

Directory

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ACCOMMODATION

Thailand offers the widest and best-priced variety of accommodation of any country in Southeast Asia.

Most hotels and resorts, and all guesthouses, quote their rates in Thai baht (B). A few top-

BOOK ACCOMMODATION ONLINE

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PRACTICALITIES

- *Bangkok Post* and the *Nation* publish national and international news daily.
- More than 400AM and FM radio stations; and short-wave radios can pick up BBC, VOA, Radio Australia, Deutsche Welle and Radio France International.
- Five VHF TV networks with Thai programming, plus UBC cable with international programming.
- The main video format is PAL.
- Thailand uses 220V AC electricity; power outlets most commonly feature two-prong round or flat sockets.
- Thailand follows the international metric system. Gold and silver are weighed in *baat* (15g).

end places quote only in US dollars and where that is the case we have followed suit.

Accommodation prices listed in this book are high-season prices for either single or double rooms. Icons are included to indicate where air-con, swimming pools or internet access are available; otherwise, assume that there's a fan. Rooms under 200B or 250B a night will typically have a shared bathroom.

In this guide we place accommodation costing less than 600B a night in the Budget category, 600B to 1500B in the Midrange category and over 1500B in Top End. Exceptions occur in the Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Andaman and Lower Southern Gulf areas, where mid-range is around 800B to 2500B or 3000B.

Beach Bungalows

Beach bungalows occupy much of the Thai coastline, especially in old-fashioned backpacker destinations such as Ko Pha-Ngan and Ko Tao. They range from simple palm thatch and bamboo huts to wooden or concrete bungalows. As travellers' budgets have become more generous in recent years many of the cheap bungalow shacks have been upgraded to more sturdy and comfortable concrete huts. Regardless of quality, many bungalows are

smack dab on the beach or built on a hillside overlooking the ocean.

Guesthouses

Guesthouses are generally the cheapest accommodation in Thailand and can be found wherever travellers go throughout central, northern and southern Thailand, and to a much lesser extent in the southeast and northeast. Rates vary according to facilities, from a rock-bottom 100B to 150B per room with shared toilet and shower to over 500B with private facilities and air-con. Most guesthouses cultivate a travellers' ambience with minor amenities like tourist information and book exchanges. Many guesthouses make their bread-and-butter from their onsite restaurants that serve some of the classic backpacker meals (banana pancakes and fruit shakes). Don't measure Thai food based on dishes you've eaten in guesthouses; all standard dishes have been adjusted to accommodate the foreigner palate.

Most guesthouses are not equipped to handle advance reservations and there are usually plenty of options grouped together so accommodation can be found upon arrival.

Hotels & Resorts

In provincial capitals and small towns, the only options are often older Chinese-Thai hotels, once the standard in all of Thailand. These are multistorey buildings usually with private bathrooms and air-con, although a few have shared bath facilities and fan rooms. Most cater to Thai guests and English is usually limited. Rates tend to be higher here than at guesthouses as these hotels don't typically have onsite restaurants to subsidise room rates.

For a room sans air-con, you should ask for *hàwng thammádaa* (ordinary room) or *hàwng phát lom* (room with fan); these usually start at 200B. *Hàwng ae* (air-con room) can range from 300B to 750B, depending on the location of the hotel and size of the room. In some of the older hotels, the toilets are squats and the 'shower' is a *khlong jar* (large water jar).

The midrange hotels offer many amenities, such as cable TV, air-con and hot showers, but unless the establishment has been recently refurbished, we've found that they are too old and worn to represent good value. Most midrange hotels start at 1000B or more.

International chain hotels can be found in Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Phuket and other high-end beach resorts. In recent years, there

has been a push for stylish and plush accommodation rather than the utilitarian options of the past. Many of these upscale resorts incorporate traditional Thai architecture with modern minimalism.

Most top-end hotels and some midrange hotels add a 7% government tax (VAT) and an additional 10% service charge. The additional charges are often referred to as 'plus plus'. A buffet breakfast will often be included in the room rate. If the hotel offers Western breakfast, it is usually referred to as 'ABF', a strange shorthand meaning American breakfast.

Midrange and chain hotels, especially in major tourist destinations, can be booked in advance and some offer internet discounts through their websites or online agents.

In most countries, 'resort' refers to hotels that offer substantial recreational facilities (eg tennis, golf, swimming, sailing) in addition to accommodation and dining. In Thai hotel lingo, however, the term simply refers to any hotel that isn't in an urban area. Hence a few thatched beach huts or a cluster of bungalows in a forest may be called a 'resort'. Several places in Thailand fully deserve the resort title under any definition – but it will pay for you to look into the facilities before making a reservation.

National Parks Accommodation

Most national parks have bungalows or campsites available for overnight stays. Bungalows typically sleep as many as 10 people and rates range from 600B to 2000B, depending on the park and the size of the bungalow. These are popular with extended Thai families who bring enough provisions to survive the apocalypse. A

NATIONAL PARKS FEE HIKE

As of late 2006, entrance fees to all national parks have been raised from 200B to 400B for foreigners. A pricing scheme for national parks was introduced some 20 years ago as a way to offset diminishing maintenance funds from the government. Since the late 1990s, entrance fees have split into a double-tiered scheme: one price for Thais and another price for foreigners. The most recent fee hike represents a 100% increase over the last. Although officials cited increased maintenance costs as justification for the recent hikes, issues involving funds are never that transparent.

few parks also have *reuan thàew* (longhouses), where rooms are around 250B for two people.

Camping is available at many parks for 30B per person per night. Some parks hire tents (100B a night), but always check the condition of the tents before agreeing to rent. It's a good idea to take your own sleeping bag or mat, and other basic camping gear.

Advance bookings for accommodation is necessary at the more popular parks, especially on holidays and weekends. To make reservations, contact the **National Park Office** (☎ 0 2562 0760; www.dnp.go.th/parkreserve; 61 Th Phahonyothin, Chatuchak, Bangkok 10900).

ACTIVITIES

Thailand has developed a fairly thriving activities sector to its tourism industry but the majority of options are often classified as 'soft' adventure.

Cycling

Many cyclists have traversed the roads of Thailand on a Southeast Asia tour. **Biking Southeast Asia with Mr Pumpy** (www.mrpumpy.net) contains route suggestions, tips and other details from real-life cyclists. Cycling around certain cities in Thailand is a great alternative to public transport; for details on bicycle hire see p761. There are also countrywide cycling tour programmes available through **SpiceRoads** (spiceroads.com) as well as bike tours of Bangkok (p147).

Diving & Snorkelling

Thailand's two coastlines and countless islands are popular among divers for their

warm and calm waters and colourful marine life. Lonely Planet's richly illustrated *Diving & Snorkelling Thailand* is full of vital information for serious divers.

On the Andaman coast, the most spectacular diving is in the Similan (p655) and Surin Islands (p651). Most dive operators running tours to this area are based in Phuket (p660), and to a lesser extent Khao Lak (p653) and Ko Chang (p257). Most dive trips to the Surin and Similan islands are multiday live aboards. One-day trips are also offered at almost every Andaman beach resort.

Reef dives in the Andaman are particularly rewarding – some 210 hard corals and 108 reef fish have so far been catalogued in this understudied marine zone, where thousands more species of reef organisms probably live. Some parts of Thailand's Andaman coast were heavily affected by the December 2004 tsunami, but actual damage to reef systems in Thailand has been very minimal.

Diving on the Gulf coast is available just about anywhere foreigners rest their luggage. Ko Tao (p616) has the reputation of providing the cheapest dive training but because of the numbers of tourists these instructions can feel like you're in a factory line. Although the water conditions are not the best, Pattaya (p232) is the closest dive spot to Bangkok, with several reefs just a short boat ride offshore.

Most islands have easily accessible snorkelling amid offshore reefs that are covered by water no deeper than 2m. Local fisherman will also take out groups for day-long snorkelling tours to various sites around the islands.

SAFETY GUIDELINES FOR DIVING

Before embarking on a scuba diving, skin diving or snorkelling trip, carefully consider the following points to ensure a safe and enjoyable experience:

- Possess a current diving-certification card from a recognised scuba diving instructional agency.
- Obtain reliable information about physical and environmental conditions at the dive site (eg from a reputable local dive operation).
- Be aware of local laws, regulations and etiquette about marine life and the environment.
- Dive only at sites within your realm of experience; if available, engage the services of a competent, professionally trained dive instructor or dive master.
- Be aware that underwater conditions vary significantly from one region, or even site, to another. Seasonal changes can significantly alter any site and dive conditions. These differences influence the way divers dress for a dive and what diving techniques they use.
- Ask about the environmental characteristics that can affect your diving and how local-trained divers deal with these considerations.

Masks, fins and snorkels are readily available for rent at dive centres and guesthouses in beach areas. If you're particular about the quality and condition of the equipment you use, however, you might be better off bringing your own mask and snorkel – some of the stuff for rent is second rate.

Kayaking

The most dramatic scenery for kayaking is along the Andaman coast. It's littered with bearded limestone mountains and semisubmerged caves. Many sea-kayaking tours are based in Phuket (p660) and take visitors to scenic Ao Phang-Nga (p659). For the sporty types, Krabi (p690) is the one-stop beach destination with sea-kayaking tours to emerald lagoons and sea caves.

Most tour operators use open-deck kayaks since water and air temperatures in Thailand are warm. When signing up for a tour, find out if you or the guide is the primary paddler; some tours are more sightseeing than exercise.

Rock Climbing

Way back before the Stone Age, Thailand sat at the bottom of a vast ocean that lapped against the Tibetan Plateau. When the ocean eventually receded and mainland Southeast Asia popped up, the skeletons of deceased marine life left behind a swath of chalk-white caves and cliffs the whole length of Thailand. While the Tibetans lost backyard surfing rights, the Thais got the milky-white, pock-marked, medium-hard limestone perfect for chalky fingers and Scarpa-clad toes. *Farang* backpackers were the first to slam bolt to stone in the mid-1980s, but the Thais have quickly followed suit. Rock climbing has become so popular that the Thais have begun sending climbers to amateur contests in the USA and Australia.

