Samet

Ferries (one way/return 50/100B) return to Ban Phe from the pier in Na Dan hourly from 7am to 5pm – buy your ticket at the pier. There are also three scheduled ferries per day from Ao Wong Deuan (one way/return 70/110B; 8.30am, midday, 4pm).

To get off Ko Samet in a hurry, charter a speedboat. Ask at your hotel, or call **Jimmy's Tours** (☎ 08 9832 1627). Prices start at 1200B from Na Dan.

#### BUS

Air-con buses to Rayong (146B, 2½ hours, every 30 minutes) leave Bangkok's Eastern (Ekmai) bus terminal from 4am to 10pm. Air-con buses direct to Ban Phe (167B, three hours, hourly) leave Ekmai hourly from 5am to 8.30pm and return from 4am to 6.30pm. Buses to Chanthaburi from Rayong bus station cost 90B and take about 2½ hours. From Pattaya to Rayong, flag down a southbound bus near the corner of Th Sukhumvit and Th Pattaya Neua (ordinary/air-con 60/93B, 1½



bedside the river. The air-con rooms at the front are a bit noisy, so if you're happy with a fan ask for a room at the back. Downstairs is a good restaurant which does it best to overcome its proximity to the town's busiest bridge.

**Muang Chan Hotel** (☎ 0 3932 1073; fax 0 3932 7244; Th Si Chan 257-259; r 230-600B; 🍽️) Grey and labyrinthine from the outside, but relatively clean and quiet inside, this is an OK backup if River Guest House is full.

**KP Grand Hotel** (☎ 0 3932 3201; www.kpgrandhotel.com; 35/200-201 Th Trirat; r incl breakfast 1200B; 🍽️) In reception the air-con is cranked up to cryogenic levels, and there are enough faux chandeliers to seriously challenge the bling bartering the town's known for. Rooms are spacious and comfortable; proof your baht goes further off the tourist trail.

**Kasemsarn Hotel** (☎ 0 3931 1100; kasemsarnhotel@yahoo.com; Th Benchamarachutit 98/1; r 1300-1500B; 🍽️) This renovated hotel in the town centre drips designer Asian cool in reception, but the rooms are more functional. With discounts of up to 45% during the week it's still good value – even if you lose your shirt in a dodgy gem deal.

## Eating

To try the famous Chanthaburi *küaytiaw sên jan* (noodles), head for the Chinese-Vietnamese part of town along Mae Nam Chanthaburi where you'll see variations on the basic rice-noodle theme, including delicious crab with fried noodles. You'll find food stalls around the gem trading area. Fruit harvested locally is famous throughout Thailand. Get to the market early for the best selection.

**Bakery** (33-35 Th Saritidet; coffee 30B, snacks 15-30B; 🍞 breakfast, lunch & dinner) This popular spot up the road from the bus station is especially good for breakfast. Combine an iced coffee with a coconut bun filled with creamy sweet corn. Trust us – it's a winning combination of sweet and savoury.

**Sony Yadaw** (Th Si Chan; dishes 30-100B; 🍽️ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Many Indian and Sri Lankan gem dealers come to Chanthaburi to trade, and this tiny hole-in-the-wall vegetarian restaurant is their home away from home. Luckily the friendly Indian owner will also sell you a Heineken, so you don't have to be too healthy and righteous.

**Chanthorn Phochana** (☎ 0 3931 2339; Th Benchamarachutit 102/5-8; dishes 30-120B; 🍽️ breakfast, lunch & dinner) A dazzling array of Thai and Chinese

meals includes such specialities as stir-fried papaya and local mangosteen wine. Try the Vietnamese spring rolls, and buy a bag of a local durian chips (tastier than you think) for your next bus ride.

## Getting There & Away

Buses operate between Chanthaburi and Bangkok's Eastern bus terminal (187B, 4½ hours) every half hour throughout the day and less frequently at night. Buses also travel to Rayong (90B, 2½ hours, five daily) and Trat (70B, 1½ hours, hourly).

If you have your own set of wheels, take Rte 317 north to Sa Kaew, then along Hwy 33 west to Kabinburi and Rte 304 north to Khorat. From Sa Kaew you can head eastwards and reach Aranya Prathet on the Thailand-Cambodia border after 46km. From this border crossing you can take a share taxi from Poipet on the Cambodian side of the border to Siem Reap (near Angkor Wat).

## AROUND CHANTHABURI

Two small national parks are within an hour's drive of Chanthaburi. Both are malarial, so take the usual precautions.

**Khao Khitchakut National Park** (☎ 0 3945 2074; reserve@dnp.go.th; admission 400B; 🕒 8.30am-4.30pm) is 28km northeast of town off Rte 3249 and is known for Nam Tok Krathing waterfall. It's one of Thailand's smallest national parks (59 sq km) although the unprotected forest surrounding the park is much larger and is said to harbour herds of wild elephants. There's a series of trails to the falls nearest the park headquarters, but visitors are discouraged from going deeper into the forest without being accompanied by a ranger.

Park **accommodation** (reserve@dnp.go.th; ☎ 0 2562 0760) is available in a camp site (50B per person) or in a 2-person bungalow (600B per room). Phone or email ahead for bookings.

To get to Khao Khitchakut by public transport, take a *sáwngháew* from the northern side of the market in Chanthaburi (40B, 45 minutes). The *sáwngháew* stops 1.5km from the park headquarters on Rte 3249, from which point you'll have to walk.

**Nam Tok Phlio National Park** (☎ 0 3943 4528; reserve@dnp.go.th; admission 400B; 🕒 8.30am-4.30pm), off Hwy 3, is 14km to the southeast of Chanthaburi and features many waterfalls, Phra Nang Ruar Lom stupa (c 1876) and the Along Khon *chedi* (c 1881).

Accommodation is available in a camp site (site 10B, plus 50B per person) or in a 6-person bungalow (1800B per room). Phone or email **park reservations** (reserve@dnp.go.th; ☎ 0 2562 0760) for bookings.

To get to the park, catch a *sáwngháew* from the northern side of the market in Chanthaburi to the park entrance (30B, 30 minutes).

The River Guest House (p251) is a good source of up-to-date information on the two border crossings.

## TRAT PROVINCE

In Trat Province, gem trading is a favoured method of putting rice on the table – unsurprisingly, *tàlào phloi* (gem markets) abound. A by-product of this gem mining has been the destruction of vast tracts of land, as the topsoil is stripped away, leaving hectares of red-orange mud.

But there's plenty more to fire your imagination. Before you head to the beaches of rugged Ko Chang or its more delicate and

subdued island neighbours, linger in the traditional riverside ambience of Trat. If you're in no hurry to travel west to Cambodia, then relax on the expansive beaches that run lazily down the coast to the border. Hat Sai Si Ngoen, Hat Sai Kaew, Hat Thap Thim and Hat Ban Cheun are all worth a look.

At the Km 70 marker, off Rte 318, is *Jut Chom Wiw* (Lookout Point), where you can survey the surrounding area, including Cambodia. Trat Province's southeasternmost point is Hat Lek, the transit point for trips along the Cambodian coast.

## TRAT

ตราด

pop 23,000

For too many travellers, all they see of Trat is the shiny new bus station before they are shunted onto a *sáwngháew* to the Ko Chang ferry, or a minibus west to the Cambodian border at Hat Lek.

But if you linger for at least a night, the town's relaxed appeal takes hold. Meandering pedestrian alleys are lined with century-old teak houses filled with traveller friendly guesthouses and restaurants, and you'll spend longer than you realise at the bustling markets.

If you're heading to Ko Chang, ignore the touts at the bus station advising you to hurry to catch the 'last ferry' to the island. If you do catch the last ferry, then expect the cost of your *sáwngháew* from the pier in Ko Chang to be inflated. With Trat's guesthouses such good value, you're better off staying at least one night (don't miss the night market) and continuing your journey in the morning.

## Orientation & Information

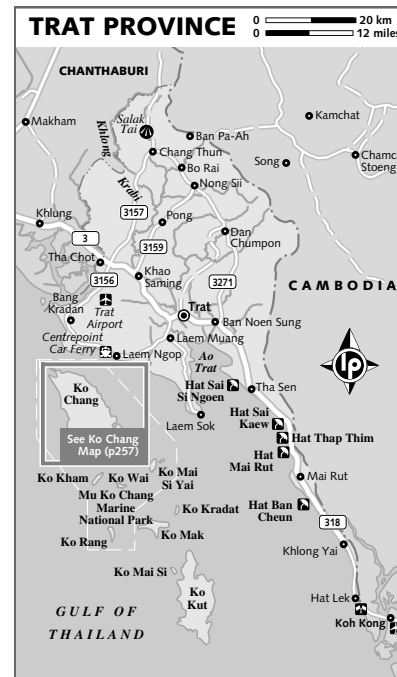
Across the lane from Tratosphere Books is Wan Laundry, if you need to get spruced up before heading to Ko Chang. It can turn a load around in three hours for 30B per kilo.

Trat's new bus station is around 1.5km north of the centre of town. A *sáwngháew* or motorbike taxi to the guesthouse area will cost around 20B.

**Bangkok Trat Hospital** (☎ 0 3953 2735; Th Sukhumvit; 🕒 24hr) Best health care in the region. It's 400m north of the town centre.

**Koh Chang New Travel Agency** (☎ 0 3953 1135; Th Sukhumvit; 🕒 8am-5pm)

**Krung Thai Bank** (Th Sukhumvit) Has an ATM and currency-exchange facilities.





### HAT LEK & LAEM NGOP

Direct minibuses from Trat to Hat Lek (110B, one hour) leave every 45 minutes from the bus station. Sǎwngthǎew (50B) also trundle from the bus station to Hat Lek, but you will have to wait for enough people to show up.

Sǎwngthǎew for Laem Ngop and Centrepoint Pier (40B to 60B) leave Trat from a stand on Th Sukhumvit, next to the municipal shopping centre market, and also from the bus station. They depart regularly throughout the day, but after dark you will have to charter one (250B).

### Getting Around

Sǎamlǎw (three-wheeled pedicabs) around town should cost 15B per person.

### AROUND TRAT Beaches

The sliver of Trat Province that extends southeast along the Cambodian border is fringed by several Gulf of Thailand beaches. **Hat Sai Si Ngoen** (Silver Sand Beach) lies just north of the Km 41 marker off Hwy 3. Nearby, at the Km 42 marker, is **Hat Sai Kaew** (Crystal Sand Beach) and at the Km 48 marker, **Hat Thap Thim** (also known as Hat Lan); they're OK to walk along the water's edge or picnic in the shade of casuarina and eucalyptus trees. The only place for accommodation here is the **Sun Sapha Kachat Thai** (Thai Red Cross; ☎ 0 3950 1015; r 800B), which has comfortable bungalows with all the usual amenities and a restaurant.

There is accommodation at **Hat Ban Cheun**, a long stretch of clean sand near the Km 63 marker. The 6km road that leads to the beach passes a defunct Cambodian refugee camp. There are casuarina and eucalyptus trees, a small restaurant and basic bungalows (300B) set on swampy land behind the beach.

### Laem Ngop

เลียมงอปก

Laem Ngop is the jumping-off point for Ko Chang (see p267). **TAT** (☎ 0 3959 7259; tattrat@tat.or.th; 100 Mu 1, Th Trat-Laem Ngop; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm) has an information office right near the pier. Further north on the road to Trat there is an **immigration office** (☎ 0 3959 7261; Th Trat-Laem Ngop; ☎ 8.30am-noon & 1-4.30pm Mon-Fri), where you can apply for visa extensions.

Between the two, **Kasikornbank** (Th Trat-Laem Ngop) has an exchange counter.

### SLEEPING & EATING

There's usually no reason to stay here, as there are regular boats to Ko Chang during the day and Trat is only 20km away. If you do get stuck, try **Laem Ngop Inn** (☎ 0 3959 7044; s/d 300/600B; ☎), with a choice of simple air-con and fan rooms. It's a five- to seven- minute walk on the road to Trat.

Near the pier in Laem Ngop are several seafood  **eateries** with views of the sea and islands.

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

Sǎwngthǎew for Laem Ngop and Centrepoint Pier (40B to 60B) leave Trat from a stand on Th Sukhumvit next to the municipal shopping centre market, and also from the bus station. They depart regularly throughout the day, but after dark you will have to charter one (around 250B). From Bangkok there are two buses per day at 7.30am and 9.30am from Bangkok's Eastern bus terminal direct to the Centrepoint Pier (250B, six hours). Many travel agencies in Bangkok also advertise VIP buses (480B, 5½ hours) direct to the pier which have the (expensive) advantage of more legroom and a pick-up from your accommodation in the capital. Travel agents at Tha Laem Ngop arrange a daily 11am minibus to Th Khao San in Bangkok (250B to 300B, 5½ hours), a 1pm minibus to Pattaya (350B, four hours) and 11am and 1pm minibuses to Ban Phe for Ko Samet (300B, 2½ hours).

### HAT LEK TO CAMBODIA

The small Thai border outpost of **Hat Lek** is the southernmost part on the Trat mainland. There's not much here apart from a small market just before the border crossing, and loads of touts to guide you through border protocols.

Motorcycle and automobile taxis are available from Hat Lek into Cambodia for 50B. There is accommodation on the island of Krong Koh Kong in Cambodia, but little to keep you there. If you plan to continue further, you can embark on a four-hour boat ride (US\$15) to Sihanoukville. There is only one boat per day to Sihanoukville and it leaves at 8am, so if you don't get across the border early you'll have to spend a night on Koh Kong. Basically, if you want to get from Trat to Sihanoukville in one day on the boat, you should be on the 6am minibus to Hat Lek and at the border with passport in hand as soon as it opens at 7am. From Koh Kong, there are

also minibuses that go to Sihanoukville (550B) and Phnom Penh (650B); both leave at 9am.

Cambodian tourist visas (1200B) are available at the border (bring a passport photo), but you should check with the Cambodian embassy in Bangkok before heading out there. Despite Cambodian tourist visas costing US\$20 at other borders, payment is only accepted in baht (1200B) at this border. If you try and debate the issue, be prepared for a frustrating time.

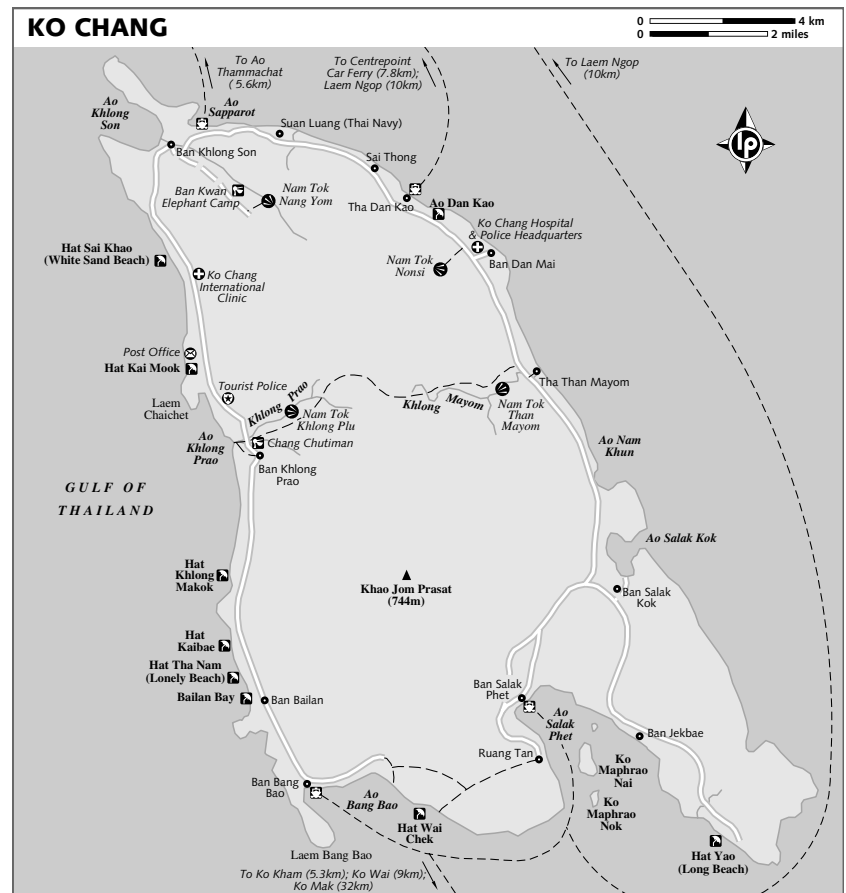
If you are going into Cambodia for a day trip, you may need a valid Thai visa to return to Thailand. Nowadays Thailand grants most nationalities a one-month visa on arrival. If your nationality is not on the instant-visa list, you will find yourself stuck in Cambodia. This border crossing closes at 8pm.

See p255 for transport information to Hat Lek.

### KO CHANG & AROUND

อุทยานแห่งชาติเกาะช้าง

Rising like a rugged, verdant leviathan from the waters near Cambodia, Ko Chang is fast becoming an essential stop on the Thai tourist trail. Earmarked as the 'next Phuket' a few short years ago, development has transformed swathes of the island's west coast and expansion is now beginning to stud other more isolated areas of Thailand's second largest island. But escape to Ko Chang's mountainous interior and you'll find a lost world of rugged waterfalls and impenetrable jungle filled with a Noah's ark of wildlife, including stump-tailed





macaques, small Indian civets and reticulated pythons. Emerge from the forest and you'll reach isolated lookouts which gaze down on beaches just made for wannabe Crusoes. And if your time on other Thai islands has included just a few too many days laying on the beach, on Ko Chang you can get nicely active and brush off any holiday cobwebs.

After all that honest exercise, recharge in an increasingly cosmopolitan range of bars and restaurants, and relax in accommodation that stretches from basic beach bungalows to luxury five-star resorts. Each of Ko Chang's beaches has a different style, from the family-friendly ambience of Hat Sai Khao and Hat Kai Mook, to the perfect party vibe of Lonely Beach (Hat Tha Nam). And while it's true that finding a pristine stretch of sand on Ko Chang is becoming more difficult, with a bit of time and travellers' get-up-and-go it's still possible.

After Ko Chang, move on to the other nearby islands of the Mu Ko Chang National Marine Park. You'll find less to do on gorgeous islands like Ko Kut, Ko Mak and Ko Wai, but after a few days of combining Ko Chang's catalogue of outdoor pursuits with late night cocktails and beachside barbecues, you'll probably need a rest anyway.

## Orientation

The **national park** (☎ 0 3955 5080; entry fee 400B; reserve@dnp.go.th; ☹ 8am-5pm) is divided into four units, with offices at Ban Khlong Son, Tha Than Mayom, just west of Nam Tok Khlong Plu and Ban Salak Phet. Entry fees are collected at any one of the four park offices. Keep your receipt as rangers may demand payment from visitors who don't have one.

Only the western coast has been developed for significant tourism and 75% of the island remains untouched rainforest. The paved road down the west coast is a measure of Ko Chang's ongoing development. A few years ago it only reached Lonely Beach; at the moment it extends to Bang Bao, but plans to circle the island are in the pipeline. At the time of writing, the latest rumour involved a tunnel. Don't hold your breath though.