Krabi's Hat Railay (p700) and Hat Ton Sai are Thailand's limestone mecca. The huge headland and tiny islands nearby offer high-quality limestone with steep, pocketed walls, overhangs and the occasional hanging stalactite. But what makes climbing here so popular are the views. Your reward for a vertical assault on a cliff isn't just the challenge to gravity but also a bird's eye view of a sparkling blue bay and humpbacked mountains.

If the crowds in Krabi are too much, check out Ko Phi-Phi or head north to Chiang Mai (p290), which has access to jungle-choked Crazy Horse Buttress.

Trekking

Wilderness walking or trekking is one of northern Thailand's biggest draws. Many routes feature daily walks through forested mountain areas coupled with overnight stays in hill-tribe villages and elephant rides to satisfy both ethno- and ecotourism urges. Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai are the primary base points for these tours, but Mae Hong Son, Nan and Um Phang also offer trekking tours and are less inundated with tourists. Kanchanaburi is also an outdoor trekking destination and is closer to Bangkok than the other trekking centres. These adventures rank high on most travellers' to-do list, but the final verdict is often mixed. Hill-tribe trekking has many detractors because of concerns over exploitation and tourism overload. For a discussion about the responsibility issues of entering these sensitive communities, see the Thailand & You chapter (p41).

Other trekking opportunities are available in Thailand's larger national parks, including Khao Yai and Khao Sok.

Windsurfing

The best combination of rental facilities and wind conditions are found on Pattaya (p232) and nearby Jomtien, on Phuket's Ao Bang Thao (p672) and on Ko Samui (p584).

In general the windy months on the Gulf of Thailand are from mid-February to April. On the Andaman Sea side of the Thai-Malay peninsula winds are strongest from September to December.

BUSINESS HOURS

Most government offices are open from 8.30am to 4.30pm weekdays. Some government offices close from noon to 1pm for

TYPICAL OPENING HOURS

- Bars – 6pm-midnight or 1am (times vary depending on local enforcement of national curfew laws)
- Department stores – 10am-8pm Mon-Sun
- Discos – 8pm-2am
- Live music venues – 6pm-1am
- Restaurants – 10am-10pm
- Local shops – 10am-5pm Mon-Sat, some open Sun

lunch, while others have Saturday hours (9am-3pm). Banking hours are typically 9.30am to 3.30pm Monday to Friday.

Privately owned stores usually operate between 10am and 5pm daily. Most local restaurants are open 10am until 10pm, with an hour's variation on either side. Some restaurants, specialising in morning meals, close by 3pm.

Please note that all government offices and banks are closed on public holidays (see p747).

CHILDREN

Travelling with children in Thailand, in some ways, is easier than a trip to the grocery store. Thais love children and in many instances will shower attention and sweets on your offspring. Children can easily find ready playmates among their Thai counterparts and a 'temporary' nanny service at practically every stop. Thais are so family focused that you'll find otherwise disinterested parties wanting to help you across the street or pinching at your children's cheeks.

To smooth out the usual road bumps of dragging children from place to place, check out Lonely Planet's *Travel with Children*, which contains useful advice on how to cope with kids on the road, with a focus on travel in developing countries.

Health & Safety

For the most part parents needn't worry too much about health concerns, although it pays to lay down a few ground rules (such as regular hand washing) to head off potential medical problems. Children should be warned not to play with animals as rabies is relatively common in Thailand and many dogs are better at being barkers and garbage eaters than pets. All the usual health precautions apply (see p771).

Practicalities

Amenities specially geared towards young children – such as child-safety seats for cars, high chairs in restaurants or nappy-changing facilities in public restrooms – are virtually nonexistent in Thailand. Therefore parents will have to be extra resourceful in seeking out substitutes or just follow the example of Thai families (which means holding smaller children on their laps much of the time).

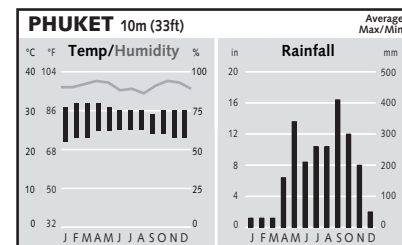
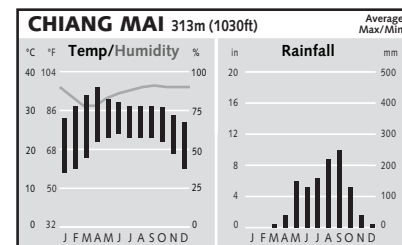
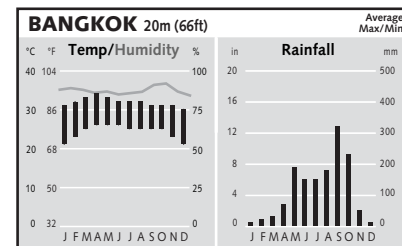
Baby formula and nappies (diapers) are available at minimarkets in the larger towns and cities, but for rural areas you'll need to bring along a sufficient supply.

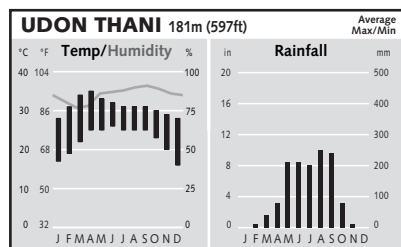
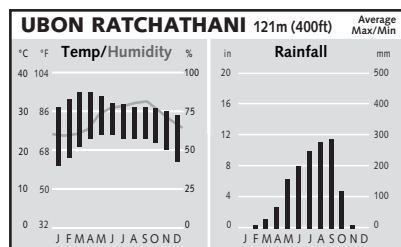
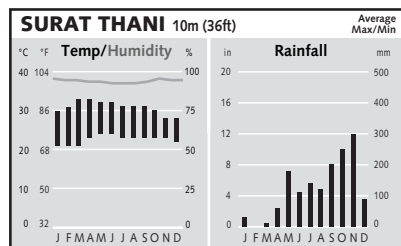
Sights & Activities

Of the many destinations in Thailand, kids will especially enjoy the beaches, as most are gentle bays good for beginner swimmers. Animal amusements abound in Thailand, but the conditions and treatments are often below par compared with the standards in the West. Elephant rides, bamboo rafting and other outdoor activities around Chiang Mai and Kanchanaburi are more animal and kid friendly. Older children might enjoy the northeastern town of Khon Kaen, which is decorated with dinosaur statues and boasts a national park and museum with dinosaur bones in situ. For other itinerary ideas, p27.

CLIMATE CHARTS

See p19 for further information on choosing the best time of year for your visit to Thailand.





COURSES

Cooking

You too can amaze your friends back home after attending a course in Thai cuisine. Cooking courses pop up wherever there are tourists willing to dice some shallots. Bangkok's courses (p143) tend to be more formal, with dedicated kitchen facilities and individual work stations; but Chiang Mai (p293) is the undisputed cooking-course capital. Elsewhere, a resourceful entrepreneur might hang a sign on the front door, and students join the rhythm of a typical Thai kitchen. See the individual destination chapters for recommended schools.

Language

Formal, university-affiliated language programmes are available in Bangkok (p144) and Chiang Mai (p293). Both cities also offer an array of short-term coursework tailored

to suit different communication needs from business Thai to reading and writing.

Muay Thai (Thai Boxing)

One of the fastest growing sectors of Thailand's educational tourism, *muay thai* (Thai boxing) training takes place at dozens of camps around the country. Before the global surge in interest, most *muay thai* camps were unable to accommodate short-term foreign fighters. Traditional *muay thai* camps, especially in the rural areas, are in the business of training winning fighters, who elevate the prestige and earnings of the teacher and the school. The training sessions are gruelling, the diet is rudimentary and the facilities are little more than a dusty ring for sparring and a few shared cabins. Some foreign fighters with the potential for competitive success have trained in these schools but they did so through personal introductions and a dedication to the sport.

Better suited for the athlete interested in the sport rather than becoming a potential prize fighter are the camps that specialise in training Westerners. Many of these facilities have English-speaking trainers and better equipment, and subsidise the training through increased tuition fees. Training periods can range from a one-day course to multiweek sessions. Do be aware that the potential for some camps to be interested only in tuition fees is a concern and it pays to do a lot of advance research. Bangkok and Chiang Mai have long-established foreigner-friendly training camps. Phuket and other resort towns have less serious schools intended for less serious students.

The website www.muaythai.com contains useful information including the addresses of training camps.

Meditation

Thailand has long been a popular place for Buddhist meditation study. Unique to Buddhism, particularly Theravada and to a lesser extent Tibetan Buddhism, is a system of meditation known as *vipassana* (*wipātsānaa* in Thai), a Pali word that roughly translates as 'insight'. Foreigners who come to Thailand to study *vipassana* can choose from dozens of temples and meditation centres specialising in these teachings. Teaching methods vary but the general emphasis is on observing mind-body processes from moment to moment. Thai language is

usually the medium of instruction but several places also provide instruction in English.

Contact details for some of the more popular meditation-oriented temples and centres are given in the destination sections of this guide. Instruction and accommodation are free of charge at temples, although donations are expected.

Some places require that you wear white clothes when staying overnight. For even a brief visit, wear clean and neat clothing (ie long trousers or skirt and sleeves that cover the shoulders).

For a detailed look at *vipassana* study in Thailand, read *A Guide to Buddhist Monasteries & Meditation Centres in Thailand*, which is available from the World Fellowship of Buddhists in Bangkok (p143).

Thai Massage

Thai massage is more like a yoga workout than a deep-tissue massage. The theory behind the tradition is to promote health by manipulating certain *sên* (pressure points) along the body meridians so that energy is distributed evenly throughout the nervous system. The dynamic aspects of Thai massage also address the muscular-skeletal system in a way that is often compared to modern physiotherapy and chiropractic.