The northern Hat Sai Khao is the longest beach strip and packs in the most accommodation, bars and restaurants per kilometre. Just further south, Hat Kai Mook is a quieter alternative with good-value, family-oriented places to stay. Ao Khlong Phrao sits around a rocky headland from Hat Kai Mook and focuses on

more up-market digs, while Hat Kaibae, further south, is transitioning between a laid-back beach setting and a bustling tourist centre.

The fast developing Lonely Beach needs a new English name, and is the island's centre for nightlife for younger travellers. However, there are still quieter bays with relatively deserted beaches just north and south of Lonely Beach's nocturnal fun. Bang Bao is a small fishing settlement in the far south with several places to stay, good seafood restaurants and a busy pier with dive shops, boat transport companies and souvenir shops. Development is impending and, at the time of writing, a luxury condominium and golf complex were planned for near Bang Bao.

The east coast is largely undeveloped with only a few low-key resorts. Hat Yao (Long Beach) is one of the island's best beaches and at the time of writing development was restricted to just two simple bungalow operations. However with a paved road now going all the way to Hat Yao, this will most likely change in the lifetime of this book. Ao Salak Phet in the southeast of the island has a fishing village atmosphere and features good seafood restaurants, with a few quiet places to stay perched above the water.

## Information

### EMERGENCY

**Police station** (☎ 0 3958 6191; Ban Dan Mai)

**Tourist Police office** (☎ 0 3957 7255, emergency 1155) Based in Ban Khlong Prao. Also has smaller police boxes in Hat Sai Khao and Hat Kaibae.

### INTERNET ACCESS

Internet access is easy to find all the way down the west coast. Expect to pay 2B per minute. **Earthlink** (Hat Sai Khao; per min 2B; ☹ 10.30am-11pm) For cool coffees at the northern end of Hat Sai Khao. Also provides wi-fi access.

### MEDICAL SERVICES

**Ko Chang Hospital** (☎ 0 3952 1657; Ban Dan Mai) Just south of the main ferry terminal.

**Ko Chang International Clinic** (☎ 0 1863 3609; www.kochanginterclinic.com; Hat Sai Khao; ☹ 24hr during high season) Related to the Bangkok Hospital Group and can handle most minor emergencies.

### MONEY

There are banks with ATMs and exchange facilities along Hat Sai Khao, and ATMs at all the west coast beaches.

## POST

**Ko Chang post office** (☎ 0 3955 1240; Hat Sai Khao) At the far southern end of Hat Sai Khao.

## TOURIST INFORMATION

The nearest tourist office is in Laem Ngop (p256). The free magazine *Koh Chang, Trat & The Eastern Islands* (www.whitesandsthai.land.com), which comes out quarterly, is widely available on the island and is packed with useful listings and tips. Its website is an excellent resource for pre-trip planning. It also publishes a Koh Chang Restaurants & Bars guide.

A comprehensive website for booking accommodation is www.koh-chang.com, while www.iamkohchang.com is a labour of love from an irreverent Brit living on the island. His 'KC Essentials A-Z' section is jam-packed with opinion and information.

## Dangers & Annoyances

The western beaches are often posted with warnings about dangerous riptides and undercurrents during the monsoon (May to September). If a beach has such a warning, don't go in above your knees. Lonely Beach, Hat Sai Khao and Ao Khlong Phrao have suffered several fatalities in recent years.

The police conduct regular drug raids on the island's accommodation. If you get caught with narcotics, you could face heavy fines or imprisonment.

Although the island's ring road is now paved, roads are very steep with several hairpin turns. Don't ride a motorbike unless you're experienced.

## Activities

### COURSES

The **Koh Chang Thai Cookery School** (☎ 08 1940 0649; www.kochangcookery.com; Ao Khlong Prao) at the Blue Lagoon Resort (p262) offers fun cookery courses for those wanting to re-create their favourite tastes once they get home. Five-hour courses cost 1000B and you can expect to learn four recipes per visit. Book ahead.

### COVER UP ON KO CHANG

Nudity and topless sunbathing are forbidden by law in Mu Ko Chang Marine National Park; this includes all beaches on Ko Chang, Ko Kut, Ko Mak, Ko Kradat etc.

**Jungle Way** (p262; www.jungleway.com) offers tuition in the subtle art of reiki (Japanese healing). Week-long courses held in a relaxed forest setting cost 4500B. At the time of writing Jungle Way were also planning courses in Thai massage.

If you wish to learn a new discipline in a lagoon-side setting, head to **Baan Zen** (☎ 08 6530 9354; www.explorakohchang.com/Baan\_Zen/index.html; Ao Khlong Prao) on the lagoon at Ao Khlong Prao. In a breezy pavilion beside the water, courses are held in yoga and natural healing techniques (weekend course 4000B, three-day course 5500B).

If learning a new skill isn't a priority, both Jungle Way and Baan Zen also offer regular sessions in yoga, massage and natural healing.

## DIVING & SNORKELLING

The seamounts off the southern tip of the island stretch between Ko Chang and Ko Kut, offering a new frontier of diving opportunities in Thailand. **Hin Luk Bat** and **Hin Lap**, rocky, coral-encrusted seamounts with depths of around 18m to 20m, are havens for schooling fish. Both **Hin Phrai Nam** and **Hin Gadeng** (between Ko Wai and Ko Rang) are formed by spectacular rock pinnacles and have coral visible to around 28m. Southwest of Ao Salak Phet, reef-fringed **Ko Wai** features a good variety of colourful hard and soft corals at depths of 6m to 15m.

But by far the best diving is around **Ko Rang**. Protected from fishing by its marine park status, this place has some of the most pristine coral in Thailand. Visibility here is much better than near Ko Chang and averages between 10m and 20m. In the area, **Ko Yak** and **Ko Laun** are both shallow dives perfect for beginners and advanced divers. These two small rocky islands can be circumnavigated and have lots of coral, schooling fish, puffer fish, morays, barracuda, rays and the occasional turtle. **Hin Kuak Maa** (also known as Three Finger Reef) is probably the top dive and is home to a coral-encrusted wall sloping from 2m to 14m and attracting swarms of marine life.

Fun diving trips typically include two dives with all guiding, transport, equipment and food, and cost around 3500B. PADI Open Water certification costs 11,500B per person.

Many dive shops close during the off season as visibility and sea conditions can be poor. The following are some of the more popular dive shops:

**BB Divers** (☎ 0 3955 8040; www.bbdivers.com) Based at Tha Ban Bang Bao.

**Ploy Scuba Diving** (☎ 08 1451 1387; www.ployscuba.com) Has a shop on all the major west coast beaches and also on Ko Wai, Ko Mak and Ko Kut; the main office is at Tha Ban Bang Bao.

### ELEPHANT TREKKING

There are several elephant camps on Ko Chang where you can get up close and personal with former working elephants. Of these, **Ban Kwan Elephant Camp** (☎ 08 1919 3995; changtone@yahoo.com; ☎ 8.30am-5pm), near Ban Khlong Son, is the best. In a beautiful setting the owner stresses the importance of seeing elephants in the wild, and he delivers informative and educational programmes. A 1½-hour 'experience', involving feeding, bathing and an elephant ride, costs 900B; a 40-minute ride costs 500B.

**Chang Chutiman** (☎ 08 9939 6676; Ban Khlong Prao; ☎ 8am-5pm) offers a similar deal in a less dramatic setting. A one-hour ride costs 500B; two hours cost 900B. Kids under five ride free. It's in Ban Khlong Prao, opposite Blue Lagoon Resort (p262).

Transfers are included in these prices, but make sure you book in advance. Most places to stay can arrange these treks with a day's notice.

### HIKING

A combination of steep terrain and year-round streams creates scenic waterfalls. A series of three falls along the stream of Khlong Mayom in the interior of the island, **Nam Tok Than Mayom** (park fee 400B; ☎ 8am-5pm) can be reached via Tha Than Mayom or Ban Dan Mai on the east coast. The view from the top is superb and nearby there are inscribed stones bearing the initials of Rama V, Rama VI and Rama VII.

**Nam Tok Khlong Plu** (park fee 400B; ☎ 8am-5pm), another impressive fall, is easily accessible from Ao Khlong Phrao on the western coast. Set amid striking jungle scenery, the fall is quickly reached by walking 600m along a well-marked, lush, jungle path. There's a pool to cool off in after your mini-adventure.

At the southeastern end of Ao Bang Bao, around the headland that leads to Ao Salak Phet, is a beautiful and secluded beach, **Hat Wai Chek**. Don't try hiking all the way from Bang Bao to Ao Salak Phet unless you're an experienced tropical hiker with moderate orienteering skills – there are a lot of hills and many interconnecting, unmarked trails.

If you don't get lost, this rewarding hike will take four to six hours. Should you decide to attempt it, carry enough food and water for an overnight stay. If you do get lost, climb the nearest hill and try to locate the sea or a stream to get your bearings. Following any stream will usually take you either to a village or to the sea. Then you can follow the coast or ask directions.

The ranger stations around the island aren't very useful for solo trekkers, but you can arrange guides at **Evolution Tour** (☎ 0 3955 7078; www.evolutiontour.com; Khlong Prao). Lek from **Jungle Way** (p262) runs one-day (800B) and two-day (950B) treks into the island's interior. The one-day Chang Noi peninsula trek in the island's north is recommended if you're after some serious exercise. Mr Rahit from **Kongoi Trekking** (☎ 08 9763 0832) runs treks (six hours, 500B) in the rugged and largely untouched south of the island. Birdwatchers should contact the **Trekkers of Koh Chang** (☎ 08 1578 7513) who run one-day and two-day trips (1200B to 2000B) into the national park.

### KAYAKING

The **Salak Kok Kayak Station** (☎ 08 1919 3995; Ban Salak Kok), in a traditional stilt village in the island's southeast, hires kayaks for viewing the mangrove-forested bay. Kayak rental for one hour costs 100B and a 90-minute guided tour is 200B. It also runs a three-hour 'dinner cruise' (1200B per person) where you're guided through the mangroves at sunset while dining on home-cooked food.

Nearby a raised concrete walkway wends its way through the mangroves. It's not the most attractive construction, but it does immerse you in this fascinating ecosystem.

### OTHER ACTIVITIES

Some of the guesthouses at Hat Sai Khao, Hat Kai Mook and Hat Kaibae rent out kayaks, sailboards, masks and snorkels, and boogie boards. Mountain bikes can be rented for 150B per day at several places on the island, most of which are located at Hat Sai Khao and Hat Kaibae. You can also organise day trips (200B to 1000B) and overnight trips (1500B to 2000B) to nearby islands from most accommodation places.

**Bailan Herbal Sauna** (☎ 08 6252 4744; Bailan Beach; ☎ 4-9pm) has a round adobe sauna set amid lush greenery where you can get healthy with different herbal concoctions for 100B. Bailan

also offers massage (300B) and facial treatments (40B to 60B). Cool down afterwards in the juice bar.

### VOLUNTEERING

You'll probably notice fewer stray animals on Ko Chang compared to other places in Thailand. This is due to the efforts of the **Koh Chang Animal Foundation** (☎ 08 9042 2347; www.kochanganimalfoundation.org; Ban Khlong Son), established in 2000 by American Lisa McAlonie. The foundation is funded entirely by donations, offers free-of-charge vet services to the people of Ko Chang, and provides refuge and treatment for stray animals around the island. Volunteer visits by travelling vets and veterinarian nurses are particularly appreciated, but the foundation also welcomes day visits from anyone who loves animals and wants to donate a bit of TLC to help bathe and socialise abused animals. As well as furry cuddles on tap, you'll also get lunch.

### Sleeping

As developers continue to have Ko Chang in their sights, you're likely to see more snazzy sleeping options opening up in the years to come. Indeed, when we visited many new resorts were being built. Rustic backpacker bungalows are far from gone, however, and the resulting mix of accommodation should please all tastes. Most development has been limited to the west coast, where you will find nearly all the sleeping and eating facilities. Beaches further south tend to be quieter and are generally more popular with those looking for the laid-back life. Ko Chang is also seeing a growth in package tourists from Europe, and remains very popular with Thai visitors on weekends and public holidays.

A few places close down during the wet season (April to October), during which time boats will usually go only as far as Ao Sapparat and Tha Dan Kao. Note that the surf further south along the east coast can be impassable during heavy rains.

The following are high season prices; expect discounts of up to 40% from April to October. Traditionally it has been difficult to book accommodation in advance, but many places now offer websites and email addresses. During peak season (November to March), weekends and major holidays, booking ahead is recommended as the island fills up quickly.

Accommodation is listed from north to south.

### Ban Khlong Son

At the northern tip of the island is the largest village, Ban Khlong Son, which has a network of piers at the mouth of the *khlawng* (canal; also spelt *khlong*), a wat, a school, several noodle shops, a health clinic and an ATM.

**Jungle Way** (☎ 08 9223 4795; www.jungleway.com; bungalow 250-400B) Four bungalows and a funky restaurant with a wildlife viewing platform are tucked into the jungle near the Ban Kwan Chang Elephant Camp. You're nowhere near the beach, but there's trekking on offer (opposite), and you can also take part in healing and massage classes (p259).

### Hat Sai Khao

The long beach at Hat Sai Khao is not the island's best, but a wide range of eating and sleeping options, and a lively nightlife keep it popular. Over the last few years, more package tourists are staying here, keeping the prices of accommodation higher than elsewhere on the island.

**Tantawan** (☎ 0 3955 1168; r 500B) The red-brick bungalows are a bit garish, but with Jack's Tattooing on site, and nightly performances from the Sticky Rice Blues Band, Tantawan lives and breathes its friendly backpacker vibe.

**Top Resort** (☎ 0 3955 1364; www.topresort-koh-chang.com; r incl breakfast 1440B; ☎) Atop the cliff at the southern end of the beach, this German-run spot has spotless rooms, and a quirky garden with fish ponds and bird cages. For families there are good value, larger stand-alone bungalows (2960B) with kitchen and laundry facilities.

**Logan's Place** (☎ 0 3955 1451; www.logansthailand.com; r 1800B; ☎) Cool and crisp Scandinavian décor and service features in this Swedish-run boutique hotel across the road from the beach. While you feel like you're sitting in an IKEA catalogue, you can grab a bite to eat at Heli's Kitchen downstairs.

**Cookies Hotel** (☎ 0 3955 1056; www.fly.to/cookieshotel; Hat Sai Khao; r 1800-2800B; ☎) In Ko Chang's backpacker days, Cookies offered simple beachside huts. Now they've progressed to two grand buildings straddling the main beach road. You'll pay about half as much again on the beach side, but the rooms in the low-slung building are nicer than across the road. On the beachside is a new pool and bar.

**KC Grande Resort** (☎ 0 3955 1199; www.kcresortkohchang.com; r 500-3600B; 📶 📺 🛏) Gradually this long established place at the northern end of Hat Sai Khao is moving upmarket. The cheapest bungalows now cost 500B, and a pool has been added. Unfortunately, the original rustic charm of this spot has been diluted and the atmosphere is now a bit like a holiday camp. Still, if you're attracted to the nearby nightlife it's a very handy location and there is a big range of rooms.

Next door to the Tantawan, **Sang Arun Resort** and **Bamboo Resort** offer similar ambience at a similar cost, but with fewer red bricks.

### Hat Kai Mook

Laid-back Hat Kai Mook (Pearl Beach) is a quieter alternative to Hat Sai Khao and features mostly midrange accommodation. Most places are on the small, rocky beach and away from the busy main road.

**Paradise Palms** (☎ 08 9094 6023; www.paradisepalmsresort.net; bungalow 1299B; 📶 📺 🛏) The first place on Hat Kai Mook (the beach is actually named after the owners' daughter Muksuda), the Thai/British owned Paradise Palms has spotless bungalows with air-con and satellite TV. There's good snorkelling off the rocks and it even throws in free use of a motorbike for their guests.

**Penny's Bungalow Resort** (☎ 08 1595 9750; www.penny-thailand.com; r incl breakfast 1500B; 📶 📺 🛏) To make room for the pool, the bungalows are a bit close together, but this is still a well run and quiet option a short ride from the brighter lights of Hat Sai Khao. Families will get good value from the larger four-person bungalow (2600B).

**Saffron on the Sea** (☎ 0 3955 1253; Hat Kai Mook; r 1500-1800B; 📶) Owned by an arty escapee from the hectic streets of Bangkok, this friendly boutique guesthouse has a deliciously bohemian ambience. After a few relaxing hours in the hammocks and gazebos, you'll be phoning work to tell them you won't be coming in next month (or maybe even next year). Bathrooms are especially funky.

**Remark Cottages** (☎ 0 3955 1261; www.remarkcotage.com; bungalow 2000-3300B; 📶) A wonderfully overgrown garden conceals 15 Balinese-style bungalows which look simple at first, but are actually accented with interesting design details. Relax in the wooden spa pool or treat yourself with a course of shower spray therapy. File under green and serene.

### Ao Khlong Prao

About 4km south of Hat Sai Khao, Ao Khlong Prao is developing as the island's luxury hub, but a few affordable places remain.

**Blue Lagoon Resort** (☎ 08 1940 0649; www.kohchangcoookery.com; Ao Khlong Prao; r600-1000B; 📶) Simple wooden bungalows with private decks sit right above the water, and further back air-con concrete bungalows lie in a shady grove. A wooden walkway leads to the beach. The other reason to come here is to attend a Thai cooking class (p259), so you can be sure the restaurant's food will be great.

**Aana** (☎ 0 3955 1539; www.aanarsort.com; r 3500-7000B; 📶 📺 🛏) With interesting angles and crisp whitewashed décor, the Aana throws away the rule book for tropical resort design, and comes up with something fresh and unique. The rooms are effortlessly romantic with spacious bathrooms, top-class bed linen and softly spinning ceiling fans. With a secluded location overlooking the Khlong Prao river, two swimming pools and personal Jacuzzis, this is one of the island's best.

**Tropicana** (☎ 0 3955 7122; www.kochangtropicana.com; r 5200-7200; 📶 📺 🛏) More traditional in design than the Aana Resort (but no less flash) the Tropicana fits 77 individual bungalows into grounds criss-crossed by lush gardens, bridges and fish ponds. The pool is a beachside stunner, and the spacious rooms maintain a natural feel with high ceilings, wooden floors and 'stay-in-the-shower-all-day' outdoor bathrooms.

### Hat Kaibae

South of the lagoon, Hat Kaibae is a rapidly expanding scene of midrange places and former backpacker spots moving upmarket. In the high season there are bad traffic jams (especially at weekends) as traffic squeezes through the narrow main road. At the time of writing, there were plans to build a much-needed bypass road.

**Kaibae Beach** (☎ 0 3955 7132; www.kaibaebeach.com; r 700-1800B; 📶) Choose between simple wooden fan bungalows or concrete (but well designed) air-con ones. A sea view costs an extra 300B, but we reckon you should save your money and spend up large in the open-air restaurant. Nightly barbecues are a good place to start.

**Garden Resort** (☎ 0 3955 7260; www.gardenresortkohchang.com; r 1200-2100B; 📶 📺 🛏) In a quiet location off the busy main road, Garden Resort has individually decorated bungalows,

in-room internet access and the biggest big screen TV you'll ever see in reception. When we visited, the hole that was to become its new swimming pool was filling gently with the monsoon rains. We're pretty sure it will be finished by the time you read this.