Since a Thai massage usually involves pulling, twisting, thwacking and elbowing, most masseuses are small but powerfully strong women who use different angles and positions as leverage. Training in Thai massage is available in Bangkok and in Chiang Mai. The centre of Thai massage pedagogy is at Wat Pho (p139) in Bangkok.

CUSTOMS

Thailand prohibits the import of firearms and ammunition (unless registered in advance with the police department), illegal drugs and pornographic media. A reasonable amount of clothing for personal use, toiletries and professional instruments are allowed in duty free. Up to 200 cigarettes and 1L of wine or spirits can be brought into the country duty free. The **customs department** (www.customs.go.th) maintains a helpful website with more specific information.

When leaving Thailand, you must obtain an export licence for any antiques or objects of art, including newly cast Buddha images (exported for religious or cultural purposes).

Export licence applications can be made by submitting two front-view photos of the object(s), with no more than five objects to a photo, and a photocopy of your passport, along with the object(s) in question, to the **Department of Fine Arts** (DFA; ☎ 0 2628 5032). Allow three to five days for the application and inspection process to be completed.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Although Thailand is in no way a dangerous country to visit, it is smart to exercise caution, especially when it comes to dealing with strangers (both Thai and foreigners) and travelling alone. In reality, you are more likely to be ripped off or have a personal possession surreptitiously stolen than you are to be physically harmed.

Assault

Assault of travellers is very rare in Thailand, but it does happen. More and more, we've received letters from travellers detailing fights between themselves and Thai guesthouse workers. While both parties are probably to blame (alcohol is often involved), do be aware that causing a Thai to 'lose face' (feel public embarrassment or humiliation) might elicit an inexplicably strong and violent reaction. While a good cuss-out might be an acceptable way to vent anger in the West, it is an invitation for fisticuffs, a sneak attack or worse by a Thai.

There have been incidents of assault on lone female travellers on Ko Samui and Ko Pha-Ngan. Some of these crimes are purely opportunistic, but others often involve confusion over acceptable courtship behaviour that is not consistent between the two cultures. Women should be guarded about flirtations with strangers, especially at night and at bars.

Border Issues

Currently Thailand's southernmost provinces (Yala, Pattani and Narathiwat) are in the midst of a separatist movement. Since 2002, violence has escalated from government and military targets to schools and temples. To a lesser extent periodic bombings have occurred in the southern commercial hub of Hat Yai. It was hoped that the ouster of Thaksin, an unpopular figure in the south, would ease tensions, but this has not been the case. The current government is keen to

negotiate with separatist leaders but none have come forward to begin talks.

As of writing, no tourists have been directly targeted but civilian attacks have increased and it is uncertain what direction future violence will take. As for crossing the Thai–Malaysian border at Sungai Kolok border by train, we advise careful monitoring of the situation. Trains are still running and foreign travellers are still making the crossing but this train station has been bombed in the past and is still considered a target.

The Myanmar border has been quiet for about five years now, but in the past conflicts between Karen or Mon rebels and the Burmese national army would spill over into Thailand. Fighting can break out at any time and border crossings into sensitive areas are often closed as a result. Mae Hong Son Province in northern Thailand borders the Myanmar territories of the Shan and Wa armies, minority groups that control the amphetamine and opium trade in the area. The involvement of these groups in legitimate businesses and with legitimate governments has significantly blurred their otherwise outlaw status. The average tourist will not interact or be affected by the inner workings of this clandestine economy, but one should still be aware that armed conflict can occur in more remote regions.

Druggings & Drug Possession

Less common now than in the past, male travellers, especially, should be suspicious of flirtatious Thai women offering them cigarettes, drinks or food. Several travellers have reported waking up sometime later with a headache, only to find that their valuables have disappeared. Inviting a prostitute to your hotel room can result in the same effect.

It is illegal to buy, sell or possess opium, heroin, amphetamines, hallucinogenic mushrooms and marijuana in Thailand. A new era of vigilance against drug use and possession was ushered in by former prime minister Thaksin's 2003 war on drugs; during the height of the campaign police searched partygoers in Bangkok nightclubs and effectively scared many of the recreational drug users into abstinence.

Belying Thailand's anything-goes atmosphere are severely strict punishments for possession and trafficking that are not relaxed for foreigners. Possession of drugs can result

in at least one year or more of prison time. Drug smuggling – defined as attempting to cross a border with drugs in your possession – carries considerably higher penalties, including execution.

Ko Pha-Ngan is one of Thailand's leading centres for recreational drug use, and the Thai police have taken notice. Particularly on days leading up to Hat Rin's famous monthly full-moon rave, police often set up inspection points on the road between Thong Sala and Hat Rin. Every vehicle, including bicycles and motorcycles, is stopped and the passengers and vehicles thoroughly searched.

Scams

Thais can be so friendly and laid-back that some visitors are lulled into a false sense of security that makes them vulnerable to scams of all kinds. Scammers tend to haunt the areas where first-time tourists go, such as Bangkok's Grand Palace and Wat Pho area. Though you could come across them anywhere in Thailand, the overwhelming majority of scams take place in Bangkok with Chiang Mai a very distant second.

Most scams begin in the same way: a friendly and well-dressed Thai, or sometimes even a foreigner, approaches you and strikes up a conversation. Invariably your destination is closed or being cleaned, but your new friend offers several alternative activities, such as sightseeing at smaller temples or shopping at authentic markets.

The most common scam involves gems. The victims find themselves invited to a gem and jewellery shop – your new-found friend is picking up some merchandise for himself and you're just along for the ride. Somewhere along the way he usually claims to have a connection, often a relative, in your home country (what a coincidence!) with whom he has a regular gem export-import business. One way or another, victims are convinced (usually they convince themselves) that they can turn a profit by arranging a gem purchase and reselling the merchandise at home. After all, the jewellery shop just happens to be offering a generous discount today – it's a government or religious holiday, or perhaps it's the shop's 10th anniversary, or maybe they've just taken a liking to you!

There is a seemingly infinite number of variations on the gem scam, almost all of which end up with the victim making a purchase

of small, low-quality sapphires and posting them to their home countries. Once you return home, of course, the cheap sapphires turn out to be worth much less than you paid for them (perhaps one-tenth to one-half).

Many have invested and lost virtually all their savings; some admit they had been scammed even after reading warnings in this guidebook or those posted by the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) around Bangkok.

The Thai police are usually no help whatsoever, believing that merchants are entitled to whatever price they can get. The main victimisers are a handful of shops who get protection from certain high-ranking government officials. These officials put pressure on police not to prosecute or to take as little action as possible.

Card games are another way to separate suckers from their money. A friendly stranger approaches the lone traveller on the street, strikes up a conversation and then invites them to their house or apartment for a drink or meal. After a bit of socialising a friend or relative of the con arrives on the scene; it just so happens a little high-stakes card game is planned for later that day. Like the gem scam, the card-game scam has many variations, but eventually the victim is shown some cheating tactics to use with help from the 'dealer', some practice sessions take place and finally the game gets under way with several high rollers at the table. The mark is allowed to win a few hands first, then somehow loses a few, gets bankrolled by one of the friendly Thais, and then loses the Thai's money. Suddenly your new-found buddies aren't so friendly any more – they want the money you lost. Sooner or later you end up cashing in most or all of your travellers cheques or making a costly visit to an ATM. Again the police won't take any action because gambling is illegal in Thailand – you've actually broken the law.

Other minor scams involve tuk-tuk drivers, hotel employees and bar girls who take new arrivals on city tours; these almost always end up in high-pressure sales situations at silk, jewellery or handicraft shops. In this case the victim's greed isn't the ruling motivation – it's simply a matter of weak sales resistance.

Follow TAT's number-one suggestion to tourists: *Disregard all offers of free shopping or sightseeing help from strangers* – they invariably take a commission from your purchases. We would add: beware of deals that seem

too good to be true. You might also try lying whenever a stranger asks how long you've been in Thailand – if it's only been three days, say three weeks! Or save your Bangkok sightseeing until after you've been up north. The con artists rarely prey on anyone except new arrivals.

Contact the **tourist police** (☎ 1155) if you have any problems with consumer fraud.

Touts

Touting is a long-time tradition in Asia, and while Thailand doesn't have as many touts as, say, India, it has its share.

ACCOMMODATION TOUTS

In the popular tourist spots it seems like everyone – young boys waving fliers, tuk-tuk drivers, säämlaw (three-wheeled pedicab) drivers, schoolgirls – is touting something, usually hotel or guesthouse accommodation. For the most part they're completely harmless and sometimes they can be very informative. But take anything a tout says with two large grains of salt. Since touts work on commission and get paid just for delivering you to a guesthouse or hotel (whether you check in or not), they'll say anything to get you to the door.

The better hotels and guesthouses refuse to pay tout commissions – so the average tout will try to steer you away from such places. Hence don't believe them if they tell you the hotel or guesthouse you're looking for is closed, full, dirty or 'bad'. Sometimes (rarely) they're right but most times it's just a ruse to get you to a place that pays more commission.

Always have a look yourself before checking into a place recommended by a tout. Tuk-tuk and säämlaw drivers often offer free or low-cost rides to the place they're touting. If you have another place you're interested in, you might agree to go with a driver only if he or she promises to deliver you to your first choice after you've had a look at the place being touted. If drivers refuse, chances are it's because they know your first choice is a better one.

This type of commission work is not limited to low-budget guesthouses. Travel agencies at the airport and Hualamphong train station are notorious for talking newly arrived tourists into staying at badly located, overpriced hotels.

BUS TOUTS

Watch out for touts wearing fake TAT or tourist information badges at Hualamphong train station. They have been known to coerce travellers into buying tickets for private bus rides, saying the train is 'full' or 'takes too long'. Often the promised bus service turns out to be substandard and may take longer than the equivalent train ride due to the frequent changing of vehicles. You may be offered a 24-seat VIP 'sleeper' bus to Chiang Mai, for example, and end up stuffed into a minivan all the way. Such touts are bounty hunters who receive a set fee for every tourist they deliver to the bus companies. Avoid the travel agencies (many of which bear 'TAT' or even 'Lonely Planet' signs) just outside the train station for the same reason.