**KB Resort** (☎ 0 1862 8103; www.kbresort.com; r 1150-2600B; 📶) Another backpacker fave that is creeping upmarket, KB Bungalows has relaunched as KB Resort with higher prices, a wider range of rooms and nightly barbecues at the over-water restaurant. Décor and design are very nice, but everything is a tad overpriced. Welcome to the future of Ko Chang.

### Lonely Beach (Hat Tha Nam) & Bailan Bay

South from Hat Kaibae is Hat Tha Nam – more commonly known as Lonely Beach. It's fast becoming Not-So-Lonely Beach, with flashier resorts moving in and a pumping nightlife scene in the tiny village. If you're looking for peace and quiet you're in the wrong place. Just slightly south, Bailan Bay is still nicely low-key.

**Siam Beach Resort** (☎ 08 9161 6664; www.siambeachkohchang.com; Hat Tha Nam; bungalow 600-800B, r 2500B; 📶 📺 🛏) Here's the past, present and future of Ko Chang. Fan and air-con bungalows cluster on the beach and the hillside, and there are also new 'deluxe' air-con rooms right on the water. If you're really counting your baht, the same outfit runs **Siam Huts** just down the coast with simple, but slightly tatty, huts (250B to 350B), complete with a retinue of friendly cats and noisy dogs.

**Nature Beach Resort** (☎ 0 3955 8027; Hat Tha Nam; bungalow 300-600B) Seemingly getting bigger every year, Nature Beach is a mix of seclusion and socialising. Daylight hours are quiet amid the well-spaced bungalows, but most nights there are parties and fire shows. Spend your nights in party mode, and then cruise the on-site book shop and internet café when you (finally) get up.

**P & Nico Guest House** (☎ 08 6111 9349; Hat Tha Nam; bungalow 800B) Tastefully decorated in summer-time blue and yellow, these new bungalows come with a welcome in Thai, French or English. You're away from the beach but well placed for bars and restaurants.

**The Magic Garden** (☎ 0 3955 8027; www.magicgardenthailand.com; Hat Tha Nam; bungalow 500-700B; 📶) Mix up Thai island style with an Ibiza groove and add a touch of the Burning Man festival. The Magic Garden's not for everyone, but this

is perfect for sociable 21st-century neo-hippies. All bungalows face The Power Lounge, a central bar/chillout area that delivers house, trance and world music from noon to the wee small hours. Look forward to seriously altering your sleep patterns.

**The Mangrove** (☎ 08 1949 7888; Bailan Bay; bungalow 1000B) Here's proof that not all bungalows are created equal. Cascading down a hill to a private beach and an architecturally designed restaurant, the bungalows here are spacious, private and pretty damn stylish.

**Bailan Family Bungalows** (☎ 08 9051 2701; www.bailanfamilybungalow.com; Bailan Bay; huts 450B, bungalow 900B; 📶) While the young 'uns party up the coast on Lonely Beach, this spot has simple, but well-designed, fan-cooled huts amid a subdued family ambience. A private beach is one minute away and there's a larger air-con bungalow if you're splashing out.

### Bang Bao

Floating on stilts above the ocean, the picturesque fishing village of Bang Bao features charming accommodation on the pier, and interesting places to stay nearby. The pier is rapidly becoming a roll call of dive shops, souvenir shops and cafés, but is still a magical place in the late afternoon sun when the day trippers have retreated north.

**Elephant Garden** (☎ 08 7143 2286; bungalow 250B) You're a fair hike from the beach, but there's a relaxed bohemian atmosphere at this rambling spot run by a proud Scotsman. At its hub is a laid-back restaurant serving tasty vegetarian curries. If you get too laid-back, boost your adrenaline by watching a DVD or jumping onto PlayStation for a session or three.

**Remark Puzi** (☎ 0 3955 8116; www.remarkpuzi.com; bungalow 350-600B) Simple wood and bamboo bungalows are given a lift with funky bed linen, and hammocks are interspersed in a leafy, beachy glade. Unfortunately a new concrete wharf has been built right out front, but this is still a relaxing place to stay at the quieter end of Ko Chang.

**Ocean Blue** (☎ 08 1889 2348; www.oceanbluethailand.com; r 700B) Simple fan rooms line this traditional house at the end of a quiet pier. The young crew running the place are quirky and funny, and the combination of a shady hammock, a good book and a cold Singha adds up to a hell of a way to spend an afternoon.

**Bang Bao Sea Hut** (☎ 08 1285 0570; www.bangbao Seahut.com; r 2000B; 📶) With individual bungalows

extending into Bang Bao harbour, this is one of Ko Chang's more enchanting places to stay. Each thatched roof 'hut' (actually much flashier than it sounds) is surrounded by a private deck, with wooden shutters opening to the sea breeze. Be sure to pack a loved one for a romantic escape.

**Nirvana** (☎ 0 3955 8061; www.nirvana-kohchang.com; Bang Bao; r 4620-9240B; 🍴📺) Ko Chang's premium resort is hidden away on a quiet peninsula, and almost impossible to spot among rambling vegetation. 'Balinese' was the initial design brief, but each bungalow is furnished slightly differently in muted earth tones with subtle Asian accents. Make sure you bring along your airline's phone number because there's every chance you'll be phoning them to catch a later flight.

### East Coast

This part of the island can feel isolated with most resorts catering to Thai customers. A few stand-out options do exist though. At the time of writing transport was limited to this area.

A road now runs from just south of Judo Resort to Hat Yao (Long Beach), a quiet, pristine slice of sand with minimal development. However, with the road now complete, don't be surprised to see other resorts pop up. Keep your eyes peeled.

**Treehouse Lodge** (☎ 08 1847 8215; www.tree-house.org; Hat Yao; bungalow 300B) Pristine stretch of sand – check. Simple but funky bungalows – check. Hippy, drippy boho ambience – check. Yep, the operators of the original (and legendary) Treehouse Lodge on Hat Yao have done a good job of recreating the original set-up on isolated Hat Yao. Plan on staying a while – most travellers do. During the peak season, transport (100B) leaves Lonely Beach at 10am going to Hat Yao.

**Island View Resort** (☎ 08 9155 2669; www.erleb-nirseisen-thailand.de; Ao Salak Phet; r 900B; 🍴📺) Sea breezes and secluded island views are standard at this unique spot perched at the end of a private pier in quiet Ao Salak Phet. The spacious air-con rooms are excellent value, and the friendly German-Thai owners arrange kayaking and sailing trips around the quiet bay. Don't leave without trying the sublime fried fish with mango. Host Dieter can pick you up at the ferry.

**Judo Resort** (☎ 08 9925 4122; Ban Jekbae; r 500-1500B; 🍴📺) Newish air-con rooms cater to the

flashpacker set, while spacious tent arrangements fulfil the budget crowd. Grab a kayak and paddle to the nearby beach if you want real peace and quiet, but the whole set-up is nicely secluded anyway.

**Funky Hut Resort** (☎ 0 3958 6177; www.funkyhut-thailand.com; Ao Dan Kao; r 650-1950B; 🍴📺) While everyone else turns right from the ferry, turn left and head to this friendly spot on quiet Ao Dan Kao. There's virtually no nightlife in close proximity, and that's just the way the owners and guests like it. Choose from air-con poolside rooms or cheaper fan bungalows. Englishman Chris and his Thai wife Oh are especially proud of their burgers, but all the food is great. Rates increase from mid-December to the end of January.

### Eating & Drinking

Virtually all of the island's accommodation options have attached restaurants, but a few specialist restaurant scenes are also developing.

#### Hat Sai Khao

Hat Sai Khao has the highest concentration of eateries.

**Thor's Palace** (☎ 08 1927 2502; Hat Sai Khao; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) The deliciously camp Thor serves up excellent food and terrific beats amid gorgeous surroundings dotted with mementos of his globetrotting. This shrine to Thor's innate good taste is only open in the high season.

**Tonsai** (☎ 08 9895 7229; Hat Sai Khao; mains 40-150B; 🍴 lunch & dinner) Settle down on the funky cushions in this treehouse/restaurant built in a sturdy banyan tree (*tonsai* in Thai). There's a good selection of Thai and Western eats amid a nicely relaxed ambience. Make an afternoon of it.

**Invito** (☎ 0 3955 1326; Hat Sai Khao; mains 200-250B; 🍴 lunch & dinner) Authentic wood-fired pizzas and hand-made pasta are the signature dishes at this classy space with excellent service. It's at the southern end of Hat Sai Khao. Invito also delivers its pizzas.

**Invito Delicatessen** (☎ 0 3955 1460; Hat Sai Khao; 🍴 9am-2pm, 5-8pm) Just up the road from Invito, this place has a terrific selection of cheese, salami and the island's best bread to assemble the island's best DIY picnics.

**Oodie's Place** (☎ 0 3955 1193; Hat Sai Khao; pizza 170-260B; 🍴 lunch & dinner) Local musician Oodie runs a nicely diverse operation with excellent French food, tasty Thai specialities, movies

at 7.30pm and live music from 10pm. Make a night of it. And yes, they do play *Knocking on Heaven's Door*.

#### Hat Kaibae

Hat Kaibae is also developing a good bar and restaurant scene. At the time of writing, the always-evolving area included a French restaurant, a Muslim vegetarian eatery and a good Indian curry house. See what else you can discover.

**Kharma** (☎ 08 1663 3286; Hat Kaibae; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Eclectic music, a wide-ranging menu featuring Thai, Mexican and vegetarian food, and a few inflated blowfish are all good reasons to head to this gay-friendly spot. The cocktails aren't to be sneezed at either.

#### Ban Bang Bao

A handful of excellent seafood restaurants lie along the pier in Ban Bang Bao.

**Bang Bao Delight** (☎ 08 1844 1434; Bang Bao; doughnut 20B, coffee 40B; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Good coffee and fresh juices are served on low tables and cushions at this top spot for breakfast on Bang Bao's pier. Later in the day treat yourself to a freshly baked sugar doughnut or raisin roll. It's OK – you're on holiday.

**The Bay** (☎ 08 1773 4860; Bang Bao; mains 80-220B; 🍴 lunch & dinner) Fresher-than-fresh seafood goes down very well with one of the island's best cocktail lists at this breezy over-water restaurant with a sophisticated ambience.

Near The Bay, **Chow Talay** and **Ruan Thai** offer similar food in more rustic surroundings.

### Surrounding Islands

There are some dazzling smaller islands in Mu Ko Chang National Marine Park, some uninhabited but many starting to welcome tourists with open arms to postcard-perfect beaches. Getting to these islands is still expensive, but becoming more straightforward every year. Costs for transport, food and accommodation remain relatively high compared to Ko Chang and Ko Samet.

On **Ko Kut** you'll find beaches mostly along the western side at Hat Taphao, Hat Khlong Chao and Hat Khlong Yai Ki. The water along these beaches is a gorgeous shade of aquamarine. A sealed road links Ban Khlong Hin Dam, the island's main village on the west coast, with Ao Klong Chao further south, and with Bang Ao Salat on the northeastern shore. Just south from Ao Klong Chao the road disintegrates

into a bumpy dirt track, eventually petering out into a single track only suitable for motorcycles. Other villages on the island include Ban Ta Poi, Ban Laem Klui and Ban Lak Uan. Nam Tok Tan Sanuk and Khlong Chao offer inland water diversions including hiking and kayaking to nearby waterfalls. Ko Kut can be reached from Tha Laem Ngop on the mainland or from Ko Chang and Ko Mak.

**Ko Mak**, the smallest of the three main islands, has a scenic beach along the northwest bay. Rainforest covers 30% of the island while coconut plantations take up another 60%. A few tractors and jeeps travel along the single paved road that leads from the pier to the main village. It is possible to rent motorcycles and organise diving trips from the resorts on the island. The nearby small islands of **Ko Rang** and **Ko Rayang** have good coral.

**Ko Wai** has some of the best coral and is excellent for snorkelling and diving. There are also a couple of bungalow operations.

**Ko Kham** is also recommended for underwater explorations; accommodation is available. Note also that in the high season many daytrippers from Ko Chang head to Ko Wai and Ko Kham for a spot of snorkelling.

### SLEEPING

Ko Kut, Ko Mak, Ko Rayang, Ko Kham and Ko Wai are quieter and more secluded than popular Ko Chang. Transport to the islands has traditionally been a bit hit and miss, but boat connections are becoming more regular as people discover these hidden gems.

Visiting the islands is really only an option in the high season, and during the May to September low season most boats stop running and many bungalow operations wind down. On weekends and holidays during the high season, vacationing Thais fill the resorts on Ko Kut, Ko Wai and Ko Mak, but during the week the ambience is very laid-back.

In Trat, Serge at Tratosphere Books (p254) is a reliable source for up-to-date information on accommodation on the islands, and can make bookings for you before you leave the mainland.

#### Ko Kut

Traditionally the domain of prepaid package tourists, it is now possible to visit the island independently, though transport infrastructure, restaurants and self-catering facilities are thin on the ground. The following all take

walk-in bookings, but you'd be wise to phone ahead. Most speedboat operators will drop you at your accommodation if you have pre-booked.

**Kohkood-Ngamkho Resort** (☎ 08 1825 7076; www.kohkood-ngamkho.com; Ao Ngam Kho; hut/bungalow 350/650B) 'Uncle Joe' runs a great spot that's the best budget option on pretty Ao Ngam Kho. Choose from simple huts or flashier fan bungalows. Campers can pitch a tent for 200B, and there's guaranteed sea views from every hammock.

**Dusita** (☎ 08 1523 7369; Ao Ngam Kho; bungalow 700-1200B; 🍷) With a sandy beach, leafy surroundings, and pavilions and restaurants open to the sea breezes, the fan and air-con bungalows at Dusita are good value. Weekends are especially busy in the high season.

**Siam Beach** (☎ 08 1945 5789; http://siambeachkohood.6te.net; Ao Bang Bao; r 500-1500B; 🍷 📺) Simple fan huts and more expensive air-con bungalows sit on a wonderfully private beach. Kayaks and snorkelling are on offer, and in the evening the restaurant serves up close relatives of the fish you eyeballed earlier in the day.

**The Beach Natural Resort** (☎ 08 6999 9420, Bangkok 0 2222 9969; www.thebeachkohood.com; Ao Bang Bao; bungalow incl breakfast 1200-2600B; 🍷 📺) Balinese-style bungalows sit among loads of vegetation on a private beach that's great for kayaking. Thais pack this place for karaoke-fuelled fun at the weekend, so try and come on a weekday. 'Beckham' the golden retriever will greet you with his 'special stone'. Correct protocol is to throw it off the wharf so he can dive in after it. Try not to lose it as we almost did.

**Bai Kood Shambala** (☎ 0 3592 4193; www.baikoodshambala.com; Ao Klong Chao; bungalow incl breakfast 1100-3550B; 🍷 📺) Sitting on a quiet bay opposite a delicate sandpit, relaxing comes easily at Shambala. Rooms are decorated with designer touches, and service in the bar and excellent restaurant is relaxed but professional. When you're done taking it easy jump in a kayak and negotiate the pretty 3km river estuary to the Klong Chao waterfall. Ask for a weekday discount.

**Shantaa** (☎ 08 1817 9648; www.shantaakohkood.com; Ao Yai Kee; bungalow incl breakfast 3500B; 🍷) The surroundings at this cliff-top spot are a tad exposed, but the gorgeous bungalows more than compensate. The open-air bathrooms with herbal toiletries could be Thailand's best, and acres of polished wood, sea views, personal stereos and private gardens come as standard.

## Ko Mak

Like Ko Kut, several 'resorts' on Ko Mak paved the way by attracting package tourists to the island in large numbers. It is still difficult to get accommodation at these places without being on an all-inclusive package tour.

The saving grace here is that there are also some charming non-resorts that rent rooms the old-fashioned way and offer a glimpse of slow-paced, Thai-island life. We have listed high season prices – expect discounts of up to 50% in the low season at the places that remain open.

Ko Mak is very small, and the whole island, including all the accommodation operators, shows up to meet the daily boat from the mainland. Don't worry, they'll find you.

At the Ao Nid pier (where most boats arrive from the mainland or from Ko Kut), the **Ball Café** (☎ 08 1925 6591) has internet access (1B per minute) and can arrange accommodation bookings across the island.

**Island Time** (☎ 08 7139 5537; huts 250B) Colourful huts, over-water swings and lazy hammocks give this simple spot a funky feel, and the welcome from the friendly family is legendary. Expect excellent food.

**TK Huts** (☎ 08 7134 8435 1631; www.tk-hut.com; bungalow 400-800B) Spartan in design, but set amid shady trees, and run by a friendly German guy who encourages a social vibe.

**Baan Koh Maak** (☎ 0 3952 4028; www.baan-koh-mak.com; bungalow 850-1000B; 🍷) A well-run and friendly spot, the simple bungalows here have stylish interiors, but the white picket fences can make it feel like a holiday camp. Thankfully a good restaurant with great cocktails easily compensates for the slightly two-ambiance. Next door it's opened **Koh Mak Cottages** with simple fan bungalows (450B).

**Monkey Island** (☎ 08 9501 6030; www.monkeyislandkohmak.com; bungalow 400-3000B; 🍷) Depending on your budget, Baboon Huts, Chimpanzee Huts and Gorilla Huts are all on offer here in nicely natural beachfront surroundings. Tasty design touches include open-air bathrooms and spacious decks, and a friendly laid-back air infuses everything and everyone.

**Good Time Resort** (☎ 08 3118 0011; www.goodtime-resort.com; villa 2500-3000B; 🍷) Sixteen gorgeous two- to three-bedroom Thai-style villas are nestled in an expansive tropical garden. Relax by the pool, enjoy the spa services or journey to the owner's private island. Good value and easily Ko Mak's best.

**Ko Mak Coco-Cape** (☎ 08 1937 9024; www.kohmakcococape.com; r 500-4500; 🍷) Owned by a couple of Bangkok architects (and it shows) this sprawling place is kinda Ko Med with lots of crisply whitewashed walls in the flashier bungalows and villas. There are cheaper options with a bamboo feel, starting at 500B for a shared bath fan bungalow, and a compact swimming beach is just minutes away. The restaurant serves good food, but it's somewhat overpriced.

Call ahead, as some of these places close during the rainy season.

## Ko Kham

**Ko Kham Resort** (☎ 08 1393 1229; bungalow 400-1800B) Just off Ko Mak, this tiny island has one simple, but overpriced, resort. Expect lots of gawking and snorkelling daytrippers during the high season. From November to May there is a daily boat from Laem Ngop, or you could kayak across from Ao Suan Yai on Koh Mak. Speedboats (70B) zip across from Ko Mak Resort.

## Ko Rayang

**Rayang Island Resort** (☎ 08 3118 0011; www.rayang-island.com; bungalow 1700-2800B) Another tiny island off Ko Mak and another tiny resort. The Rayang Island Resort has fifteen refurbished one- and two-bedroom bungalows. There are no daytrippers, so it's wonderfully quiet. If you do want to be noisy, you can rent the whole island for €500 per day. It's owned by the same family who have the Good Time Resort on Ko Mak.