Theft & Fraud

Exercise diligence when it comes to your personal belongings. Ensure that your room is securely locked and carry your most important effects (passport, money, credit cards) on your person. Take care when leaving valuables in hotel safes.

Follow the same practice when you're travelling. A locked bag will not prevent theft on a long-haul bus when you're snoozing and the practiced thief has hours alone with your luggage. This is a common occurrence on the tourist buses from Khao San to the south or north to Chiang Mai.

When using a credit card, don't let vendors take your credit card out of your sight to run it through the machine. Unscrupulous merchants have been known to rub off three or four or more receipts with one purchase. Sometimes they wait several weeks – even months – between submitting each charge receipt to the bank, so that you can't remember whether you'd been billed by the same vendor more than once.

To avoid losing all of your travel money in an instant, always use a credit card that is not directly linked to your bank account back home so that the operator doesn't have access to immediate funds.

DISABLED TRAVELLERS

Thailand presents one large, ongoing obstacle course for the mobility impaired. With its high curbs, uneven pavements and nonstop traffic, Bangkok can be particularly difficult. Many streets must be crossed via pedestrian bridges

flanked with steep stairways, while buses and boats don't stop long enough for even the fully abled. Rarely are there any ramps or other access points for wheelchairs.

A number of more expensive, top-end hotels make consistent design efforts to provide disabled access to their properties. Other deluxe hotels with high employee-to-guest ratios are usually good about accommodating the mobility impaired by providing staff help where building design fails. For the rest, you're pretty much left to your own resources. Counter to the prevailing trends, **Worldwide Dive & Sail** (www.worldwidediveandsail.com) offers live-aboard diving programmes for the deaf and hard of hearing, and can work with wheelchair users.

Some organisations and publications:

Accessible Journeys (☎ 610 521 0339; www.disabledtytravel.com; 35 West Sellers Ave, Ridley Park, Pennsylvania, PA 19078, USA)

Mobility International USA (☎ 541 343 1284; www.miusa.org; 132 E Broadway, Suite 343, Eugene, OR 97401, USA)

Society for Accessible Travel & Hospitality (☎ 212 447 7284; www.sath.org; Ste 610, 347 Fifth Ave, New York, NY 10016, USA)

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES
Thai Embassies & Consulates

The website www.thaiembassy.org links to Thai diplomatic missions abroad. Here is a sample of Thai embassies worldwide.

Australia (☎ 02 6273 1149; www.thaiembassy.org.au; 111 Empire Circuit, Yarralumla, Canberra, ACT 2600); Consulates in Adelaide, Brisbane, Melbourne, Sydney and Perth

Cambodia (☎ 023 726 306; 196 MV Preah Nordom Blvd, Sangkat Tonle Bassa, Khan Chamkar Mon, Phnom Penh)

Canada (☎ 613 722 4444; www.magma.ca/~thaiott/mainpage.htm; 180 Island Park Dr, Ottawa, ON K1Y 0A2); Consulate in Vancouver.

France (☎ 01 56 26 50 50; thaipar@micronet.fr; 8 rue Greuze, 75116 Paris)

Germany (☎ 030 794 810; www.thaiembassy.de; Lepsiusstrasse 64-66, 12163 Berlin); Consulate in Frankfurt.

Israel (☎ 972 3 695 8980; www.thaiembassy.org/tela viv; 21 Shaal Hamelech Blvd, Tel Aviv)

Laos (☎ 21 214581 3; www.thaiembassy.org/Vientiane; Kaysonne Phomvihane Ave, Xaysettha, Vientiane); Consulate in Savannakhet.

Malaysia (☎ 603 248 8222; 206 Jalan Ampang, Kuala Lumpur); Consulates in Penang and Kota Bahr.

Myanmar (Burma; ☎ 01 512017, 512018; 437 Pyay Rd, 8 Ward, Kamayut township, Yangon)

UK (☎ 020 7589 2944; www.thaiembassyuk.org.uk; 29-30 Queen's Gate, London SW7 5JB); Consulates in Birmingham, Cardiff & Liverpool.

USA (☎ 202 944 3608; www.thaiembdc.org/index.htm; 1024 Wisconsin Ave NW, Washington, DC 20007); Consulates in Chicago, New York and Los Angeles.

Vietnam (☎ 04 823 5092-94; fax 04 823 5088; 63-65 Hoang Dieu St, Hanoi); Consulate in Ho Chi Minh City.

Embassies & Consulates in Thailand

Foreign embassies are located in Bangkok; some nations also have consulates in Chiang Mai and Khon Kaen.

Australia Embassy (Map p127; ☎ 0 2344 6300; www.austembassy.or.th; 37 Th Sathon Tai)

Cambodia Embassy (Map p127; ☎ 0 2254 6630; 185 Th Ratchadamri, Lumpini)

Canada Embassy (Map p127; ☎ 0 2636 0540; www.dfait-maeci.gc.ca/bangkok; 15th fl, Abdulrahim Bldg, 990 Th Phra Ram IV)

China Embassy (Map pp114-15; ☎ 0 2245 7044; www.chinaembassy.or.th/chn; 57 Th Ratchadaphisek)

Denmark Embassy (Map pp114-15; ☎ 0 2343 1100; www.ambbangkok.um.dk; 10 Soi 1, Th Sathon Tai)

EU Delegation (Map p127; ☎ 0 2305 2645; Kian Gwan Bldg, 19th fl, 140/1 Th Withayu)

France Embassy (Map pp124-5; ☎ 0 2657 5100; www.ambafrance-th.org; 35 Soi 36, Th Charoen Krung); Consular Section (Map p127; ☎ 0 2627 2150; 29 Th Sathon Tai)

Germany Embassy (Map p127; ☎ 0 2287 9000; www.german-embassy.or.th; 9 Th Sathon Tai)

India Embassy (Map pp122-3; ☎ 0 2258 0300-6; www.visatoindia.com/indian-embassy-in-thailand.html; 46 Soi Prasanmit/Soi 23, Th Sukhumvit); Consulate (Map pp276-7; ☎ 0 5324 3066; 344 Th Charoenrat, Chiang Mai)

Indonesia Embassy (Map pp128-9; ☎ 0 2252 3135; www.kbri-bangkok.com; 600-602 Th Phetburi Tat Mai)

Ireland Embassy (Map p127; ☎ 0 2677 7500; www.irelandinthailand.com; 28th fl, Q House, Th Sathon Tai)

Israel Embassy (Map pp122-3; ☎ 0 2204 9200; Ocean Tower 2, 25th fl, 25 Soi 19, Th Sukhumvit)

Japan Embassy (Map p127; ☎ 0 2207 8500; www.th.emb-japan.go.jp; 177 Th Withayu)

Laos Embassy (Map pp114-15; ☎ 0 2539 6679; www.bkklaembassy.com; 502/1-3 Soi Sahakarnpramoon, Th Pracha Uthit/Soi 39, Th Ramakamhaeng)

Malaysia Embassy (Map pp124-5; ☎ 0 2679 2190-9; 33-35 Th Sathon Tai)

Myanmar Embassy (Burma; Map pp124-5; ☎ 0 2233 2237, 0 2234 4698; www.mofa.gov.mm; 132 Th Sathon Neua)

Nepal Embassy (Map pp114-15; ☎ 0 2391 7240; www.immi.gov.np; 189 Soi 71, Th Sukhumvit)

Netherlands Embassy (Map pp128-9; ☎ 0 2309 5200; www.netherlandsembassy.in.th; 15 Soi Tonson, Th Ploenchit)

New Zealand Embassy (Map pp128-9; ☎ 0 2254 2530; www.nzembassy.com; 14th fl, M Thai Tower, All Seasons Pl, 87 Th Withayu)

Philippines Embassy (Map pp122-3; ☎ 0 2259 0139; www.philembassy-bangkok.net; 760 Th Sukhumvit)

Singapore Embassy (Map pp124-5; ☎ 0 2286 2111; www.mfa.gov.sg/bangkok; 129 Th Sathon Tai)

South Africa Embassy (Map p127; ☎ 0 2253 8473; www.dfa.gov.za; 6th fl, Park Pl, 231 Th Sarasin)

Spain Embassy (Map pp122-3; ☎ 0 2661 8284; www.embes.or.th; 193 Th Ratchadaphisek)

Switzerland Embassy (Map pp128-9; ☎ 0 2253 0156; 35 Th Withayu)

UK Embassy (Map pp128-9; ☎ 0 2305 8333; www.britishembassy.gov.uk; 14 Th Withayu)

USA Embassy (Map pp128-9; ☎ 0 2205 4000; <http://bangkok.usembassy.gov>; 120-22 Th Withayu); Consulate (Map pp280-1; ☎ 0 5325 2629; 387 Th Wichayanon, Chiang Mai)

Vietnam Embassy (Map pp128-9; ☎ 0 2251 5836-8; www.vietnamembassy.or.th; 83/1 Th Withayu)

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Thai festivals tend to be linked to the agricultural seasons or to Buddhist holidays and are most frequent from February to March, after the main rice harvest is in.

The general word for festival in Thai is *ngaan thêtsàkaan*. The exact dates for festivals may vary from year to year, either because of the lunar calendar or because local authorities have decided to change festival dates. For specific dates, contact TAT.

January/February

That Phanom Festival A 10-day-long homage to the northeast's most sacred Buddhist stupa (Phra That Phanom) in Nakhon Phanom Province. Pilgrims from all over the country, as well as from Laos, attend.

Bangkok International Film Festival (www.bangkokfilm.org) Films from around the world, with an emphasis on Asian cinema, are screened in the capital city. Events end with the awarding of the festival's Golden Kinnaree in a range of categories.

Chiang Mai Flower Festival During this festival, colourful floats and parades exhibit Chiang Mai's cultivated flora.

Magha Puja (*maakhá buachaa*) Held on the full moon of the third lunar month to commemorate Buddha preaching to 1250 enlightened monks who came to hear him 'without prior summons'. A public holiday throughout the country, it culminates with a candle-lit walk around the *wian thian* (main chapel) at every wat.

Phra Nakhon Khiri Diamond Festival This is a week-long celebration of Phetchaburi's history and architecture focused on Phra Nakhon Khiri Historical Park (also known as Khao Wang), a hill topped by a former royal palace overlooking the city. It features a sound-and-light show on Khao Wang; the temples are festooned with lights and presentations of Thai classical dance-drama.

Chinese New Year Called *trùt jìn* in Thai, Chinese all over Thailand celebrate their Lunar New Year with a week of house-cleaning, lion dances and fireworks.

April

Prasat Hin Khao Phanom Rung Festival A festival to commemorate Prasat Hin Khao Phanom Rung Historical Park, an impressive Angkor-style temple complex in Buriram Province. It involves a daytime procession up Phanom Rung and spectacular sound-and-light shows at night. The actual date depends on the lunar cycles – be prepared for very hot weather.

Songkran Held from 13 to 15 April, this is the celebration of the lunar New Year. Buddha images are 'bathed', monks and elders receive the respect of younger Thais by the sprinkling of water over their hands, and a lot of water is tossed about. Bangkok and Chiang Mai became watery battlegrounds. Songkran generally gives everyone a chance to release their frustrations and literally cool off during the peak of the hot season.

May

Visakha Puja (*Wisākhā buuchaa*) Falling on the 15th day of the waxing moon in the sixth lunar month, this day commemorates the date of the Buddha's birth, enlightenment and *parinibbana* (passing away). Activities are centred around the wat, with candle-lit processions, much chanting and sermonising.

June

Bun Phra Wet (Phi Ta Khon) Festival An animist-Buddhist celebration, held in Loei's Amphoe Dan Sai, in which revellers dress in garish 'spirit' costumes, wear painted masks and brandish carved wooden phallices. The festival commemorates a Buddhist legend in which a host of spirits (*phii*) appeared to greet the Buddha-to-be upon his return to his home town, during his penultimate birth.

Rocket Festival (*bun bang fai*) In the northeast, villagers craft large skyrockets of bamboo, which they then fire into the sky to bring rain for rice fields. This festival is best celebrated in Yasothon, Ubon Ratchathani and Nong Khai.

Royal Ploughing Ceremony To kick off the official rice-planting season, the king participates in this ancient Brahman ritual at Sanam Luang in Bangkok.

July

Asalha Puja (*āsānhā buuchaa*) This festival commemorates the Buddha's first sermon.

Khao Phansa (*khāo phansāa*) A public holiday and the beginning of Buddhist 'lent', this is the traditional time of year for young men to enter the monkhood for the rainy season and for all monks to station themselves in a monastery for three months. It's a good time to observe a Buddhist ordination. Khao Phansa is celebrated in the northeast of Ubon Ratchathani by parading huge carved candles on floats in the streets.

August

Queen's Birthday In Bangkok, Th Ratchadamnoen Klang and the Grand Palace are festooned with coloured lights. Held on 12 August.

September/October

Narathiwat Fair An annual week-long festival celebrating local culture in Narathiwat Province, with boat races, dove-singing contests, handicraft displays and traditional southern Thai music and dance.

Thailand International Swan-Boat Races These take place on Mae Nam Chao Phraya outside of Ayutthaya near the Bang Sai Folk Arts Centre.

Vegetarian Festival A nine-day celebration most notably in Bangkok, Trang and Phuket during which devout Chinese Buddhists eat only vegetarian food. There are various ceremonies at Chinese temples and merit-making processions that bring to mind Hindu Thaiusam in its exhibition of self-mortification. Smaller towns throughout the country also celebrate the veggie fest in the Chinese business sections of town.

November

Kathin (*thāwt kàthīn*) A month at the end of the Buddhist lent during which new monastic robes and requisites are offered to the *Sangha* (monastic community). In Nan Province longboat races are held on Mae Nan.

Loi Krathong On the proper full-moon night, small lotus-shaped baskets or boats made of banana leaves containing flowers, incense, candles and a coin are floated on Thai rivers, lakes and canals. This is a peculiarly Thai festival that probably originated in Sukhothai and is best celebrated in the north. In Chiang Mai, where the festival is called Yi Peng, residents also launch paper hot-air balloons into the sky.

Surin Annual Elephant Roundup Held on the third weekend of November, Thailand's biggest elephant show is popular with tourists. If you have ever had the desire to see a lot of elephants in one place, then here's your chance.

River Kwae Bridge Week Sound-and-light shows at the Death Railway Bridge in Kanchanaburi. Events include historical exhibitions and vintage-train rides on the infamous railway.

December

King's Birthday This public holiday is celebrated with some fervour in Bangkok. As with the Queen's Birthday, it features lots of lights and other decorations along Th Ratchadamnoen Klang. Other Thai cities hold colourful parades. Some people erect temporary shrines to the king outside their homes or businesses. Held on 5 December.

FOOD

Most restaurants in Thailand are inexpensive by international standards, hence we haven't divided them into Budget, Midrange and Top End categories. A typical meal for one at a street stall should cost 25B to 40B; a restaurant meal for one should be about 100B to 150B. Guesthouses and restaurants catering to foreigners tend to charge more than local restaurants. See p75 for thorough descriptions of the cuisine and the kinds of restaurant you'll find in Thailand.

GAY & LESBIAN TRAVELLERS

Thai culture is relatively tolerant of both male and female homosexuality. There is a fairly prominent gay and lesbian scene in Bangkok (see p170) and in Phuket. With regard to dress or mannerism, lesbians and gays are generally accepted without comment. However, public displays of affection – whether heterosexual or homosexual – are frowned upon. The **Utopia** (www.utopia-asia.com) website posts lots of Thailand information for gay and lesbian visitors.

HOLIDAYS

Government offices and banks close on the following days:

Jan 1 New Year's Day

Apr 6 Chakri Day, commemorating the founder of the Chakri dynasty, Rama I

May 5 Coronation Day, commemorating the 1946 coronation of HM the King and HM the Queen

Jul (date varies) Khao Phansa, the beginning of Buddhist 'lent'

Aug 12 Queen's Birthday

Oct 23 (Chulalongkorn Day)

Oct/Nov (date varies) Ok Phansa, the end of Buddhist 'lent'

Dec 5 King's Birthday

Dec 10 Constitution Day

INSURANCE

A travel-insurance policy to cover theft, loss and medical problems is a good idea. Policies offer differing medical-expense options. There

is a wide variety of policies available, so check the small print. Be sure that the policy covers ambulances or an emergency flight home.

Some policies specifically exclude 'dangerous activities', which can include scuba diving, motorcycling or even trekking. A locally acquired motorcycle licence is not valid under some policies.

You may prefer a policy that pays doctors or hospitals directly rather than you having to pay on the spot and claim later. If you have to claim later make sure you keep all documentation.

See p771 for recommendations on health insurance and p766 for details on vehicle insurance.

INTERNET ACCESS

You'll find plenty of internet cafés in most larger towns and cities, and in many guesthouses and hotels as well. The going rate is anywhere from 30B to 80B an hour. Bangkok typically has fast connections and new machines, while the provinces are a little bit behind. Wi-fi is available in some upscale hotels but the daily charge is usually around 500B to 600B.

Most hotels use RJ11 phone jacks, though in older hotels and guesthouses the phones may still be hard-wired. In the latter case you may be able to use a fax line in the hotel or guesthouse office, since all fax machines in Thailand are connected via RJ11 jacks.

Temporary internet accounts are available from several Thai ISPs. One of the better ones is WebNet, offered by **CSLoxinfo** (www.cslloxinfo.com).

LEGAL MATTERS

In general Thai police don't hassle foreigners, especially tourists. If anything they generally go out of their way not to arrest a foreigner breaking minor traffic laws, instead taking the approach that a friendly warning will suffice.

One major exception is drugs, which most Thai police view as either a social scourge against which it's their duty to enforce the letter of the law, or an opportunity to make untaxed income via bribes.

If you are arrested for any offence, the police will allow you the opportunity to make a phone call to your embassy or consulate in Thailand, if you have one, or to a friend or relative if not. There's a whole set of legal codes governing the

length of time and manner in which you can be detained before being charged or put on trial, but a lot of discretion is left to the police. In the case of foreigners the police are more likely to bend these codes in your favour. However, as with police worldwide, if you don't show respect you will make matters worse.

Thai law does not presume an indicted detainee to be either 'guilty' or 'innocent' but rather as a 'suspect', whose guilt or innocence will be decided in court. Trials are usually speedy.

The **tourist police** (☎ 1155) can be very helpful in cases of arrest. Although they typically have no jurisdiction over the kinds of cases handled by regular cops, they may be able to help with translation or with contacting your embassy. The tourist police can also help with most serious hassles regarding rip-offs or thefts. You can call a hotline number 24 hours a day to lodge complaints or to request assistance with regards to personal safety.

MAPS

The Roads Association of Thailand publishes a good large-format, 48-page, bilingual road atlas called *Thailand Highway Map*. The atlas, which is updated every year, includes dozens of city maps, distance charts and an index. It also gives driving distances and a lot of travel and sightseeing information. Beware of inferior copies. A big advantage of the *Thailand Highway Map* is that the town and city names are printed in Thai as well as Roman script.

ThinkNet (www.thinknet.co.th) produces high-quality city and country series, including bilingual maps and interactive CDs to Bangkok and Thailand.

Do-it-yourself trekkers, or anyone with a keen interest in geography, may find sheet maps issued by the Thai military to be helpful. These maps are available at a number of scales, complete with elevations, contour lines, place names (in both Thai and Roman script) and roads. These maps can be purchased at the **Royal Thai Survey Department** (Krom Phaen Thi Thahan; Map p130; ☎ 0 2222 8844; Th Kanlayana Maitri, Bangkok), opposite the Interior Ministry on the western side of Th Ratchini in Ko Ratanakosin.