## Ko Wai

**Ko Wai Paradise** (r 300B) This welcoming spot has simple wooden bungalows on the beach. Readers have praised the restaurant as the island's best.

**Ko Wai Pakarang** (☎ 08 4113 8946; www.kohwaipakarang.com; bungalow 700-1000B) The fan bungalows at Pakarang are as flash as it gets on Ko Wai. There are better beaches on the island, but the friendly staff whips up a range of daytrips and activities. Most nights movies offset the delicious ennui of island life.

## Getting There & Away

Services to Ko Chang are year-round; boats to other islands become irregular, or even disappear completely, in the May to September rainy season.

At the time of writing this was a summary of available services, but each year sees an increase in the range and frequency of boats during the high season. Especially keep an eye out for improved services to the outer islands.

## KO CHANG

There are now three piers in Laem Ngop serving Ko Chang: the main one, at the end of the road from Trat, is called Tha Laem Ngop; another 4km northwest of Laem Ngop is Tha Ko Chang Centrepoint; and the new pier, called Tha Thammachat, is located at Ao Thammachat, further west of Laem Ngop.

During the high season, Tha Laem Ngop is the main pier to many of the Ko Chang Marine Park islands. There is a passenger (backpacker) ferry which runs to Ko Chang hourly (80B, one hour), but this rusty fishing boat often gets overcrowded and it's not the safest option.

From Tha Ko Chang Centrepoint, there are hourly ferries to and from Ko Chang's Tha Dan Kao from 6am until 7pm daily (one-way/return 100/200B, 45 minutes). This is also a vehicle ferry – cars and motorbikes can ride this ferry free with every paying passenger. This is a faster, cheaper and safer option than the backpacker ferry and will drop you off closer to the main beaches. A sawngthæw from Trat to Tha Ko Chang Centrepoint costs around 60B per person.

Another way to get to Ko Chang is via the hourly vehicle ferry from Tha Thammachat. This ferry arrives at Ao Sapparat on Ko Chang (per person/car 100/150B, 30 minutes) and may be the only boat running during rough seas.

## KO MAK & KO KUT

Year round there is a daily 3pm boat to Ko Mak, via Ko Wai, leaving from Tha Laem Ngop (300B, three hours). This boat returns from Ko Mak at 8am and can drop you off at Ko Chang's Long Beach (for Tree House Lodge) on request.

**Ko Kut Seatrans** (☎ 0 3959 7646; Laem Ngop) has boats leaving from Laem Ngop for Ko Mak (300B, 1½ hours) and Ko Kut (500B, 2½ hours) on Tuesday, Saturday and Sunday at 9am, departing for the return journey on Thursday, Friday and Sunday at 12.30pm from Ko Kut and 1.30pm from Ko Mak.

Due to the increasing popularity of the outlying islands, several fast craft make extra

trips in the high season. **Ko Mak Express** (☎ 0 1863 9400; Laem Ngop) speeds to Ko Mak from Laem Ngop on Friday, Saturday and Sunday at 12pm (400B, 1½ hours) and returns on the same day at 1.30pm.

Departing from Tha Dan Kao, 5km east of Trat (not to be confused with Ko Chang's Tha Dan Kao), **Speedboat Dan Kao** (Dan Kao) leaves at 9am for Ko Mak (300B, one hour) and onto Ko Kut (550B, two hours) on Monday, Wednesday, Friday and Saturday. This boat returns from Ko Kut at 9.30am and Ko Mak at 10.30am on Tuesday, Thursday, Friday and Sunday. Transfers to and from Trat are included in your ticket, or you can catch a sawngthæw to Dan Kao for 40B.

**Siriwite Speedboat** (☎ 08 6126 7860; Laem Sok) also services these two islands and departs from Tha Laem Sok, 22km (approximately 45 minutes) southeast of Trat. It has daily departures at 9am and 1pm for Ko Mak (400B, 40 minutes) that go onto Ko Kut (500B, 1¼ hours). In the reverse direction, boats leave Ko Kut at 10am and 2pm and Ko Mak at 10.30am and 2.30pm. A share taxi from Trat to Laem Sok should cost about 60B per person.

From October to May, you can also reach Ko Mak and Ko Kut from Ban Bang Bao on Ko Chang. **Island Hopper** (☎ 08 1865 0610; www.islandhopper-kochang.com) ferries leave from the Bang Bao pier at 8am and noon daily, returning from Ko Mak at noon, and from Ko Kut at 10am and 3pm. From Ko Chang to Ko Mak costs 350B each way, and from Ko Chang to Ko Kut is 600B each way. Island Hopper boats also call in at Ko Kham and Ko Wai during their twice-daily runs. **Bang Bao Boats** (☎ 08 7054 4300) operates a similar service. You'll see them both widely advertised on Ko Chang.

#### KO WAI & KO KHAM

From Ko Mak to Ko Kham it's a short hop from the pier at Ko Mak Resort; boats leave several times a day (around 70B).

A boat leaving Tha Laem Ngop daily at 3pm stops at Ko Wai (250B) before continuing on to Ko Mak. Island Hopper boats (see above) stop at Ko Wai (250B) at 9am and 1pm daily, and at Ko Kham (350B) every day at 10am and 2pm.

#### Getting Around

##### BOAT

Charter trips to nearby islands cost around 600B to 900B for a half day, or 1200B to 2000B

for a full day. Make sure that the charter includes all 'user fees' for the islands – sometimes boat operators demand 200B on top of the charter fee for 'using' the beach.

At the southern end of Ko Chang, you can charter a long-tail boat or fishing boat between Hat Kaibae and Ao Bang Bao for 1000B, or around 150B per person if you can manage to fill a boat. Similar charters are also available between Ao Bang Bao and Ao Salak Phet.

Boat rides up Khlong Phrao to the falls cost 50B per person and can be arranged through most bungalows.

#### CAR & MOTORCYCLE

Bungalow operations along the west coast charge 200B per day for motorbike hire. Elsewhere on the island, rental bikes are scarce. Ko Chang's hilly and winding roads are quite dangerous and are best left to relatively experienced riders, as there have been a number of fatal accidents involving Western tourists. Jeeps can be hired for around 2000B per day in the high season. **Mr Phol** (☎ 08 1887 9515) is reliable and can arrange all sorts of transport with two or four wheels.

#### SĂWNGTHĂEW

The sawngthæw meeting the boats at Tha Dan Kao and Ao Sapparot charge 40B per person to Hat Sai Khao, 50B to Ban Khlong Phrao, 60B to Hat Kaibae and 80B to Lonely Beach along the west coast. At the time of writing there were irregular sawngthæw to Bang Bao, but as the number of daytrippers increases frequency will no doubt increase. Between Tha Dan Kao and Ao Salak Phet, the local price is 50B per person, although tourists may be charged more.

## PRACHINBURI & SA KAEW PROVINCES

The town of Prachinburi is worth a look for its interesting hospital, and the area is a good base to explore the Khao Yai National Park (p464). Near the quieter, southern border of the park, the village of Ban Kon Khuang on Rte 33 includes some good accommodation, and it is much closer to Bangkok than the main park entrance at Pak Chong in Nakhon Ratchasima Province.

The rural areas of Prachinburi and Sa Kaew provinces are peppered with many

small Dvaravati and Khmer ruins. Sa Kaew means 'Jewel Pool', a reference to various Mon-Khmer reservoirs in the area. Little more than loose collections of laterite blocks, most are of little interest to the casual visitor. Keep going east on Rte 33 and cross the border at Aranya Prathet to Cambodia and the real deal at Angkor Wat.

Further west on Rte 33, the town of Nakhon Nayok (in Central Thailand) is a popular getaway for Thais from Bangkok keen on outdoor adventure, especially year-round rafting. Try to come on a weekend as it's often difficult to find companies running weekday trips. It's a good area to explore with your own transport.

#### National Parks

To the north of Prachinburi, Rte 3077 leads to Khao Yai National Park (p464). North and northeast of Kabinburi, the length of the southern escarpment of the Khorat Plateau, are the contiguous Thap Lan and Pang Sida National Parks.

At 2235 sq km, the **Thap Lan National Park** (☎ 0 3721 9408; reserve@dnf.go.th; 400B; ☞ 8am-5pm) is Thailand's second-largest national park. Well known as a habitat for the abundant *tôn laan* (talipot palm; see below), the park is also home to elephants, tigers, gaur, sambar, barking deer, palm civets, hornbills and gibbons. It is hoped that the kouprey, a rare species of primitive cattle, still lives here, though it has been more than 30 years since the last official sighting. Illegal logging has damaged the park, but tree-planting programmes are redressing the imbalance.

Facilities are minimal; To explore the interior contact the rangers at **park headquarters**

(☎ 0 3721 9408) in Thap Lan village. They can arrange a tour of the park and provide camping permits (50B per person). There are three six-bed bungalows (1500B) – book through the Thap Lan National Park email address.

There is no public transport to the park entrance, which is 32km north of Kabinburi via Rte 304 (the road to Nakhon Ratchasima).

Approximately 30km southeast of Thap Lan close to Sa Kaew, **Pang Sida National Park** (☎ 0 3724 6100; reserve@dnf.go.th; 400B; ☞ 8am-5pm) is smaller but hillier than Thap Lan. There are several scenic waterfalls, including Nam Tok Pang Sida and Nam Tok Na Pha Yai near the park headquarters, and the more difficult to reach Suan Man Suan Thong and Nam Tok Daeng Makha.

#### Sights & Activities

In Prachinburi the **Chao Phraya Abhaibhubejhr Hospital** (☎ 0 3721 3610; www.adhaiherb.com; 32/7 Moo 12, Th Prachin-Ahuson) is renowned across Thailand for using traditional medicine to develop herbal remedies. The hospital's shop (open 8.30am to 8.30pm) sells interesting health and beauty products. The soaps, including galangal and mangosteen variants, are excellent and the safflower herbal tea is recommended for lowering cholesterol. Buy these authentic products before your local Body Shop or Starbucks launches the mass-market versions.