MONEY

The basic unit of Thai currency is the *baht*. There are 100 *satang* in one baht; coins include 25-satang and 50-satang pieces and baht

in 1B, 5B and 10B coins. Older coins have Thai numerals only, while newer coins have Thai and Arabic numerals.

Paper currency is issued in the following denominations: 10B (brown), 20B (green), 50B (blue), 100B (red), 500B (purple) and 1000B (beige). 10B bills are being phased out in favour of the 10B coin.

ATMs & Credit/Debit Cards

Debit and ATM cards issued by a bank in your own country can be used at ATM machines around Thailand to withdraw cash (in Thai baht only) directly from your account back home. ATMs are widespread throughout the country and can be relied on for the bulk of your spending cash. You can also use ATMs to buy baht at foreign exchange booths at some banks.

Credit cards as well as debit cards can be used for purchases at many shops, hotels and restaurants. The most commonly accepted cards are Visa and MasterCard, followed by Amex and Japan Card Bureau (JCB).

To report a lost or stolen credit/debit card, call the following telephone hotlines in Bangkok:

American Express (☎ 0 2273 5544)

Diners Club (☎ 0 2238 3660)

MasterCard (☎ 001 800 11887 0663)

Visa (☎ 001 800 11535 0660)

Changing Money

Banks or the more rare private moneychangers offer the best foreign-exchange rates. When buying baht, US dollars are the most accepted currency, followed by British pounds and Euros. Most banks charge a commission and duty for each travellers cheque cashed.

Current exchange rates are printed in the *Bangkok Post* and the *Nation* every day, or you can walk into any Thai bank and ask to see a daily rate sheet.

See p19 for information on the cost of travel in Thailand.

Exchange Control

There is no limit to the amount of Thai or foreign currency you may bring into the country.

There are certain monetary requirements for foreigners entering Thailand; demonstrations of adequate funds varies per visa type but typically does not exceed a traveller's estimated trip budget. Rarely will you be

asked to produce such financial evidence, but do be aware that such laws do exist. For specific amounts for each visa type, visit the website of the **Ministry of Foreign Affairs** (www.mfa.go.th).

Upon leaving Thailand, you're permitted to take out no more than 50,000B per person without special authorisation; export of foreign currencies is unrestricted. An exception is made if you're going to Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar or Vietnam, where the limit is 500,000B.

It's legal to open a foreign currency account at any commercial bank in Thailand. As long as the funds originate from out of the country, there are not any restrictions on maintenance or withdrawal.

Tipping

Tipping is not generally expected in Thailand. The exception is loose change from a large restaurant bill; if a meal costs 488B and you pay with a 500B note, some Thais will leave the 12B change. It's not so much a tip as a way of saying 'I'm not so money grubbing as to grab every last baht'. On the other hand, change from a 50B note for a 44B bill will usually not be left behind.

At many hotel restaurants or other upmarket eateries, a 10% service charge will be added to your bill. When this is the case, tipping is not expected. Bangkok has adopted some standards of tipping, especially in restaurants frequented by foreigners.

PHOTOGRAPHY & VIDEO Film & Equipment

Print film is fairly inexpensive and widely available throughout Thailand. Slide film can be hard to find outside Bangkok and Chiang Mai, so be sure to stock up before heading out to rural areas.

Memory cards for digital cameras are generally widely available in the more popular formats.

Photographing People

In some of the regularly visited areas hill-tribe people expect money if you photograph them, while certain hill tribes will not allow you to point a camera at them. Use discretion when photographing villagers anywhere in Thailand as a camera can be a very intimidating instrument. You may feel better leaving your camera behind when visiting certain areas.

Processing

Film processing is generally quite good in the larger cities in Thailand and also quite inexpensive. Dependable E6 processing is available at several labs in Bangkok but is untrustworthy elsewhere. Kodachrome must be sent out of the country for processing, so it can take up to two weeks to get it back.

Professionals will find a number of labs in Bangkok that offer same-day pick-up and delivery at no extra cost within the city. **Image Quality Lab** (1Q Lab; Map pp124-5; ☎ 0 2266 4080; 160/5 ITF Bldg, Th Silom, Bangkok) offers the widest range of services, with all types of processing (except for Kodachrome), slide duplication, scanning and custom printing.

POST

Thailand has a very efficient postal service and local postage is inexpensive. Typical provincial post offices keep the following hours: 8.30am to 4.30pm weekdays and 9am to noon on Saturday. Larger main post offices in provincial capitals may also be open for a half-day on Sunday.

Most provincial post offices sell do-it-yourself packing boxes, and some will pack your parcels for you for a small fee. Don't send cash or other valuables through the mail.

Thailand's poste restante service is generally very reliable, though these days few tourists use it. When you receive mail, you must show your passport and fill out some paperwork.

SHOPPING

Many bargains await you in Thailand if you have the luggage space to carry them back. Don't go shopping in the company of touts, tour guides or friendly strangers as they will inevitably take a commission on anything you buy, thus driving prices up.

Antiques

Real antiques cannot be taken out of Thailand without a permit. No Buddha image, new or old, may be exported without the permission of the Fine Arts Department. See p741 for information.

Merchandise in the tourist antique shops are, predictably, fantastically overpriced. Northern Thailand has become the best source of Thai antiques as many items are brought into Thailand from Myanmar and offer good value.

BARGAINING

Items sold by street vendors in markets or in many shops are flexibly priced – that is, the price is negotiable. Prices in department stores, minimarts, 7-Elevens and so forth are fixed. If the same kind of merchandise is offered in a department store and a small shop or market, check the department-store price for a point of reference.

Thais respect a good haggler. Always let the vendor make the first offer then ask 'Is that your best price?' or 'Can you lower the price?'. This usually results in an immediate discount from the first price. Now it's your turn to make a counteroffer; always start low but don't bargain at all unless you're serious about buying. Negotiations continue until a price is agreed – there's no set discount from the asking price as some vendors start ridiculously high, others closer to the 'real' price.

Do your homework by shopping around, and the whole process becomes easier with practice. It helps immeasurably to keep the negotiations relaxed and friendly, and to speak slowly, clearly and calmly. Vendors will almost always give a better price to someone they like. Try smiling and being jovial as it often helps relax the seller.

Ceramics

Many kinds of hand-thrown pottery, old and new, are available throughout the kingdom. The best-known ceramics are the greenish Thai celadon products from the Sukhothai-Si Satchanalai area, red-earth clay of Don Kwian, and central Thailand's *benjarong* or 'five-colour' style. Benjarong is based on Chinese patterns while celadon is a Thai original that has been imitated throughout China and Southeast Asia. Rough, unglazed pottery from the north and northeast can also be very appealing. For international styles, the many ceramic factories of Lampang are the best places to look for bargains.

Clothing

Tailor-made and ready-to-wear clothes tend to be inexpensive. If you're not particular about style you could pick up an entire wardrobe of travelling clothes at Bangkok's Siam Square or Pratunam street markets for what you'd pay for one designer shirt in New York, Paris or Milan.

You're more likely to get a good fit if you visit a tailor, but be wary of the quickie 24-hour tailor shops; they often use inferior fabric and have poor workmanship. It's best to ask Thai or long-time foreign residents for a recommendation and then go for two or three fittings.

Fakes

In Bangkok, Chiang Mai and other tourist centres there is black-market street trade in fake designer goods branded with names such as Benetton, DKNY, Lacoste, Von Dutch,

Ralph Lauren, Levi's, Reebok, Rolex, Cartier and more. No-one pretends they're the real thing, at least not the vendors.

In some cases foreign-name brands are produced under licence in Thailand and represent good value. A pair of legally produced Levi's jeans, for example, costs a lot less from a Thai street vendor, than in the company's home town of San Francisco.

Furniture

Rattan and hardwood furniture items are often good buys and can be made to order. Bangkok and Chiang Mai have the best selection. With the ongoing success of teak farming and recycling, teak furniture has again become a bargain in Thailand if you find the right places. Asian rosewood is also a good buy.

Gems & Jewellery

Thailand is the world's largest exporter of gems and ornaments, rivalled only by India and Sri Lanka. Although rough-stone sources in Thailand have decreased dramatically, stones are now imported from Australia, Sri Lanka and other countries to be cut, polished and traded.

Be wary of special 'deals' that are offered for one day only or that set you up as a 'courier' in which you're promised big money. Shop around and *don't be hasty*. Remember, there's no such thing as a 'government sale' or 'factory price' at a gem or jewellery shop; the Thai government does not own or manage any gem or jewellery shops. See p742 for a detailed warning on gem fraud.

If you know what you are doing you can make some really good buys in both unset gems and finished jewellery. Buy from reputable dealers only, preferably members of the Jewel Fest Club, a guarantee programme established by TAT and the Thai Gem & Jewellery Traders Association (TGJTA). When you purchase an item of jewellery from a shop that is identified as a member of the Jewel Fest Club, a certificate detailing your purchase will be issued. This guarantees a refund, less 10%, if you return the merchandise to the point of sale within 30 days. You can obtain a list of members direct from **Jewel Fest Club** (☎ 0 2630 1390; www.jewelfest.com) or from TAT.

Lacquerware

Lacquer comes from the *Melanorrhea usitata* tree and in its most basic form is mixed with paddy-husk ash to form a light, flexible, waterproof coating over bamboo frames. To make a lacquerware object, a bamboo frame is first woven. If the item is top quality, only the frame is bamboo and horse or donkey hairs will be wound round it. With lower-quality lacquerware, the whole object is made from bamboo. The lacquer is then coated over the framework and allowed to dry. After several days it is sanded down with ash from rice husks, and another coating of lacquer is applied. A high-quality item may have seven layers of lacquer.