Attached to the hospital is a serene massage room (massage per hour 160B) where masseuses take your blood pressure before they begin. Next door is a gorgeous baroque building built by the hospital's founder, Siamese governor Chao Phraya Abhaibhubejhr. The building is now a museum of herbal medicine.

#### A GIANT OF A PALM

Look out for the spectacular talipot palm (*Corypha umbraculifera*), one of the largest palms in the world. Native to southern India and Sri Lanka, it is now found throughout Southeast Asia and further north into Yunnan Province in China. The talipot grows to a height of 25m, and is topped with a graceful umbrella of leaves up to 5m in diameter. This tree is all about being showy, and when the talipot finally blooms (after 30 to 80 years), 10 million tiny flowers only 3mm wide emerge simultaneously in a spectacular display at the top of the tree. Marble-sized fruits develop, fall gently to the ground and the spectacular talipot begins a rapid decline. The umbrella-like leaves wilt, having fulfilled their sole purpose of collecting moisture to allow the tree to bloom, and the talipot dies a few months after flowering. Traditionally the gracefully arched leaves were used for manuscripts, and many important Buddhist scriptures were recorded with iron styli on the giant canvases. The leaves are also used for thatching and the trunks are tapped to make palm wine. Unfortunately, development is threatening the talipot, and it is considered an endangered species.

Labels are in Thai, but you'll work most things out. A tük-tük to the hospital from Prachinburi's bus station is 40B, and from the train station is 60B. Palm Garden Lodge (below) will also run you into town for 100B each way.

In **Ban Kon Khuang**, Palm Garden Lodge runs daytrips (1300B per person) to the Khao Yai National Park. The night safari (300B extra) is not worth it, but the waterfall-laden day trips are good value.

Southeast of Prachinburi via Rtes 319 and 3070, in the village of Ban Sa Khoi (between Khok Pip and Sa Maha Pho on Rte 3070), is the Angkor-period **Sa Morakot** (Emerald Pool; admission free; ☀ daylight). This was an important Khmer reservoir during the reign of Angkor's Jayavarman VII. Original laterite-block sluices next to the dam, along with assorted *sēmaa* (boundary stones), *naga* (a mythical serpent-like being with magical powers) sculptures, pedestals and a sandstone lingam can still be seen here. Water from this reservoir is considered sacred and has been used in Thai coronation ceremonies.

**Sa Kaew** (Jewel Pool; admission free; ☀ daylight), another historic reservoir site, is just south of Khok Pip off Rte 3070. This one features a Dvaravati-period laterite quarry with some bas-relief surviving on the walls. There are a number of other Dvaravati and Angkor laterite foundations in the area. You'll need private transport to get to Sa Morakot and Sa Kaew.

**Sarika Adventure Point** (☎ 0 3732 8432), in **Nakhon Nayok**, runs combination trips featuring rafting on the nearby Tha Dan dam and mountain biking (one day 1000B, two days 1900B). There's also abseiling on offer (one day 1500B). Sarika is 11km from town near the intersection of Rte 3049 and Rte 3050.

## Sleeping

Accommodation in Nakhon Nayok is pretty grim and you're better off staying in one of the family-run bungalows along Soi Suan Lung Nai off Rte 3029. Thai tourists pack these places on weekends, but on weekdays it's very quiet. There are misty views of nearby mountains and a network of pretty streams. Most places hire mountain bikes and kayaks. Don't expect much English to be spoken. There's no public transport but a taxi from the Nakhon Nayok bus station is around 200B.

**Palm Garden Lodge** (☎ 08 9989 4470; www.palmalga.com; Moo 10, Ban Kon Khuang, Prachinburi; r 400-650B, bungalow 1200B; 📶) Set in a leafy garden and featur-

ing fan and air-con rooms, the friendly family who run Palm Garden Lodge are a national treasure. The food's exceptional and they've got loads of ideas for seeing the area. Motorcycles can be hired (250B per day) and they can arrange transport (100B) to Prachinburi's excellent night market and the Chao Phraya Abhaibhubejhr hospital.

**Tha Dan Homestay** (☎ 0 3738 5015; Nakhon Nayok; s from 100B) Expect friendly cats, good food and simple (fan plus mattress on the floor) rooms with shared bathrooms. There's no English spoken so book through the Tourism Authority of Thailand office (☎ 0 3731 2284) in Nakhon Nayok.

**Blue Diamond Resort & Spa** (☎ 0 3738 5262; Nakhon Nayok; bungalow 1200-1400B, f 2000B; 📶 🚿) Pleasant bungalows sit in shady surroundings. There are also some larger rooms sleeping up to 10. Massages (400B per 90 minutes) are available.

## Getting There & Away

Frequent buses run to Nakhon Nayok (90B) and Prachinburi (110B) from Bangkok's Northern bus terminal (Mo Chit). Four trains a day (two to three hours; 42B to 110B) travel from Bangkok's Hualamphong station to Prachinburi. Buses along Rte 33 to Aranya Prathet from Bangkok's Northern bus terminal stop in Ban Kon Khuang on request. **Palm Garden Lodge** (www.palmalga.com) have transport instructions on its website.

## Getting Around

Motorcycles can be hired (250B per day) from Palm Garden Lodge (left). The area has excellent roads and is good to explore with a private car.

## ARANYA PRATHET

อารัญญาพริต

pop 60,000

The dusty border town of Aranya Prathet (aka Aran) has long been a magnet for refugees fleeing the turbulent chapters of Cambodia's roller-coaster 20th century. Displaced Cambodians flooded into the area after the Khmer Rouge takeover of 1975 and the subsequent Vietnamese invasion of 1979. Random skirmishes between Khmer Rouge guerrillas and the Phnom Penh government continued until 1998, but now the area is safe and is the most used border crossing for trips between Thailand and Angkor Wat in Cambodia.

A crackdown on gambling in Phnom Penh has caused a glut of casinos to be built in Poipet. Most cater to Thais from Bangkok, and the contrast between visiting Thais and poor Khmers pushing rudimentary handcarts is startling.

Parts of this area are still heavily mined – do not stray from marked roads and paths.

## Sights

The large border market of **Talat Rong Kleua**, at the northern edge of town, attracts a rag-tag crowd of Cambodians who cross the border to trade with the more affluent Thais. Gems, handicrafts and textiles were traditionally sold but the emphasis is now on second-hand gear from developed countries. It's mainly thrift-store tat, but if you're after a pair of knockoff Converse, a retro Japanese baseball shirt or taekwondo gear formerly used by the South Korean national team, it's definitely worth a browse. Hire a bike (20B) to explore the maze of over 3000 shops. If you're not buying, it's still fascinating to observe the steady stream of Cambodians crossing the border with huge hand-pulled carts piled high with market goods.

## Sleeping & Eating

Simple **rooms for rent** (r 200-300B) are available near the turn-off to the market just before the border. Look for the Pepsi sign in Thai.

**Market Hotel** (☎ 0 3723 2302; 105/30-32 Th Rat Uthit; r 250-400B; 📶 🚿) It gets mighty dusty around Aranya Prathet so having a pool and air-con is a wise investment to recharge before the long journey to Siem Reap.

**Aran Mermed Hotel** (☎ 0 3722 3655; fax 0 3722 3666; 33 Th Tanawithi; r/st 1200/2500B; 📶) With air-con that goes all the way to 11, and spacious and comfy rooms in a shiny high-rise, you almost forget you're in a Thai border town. The Aran Mermed is tucked right behind the bus station.

**Little House** (☎ 0 3723 1546; 67 Th Chaoprayabirdin; ☀ breakfast, lunch & dinner) The owners may be Chinese, but their culinary skills extend to surprisingly good pizza and burgers.

**Niza Restaurant** (Talat Rong Kleua; ☀ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Break your shopping marathon at this friendly eatery on the western edge of the market.

Around the market there are many cheap food stalls.

## Getting There & Away

Ordinary buses from Bangkok's Northern and Northeastern bus station to Aranya Prathet (118B, five hours) leave on an hourly basis from 5.30am to 4.30pm; air-con buses (207B, 4¼ hours) leave hourly from 5.30am to 10.30am, and from noon to 5pm. If you're travelling to Northeastern Thailand there are regular buses from Aranya Prathet to Khorat (200B, five hours). At the time of writing a direct bus service had commenced from Bangkok's newly opened Suvarnabhumi airport to the border with Cambodia (210B, four hours).

Two trains per day (5.55am and 1.05pm) depart Bangkok's Hualamphong station for Aranya Prathet (third-class only, 48B, six hours).

## Getting Around

From the bus station, a local bus (15B) goes to Talat Rong Kleua, from where you can walk to the border. The train station is near the bus station and a tük-tük from either the border or the market is 80B.

## Border Crossing (Cambodia)

The border to Cambodia is open daily from 7am to 8pm. First proceed through the Thai immigration office and then cross the border by foot to the Cambodian immigration office. You'll need a photo and 1000B (or US\$25). You can also pre-arrange a Cambodian visa in Bangkok at the Cambodian embassy. A tourist shuttle bus outside the Cambodian immigration office delivers passengers free of charge to Poipet's taxi stand, where onward transport can be arranged. At the time of writing the road from Poipet had *still* not been sealed. In the dry season, it's a four-hour trip but considerably longer in the wet season. See Lonely Planet's *Cambodia* guidebook for more information.

Note that this border gets very busy at weekends when Thais are crossing to the casinos in Poipet. Border officials suggest you get there early to avoid delays.

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