The lacquerware is engraved and painted, then it is polished to remove the paint from everywhere except in the engravings. Multi-coloured lacquerware is produced by repeated applications. From start to finish it can take five or six months to produce a high-quality piece of lacquerware, which may have as many as five colours. Flexibility is one characteristic of good lacquerware: a well-made bowl can have its rim squeezed together until the sides meet without suffering damage. The quality and precision of the engraving is another thing to look for.

Good lacquerware, much of which is made in Myanmar (although it originated in Chiang Mai) and sold along the northern Myanmar border, can be found in Thailand. Try Mae Sot, Mae Sariang and Mae Sai for the best buys. Common lacquerware includes bowls, trays, plates, boxes, cups, vases and many other everyday items, as well as pure objects of art.

Textiles

Thai silk is considered the best in the world – the coarse weave and soft texture of the silk means it is more easily dyed than harder, smoother silks, resulting in brighter colours and a unique lustre. Silk can be purchased cheaply in the north and northeast, especially Surin, where it is made, typically by handicraft villages. Every region of Thailand has developed a distinctive silk pattern that can often be divided even further into village characteristics.

Traditional Thai cotton shirts, known as *mâw hâwm* (Thai work shirt), are part of the weaving culture and village fashion; this type of cotton is popular in the northeast. The northeast is also famous for *mât-mii* cloth – thick cotton or silk fabric woven from tie-dyed threads – similar to Indonesia's *ikat* fabrics.

Each hill tribe has a tradition of embroidery that has been translated into the modern market place as bags and jewellery. Much of what you'll find in the marketplaces have been machine made but there are many NGO cooperatives that help villagers get their goods to the consumers. Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai are good places to start.

In the north you can also find Lanna-style textiles based on intricate Thai Daeng, Thai Dam and Thai Lü patterns from Nan, Laos and China's Xishuangbanna.

Fairly nice *paa-té* batik is available in the south in patterns that are more similar to the batik found in Malaysia than in Indonesia.

The colourful *mâwn khwâan* – a hard, triangle-shaped pillow made in the northeast – makes a good souvenir and comes in many sizes.

TELEPHONE

The telephone system in Thailand is operated by the government-subsidised, privately owned Telephone Organisation of Thailand (TOT) under the Communications Authority of Thailand (CAT). It is efficient if costly, and from Bangkok you can direct dial most major centres with little difficulty.

The telephone country code for Thailand is ☎ 66. Thailand no longer uses separate area codes for Bangkok and the provinces, so all phone numbers in the country use eight digits (preceded by a ☎ 0 if you're dialling domestically). When dialling Thailand from outside the country, you must first dial whatever international access code is necessary (eg from

the USA dial ☎ 011 first for all international calls), followed by ☎ 66 and then the phone number in Thailand.

International Calls

If you want to direct-dial an international number from a private telephone, just dial ☎ 001 before the number. Dial ☎ 100 for operator-assisted international calls.

In addition to the standard direct-dial access number, telephone providers also have various connection prefixes with variable but cheaper calling rates. These include ☎ 007, 008 and 009.

A service called Home Country Direct is available at Bangkok's main post office (Map pp124-5). Home Country Direct phones offer easy one-button connection to international operators in 40-odd countries around the world.

Hotels usually add surcharges (sometimes as much as 50% over and above the CAT rate) for international long-distance calls. Private long-distance phone offices with international service always charge more than the government offices, although they are usually lower than hotel rates. Some guesthouses will have a mobile phone or landline that customers can use for a per-minute fee.

The Communications Authority of Thailand (CAT) does not offer long-distance services to Malaysia or Laos. To call these countries you must go through TOT. For Laos, you can direct-dial ☎ 007 and country code 856, followed by the area code and number you want to reach. Malaysia can be dialled direct by prefixing the Malaysian number (including area code) with the code ☎ 09.

Mobile (Cellular) Phones

Thailand is on a GSM network. Cellular operators in Thailand include AIS, Orange and DTAC – all of which will allow you to use their SIM cards in an imported phone, as long as your phone isn't SIM-locked. For short-term visitors, one route is to buy a phone in Thailand along with a SIM card, telephone number and refill used minutes with prepaid phone cards. Bangkok is the best place to get started: MBK (p174) has a whole section dedicated to new and used phones and phonecards can be bought from 7-Elevens. Rates are typically around 3B per minute anywhere in Thailand and between 5B to 7B for international calls.

To accommodate the growth in cell phone usage, Thailand has introduced an '8' prefix to all mobile numbers; ie ☎ 01 234 5678 is now ☎ 081 234 5678.

Pay Phones & Phonecards

Basically there are two kinds of coin-operated public pay phones in Thailand: 'red' (local city calls) and 'blue' (both local and long-distance calls within Thailand). Then there are the phonecard phone booths that accept only certain kinds of card: 'green' takes domestic TOT phonecards, 'yellow' takes Lenso international phonecards and most major credit cards.

Local calls from pay phones cost 1B for 164 seconds (add more coins for more time). Long-distance rates within the country vary from 3B to 12B per minute, depending on the distance.

Rates for international calls using phonecards are usually around 7B per minute and can be bought from 7-Elevens in varying denominations (300B to 500B). A CAT-issued, prepaid international phonecard, called ThaiCard, comes in 300B and 500B denominations and allows calls to many countries at standard CAT rates. You can use the ThaiCard codes from either end, for example calling the UK from Thailand or calling Thailand from the UK.

TIME

Thailand's time zone is seven hours ahead of GMT/UTC (London). At government offices and local cinemas, times are often expressed according to the 24-hour clock, eg 11pm is written 2300. See also the World Time Zone map (pp18-19).

The official year in Thailand is reckoned from 543 BC, the beginning of the Buddhist Era, so that AD 2005 is BE 2548, AD 2006 is BE 2549 etc.

TOILETS

As in many other Asian countries, the 'squat toilet' is the norm except in hotels and guesthouses geared towards tourists and international business travellers. These sit more-or-less flush with the surface of the floor, with two footpads on either side. For travellers who have never used a squat toilet, it takes a bit of getting used to.

If there's no mechanical flush, toilet users scoop water from an adjacent bucket or tank with a plastic bowl and use it to clean their nether regions while still squatting over the

toilet. A few extra scoops of water must be poured into the toilet basin to flush waste into the septic system.

More rustic yet are toilets in rural areas, which may simply consist of a few planks over a hole in the ground.

Even in places where sit-down toilets are installed, the plumbing may not be designed to take toilet paper. In such cases the usual washing bucket will be standing nearby or there will be a waste basket where you're supposed to place used toilet paper.

TOURIST INFORMATION

The government-operated tourist information and promotion service, **Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT)**, was founded in 1960 and produces excellent pamphlets on sightseeing, accommodation and transport. There are information offices overseas and in major tourist destinations in Thailand.

TAT Offices Abroad

Check TAT's website for contact information in Hong Kong, Taipei, Seoul, Tokyo, Osaka, Fukuoka, Stockholm and Rome.

Australia (☎ 02 9247 7549; info@thailand.net.au; Level 2, 75 Pitt St, Sydney, NSW 2000)

France (☎ 01 53 53 47 00; tatpar@wanadoo.fr; 90 ave des Champs Elysées, 75008 Paris)

Germany (☎ 069 138 1390; tatfra@tat.or.th; Bethmannstrasse 58, D-60311 Frankfurt/Main)

Malaysia (☎ 603 216 23480; sawatdi@po.jaring.my; Ste 22.01, Level 22, Menara Citibank, 165 Jalan Ampang, 50450 Kuala Lumpur)

Singapore (☎ 65 6235 7901; tatsin@singnet.com.sg; c/o Royal Thai embassy, 370 Orchard Rd, 238870)

UK (☎ 020 7925 2511; tatuk@tat.or.th; 3rd fl, Brook House, 98-99 Jermy St, London SW1Y 6EE)

USA New York (☎ 212 432 0433; tatny@tat.or.th; 61 Broadway, Ste 2810, New York, NY 10006); Los Angeles (☎ 323 461 9814; tatla@ix.netcom.com; 1st fl, 611 North Larchmont Blvd, LA, CA 90004)

Tourist Offices in Thailand

TAT's head office is in Bangkok and there are 22 regional offices spread throughout the country. Check the destination chapters for the TAT office in the towns you're planning to visit.

VISAS

The **Ministry of Foreign Affairs** (www.mfa.go.th) oversees immigration and visas issues. Check the website or the nearest Thai embassy or consulate for application procedures and costs.

The Thai government allows 41 different nationalities, including those from most of Europe, Australia, New Zealand and the USA, to enter the country without a prearranged visa for 30 days at no charge. This status is called a 'visa exemption' and in your passport you'll receive an entry and exit stamp that indicates the period you are allowed to remain in country.

Without proof of an onward ticket and sufficient funds for one's projected stay any visitor can be denied entry, but in practice your ticket and funds are rarely checked if you're dressed neatly for the immigration check.

Non-Immigrant Visas

The Non-Immigrant Visa is good for 90 days and is intended for foreigners entering the country for business, study, retirement and extended family visits. If you plan to apply for a Thai work permit, you'll need to possess a Non-Immigrant Visa first.

Tourist Visas

If you plan to stay in Thailand more than a month, you should apply for the 60-day Tourist Visa before arrival.

Visa Extensions & Renewals

You can apply at any immigration office for visa extensions. Most foreigners use the **Bangkok immigration office** (☎ 0 2287 3101; Soi Suan Phlu, Th Sathon Tai; ☎ 9am-noon & 1-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat) or the **Chiang Mai immigration office** (Map pp276-7; ☎ 0 5320 1755-6; Th Mahidon; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri) for extensions of most types of visa. The usual fee for a visa extension is 1900B.

The 30-day, visa exemption can be extended for seven to 10 days (depending on the immigration office). Prior to October 2006, there was no limit on the number of times within a year that a national from a visa-exempt country could leave Thailand and reenter in order to receive another 30-day entry stamp. Under new regulations, entry stamps will be renewable two consecutive times for a maximum stay of 90 days, after which the visitor must remain outside of the country for at least 90 days before being able to reenter. As of early 2007, travellers were reporting that some border officials were inconsistent in the enforcement of these new regulations and allowing for a third consecutive stamp. But it is unclear how long this practice will continue.

The 60-day Tourist Visa can be extended up to 30 days at the discretion of Thai immigration

authorities. The fee for extension of a Tourist Visa is 1900B.

For all types of visa extensions, bring along two passport-sized photos and one copy each of the photo and visa pages of your passport. Remember to dress neatly and do all visa extensions yourself, rather than hiring a third party.

If you overstay your visa, the usual penalty is a fine of 500B per day, with a 20,000B limit. Fines can be paid at the airport or in advance at an immigration office. If you've overstayed only one day, you don't have to pay. Children under 14 travelling with a parent do not have to pay the penalty.

WOMEN TRAVELLERS

Women make up nearly half of all foreign visitors to Thailand, a much higher ratio than the worldwide average, and female travellers generally face few problems. With the great amount of respect afforded to women, an equal measure should be returned.

In the provincial towns, it is advisable to dress conservatively, covering shoulders and belly buttons. Outside of Bangkok, most Thai women cover up in the sun to avoid unneces-

sary exposure since white skin is considered more beautiful. That Westerners believe the opposite is an endless source of amusement and confusion.

Attacks and rapes are less common in Thailand than in many Western countries, but incidents do occur especially when an attacker observes a vulnerable target; a drunk or solo woman. If you return home from a bar alone, be sure to have your wits about you. The full-moon parties at Ko Pha-Ngan are common trouble spots. Avoid taking dodgy gypsy cabs or accepting rides from strangers late at night – common sense stuff that might escape your notice in a new environment filled with hospitable people.

While Bangkok might be a men's paradise, foreign women are finding their own Romeos on the Thai beaches. As more couples emerge, more Thai men will make themselves available. Women who aren't interested in such romantic encounters should not presume that Thai men have platonic motives. Oftentimes, Thai men ignore their own culture's strictures regarding mingling of the sexes when it comes to dealing with a foreign women. There's no threat of danger, just misconceptions.

Transport

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GETTING THERE & AWAY

ENTERING THE COUNTRY

Entry procedures for Thailand, by air or by land, are straightforward. You'll have to show your passport, with any visa you may have obtained beforehand (see p753). You'll also need to present completed arrival and departure cards. These are usually distributed on the incoming flight or, if arriving by land, can be picked up at the immigration counter.

THINGS CHANGE

The information supplied in this chapter is particularly vulnerable to change: Prices for international travel are volatile, routes are introduced and cancelled, schedules change, special deals come and go, and rules and visa requirements are amended. Airlines and governments seem to take a perverse pleasure in making price structures and regulations as complicated as possible. You should check directly with the airline or a travel agent to make sure you understand how a fare (and ticket you may buy) works. In addition, the travel industry is highly competitive and there are many lurks and perks.

The upshot of this is that you should get opinions, quotes and advice from as many airlines and travel agents as possible before you part with your hard-earned cash. The details given in this chapter should be regarded as pointers and are not a substitute for your own careful, up-to-date research.

You do not have to fill in a customs form on arrival unless you have imported goods to declare. In that case you can get the proper form from Thai customs officials at the point of entry.

See p748 for Thai customs information about minimum currency requirements.

AIR Airports

The new **Suvarnabhumi Airport** (Bangkok International Airport; www.bangkokairportonline.com) – pronounced *sūwannáphuum* – opened in September 2006 and has replaced the former airport at Don Muang for all Bangkok-arriving and -departing domestic and international flights. It is located in the Nong Ngu Hao area of Samut Prakan – 30km east of Bangkok and 60km from Pattaya.

The Bangkok International Airport at **Don Muang** was retired from commercial service in September 2006 only to be partially reopened five months later to handle overflow from Suvarnabhumi. As of March 2007, Don Muang began servicing some domestic carriers, but it was unclear at the time of writing what the operating duration or capacity of the old airport would be once construction problems at Suvarnabhumi were resolved.

While most international flights arrive at and depart out of Bangkok, there are a few routes servicing Thailand's other 'international' airports. Moderately up-to-date information about these airports is available online at www.airportthai.co.th. Besides

DEPARTURE TAX

At the time of writing, all passengers leaving Thailand on international flights are charged a departure tax (officially called an 'airport service charge') of 500B, which is not included in the price of air tickets, but paid at a booth near the passport control area. Only baht are accepted. However, the departure tax is slated to rise to 700B, the cost of which will be included in ticket prices.

Bangkok, the **Chiang Mai International Airport** (p320) has scheduled flights to many regional capitals. **Phuket** (p669) has a few flights to certain European destinations without a layover in Bangkok. Additional international airports include **Chiang Rai** (p360), which is designated as international but is not currently receiving flights from abroad, Hat Yai, Samui and **Sukhothai** (p408). Samui and Sukhothai airports are privately owned by Bangkok Airways. There are plans to add international flights to **Udon Thani** (p488; the closest provincial airport to the Friendship Bridge between Thailand and Laos), and **Khon Kaen** (p479).

Airlines Travelling to/from Thailand

Bangkok is one of the cheapest cities in the world to fly out of, due to the Thai government's loose restrictions on air fares and close competition between airlines and travel agencies. Thailand's national carrier is Thai Airways International (THAI), which also operates many domestic air routes.

Air Asia (☎ 0 2515 9999; www.airasia.com; Suvarnabhumi Airport)

Air China (Map pp124-5; ☎ 0 2634 8991; www.fly-airchina.com; Bangkok Union Insurance Bldg, 175-177 Th Surawong)

Air France (Map pp124-5; ☎ 0 2635 1191; www.airfrance.fr; 20th fl, Vorawat Bldg, 849 Th Silom)

Air New Zealand (Map pp124-5; ☎ 0 2254 8440; www.airnewzealand.com; 11th fl, 140/17 ITF Tower, Th Silom)

American Airlines (Map pp128-9; ☎ 0 2263 0225; www.aa.com; 11th fl Ploenchit Tower, 898 Th Ploenchit)

Bangkok Airways (☎ 0 2265 5555; www.bangkokair.com)

British Airways (Map pp124-5; ☎ 0 2627 1701; www.britishairways.com; 21st fl, Charn Issara Tower, 942/160-163 Th Phra Rama IV)

Cathay Pacific Airways (Map pp128-9; ☎ 0 2263 0606; www.cathaypacific.com; Ploenchit Tower, 898 Th Ploenchit)

China Airlines (Map pp128-9; ☎ 0 2253 4242; www.china-airlines.com; 4th fl, Peninsula Plaza, 153 Th Ratchadamri)

Garuda Indonesia (Map p127; ☎ 0 2679 7371; www.garuda-indonesia.com; 27th fl, Lumpini Tower, 1168/77 Th Phra Ram IV)

Gulf Air (Map pp128-9; ☎ 0 2254 7931-4; www.gulfair.com; Maneeya Center, 518/5 Th Ploenchit)

Japan Airlines (Map pp128-9; ☎ 0 2649 9555; www.jal.co.jp; Nantawan Bldg, 161 Th Ratchadamri)

KLM-Royal Dutch Airlines (Map pp124-5; ☎ 0 2635 2300; www.klm.com; 20th fl, Vorawat Bldg, 849 Th Silom)

Korean Air (Map pp124-5; ☎ 0 2635 0465; www.koreanair.com; 1st fl, Kongboonma Bldg, 699 Th Silom)

Lao Airlines (Map pp124-5; ☎ 0 2236 9822; www.laoairlines.com; Silom Plaza, Th Silom)

Lufthansa Airlines (Map pp122-3; ☎ 0 2264 2484; reservations 0 2264 2400; www.lufthansa.com; 18th fl, Q House, Soi 21/Asoke, Th Sukhumvit)

Malaysia Airlines (Map pp128-9; ☎ 0 2263 0565; www.mas.com.my; 20th fl, Ploenchit Tower, 898 Th Ploenchit)

Myanmar Airways International (Map pp122-3; ☎ 0 2630 0334-8; www.maiair.com; 8th fl, BB Bldg, 54 Soi 21/Asoke, Th Sukhumvit)

Northwest Airlines (Map pp128-9; ☎ 0 2254 0789; www.nwa.com; 4th fl, Peninsula Plaza, 153 Th Ratchadamri)

Orient Thai (Map p127; ☎ 0 2229 4260; www.orient-thai.com; 18 Th Ratchadaphisek)

Qantas Airways (☎ 0 2236 2800; reservations 0 2636 1747; www.qantas.com.au; Tour East, 21st fl, Charn Issara Tower, 942/160-163 Th Phra Ram IV)

Royal Brunei Airlines (Map p127; ☎ 0 2637 5151; www.bruneiair.com; 17th fl, U Chu Liang Bldg, 968, Th Phra Ram IV)

Royal Nepal Airlines (☎ 0 2216 5691-5; www.royalnepal.com; 9th Floor Phayathai Plaza Bldg, 128 Th Phayathai)

Scandinavian Airlines (Map pp122-3; ☎ 0 2645 8200; www.scandinavian.net; 8th fl, Glas Haus B Bldg, Th Sukhumvit)

Singapore Airlines (Map pp124-5; ☎ 0 2353 6000; reservations ☎ 2236 5301; www.singaporeair.com; 12th fl, Silom Center Bldg; 2 Th Silom)

South African Airways (Map pp124-5; ☎ 0 2635 1414; www.flysaa.com; 20th fl, Vorawat Bldg, 849 Th Silom)

Thai Airways International Silom (Map pp124-5; ☎ 0 2232 8000; www.thaiair.com; 485 Th Silom); Banglamphu (Map pp120-1; ☎ 0 2356 1111, 6 Th Lan Luang)

United Airlines (Map pp128-9; ☎ 0 2296 7752; www.ual.com; 14th fl, Sindhorn Bldg, Tower 3, 130 Th Withayu)

Vietnam Airlines (Map pp122-3; ☎ 0 2656 9056-8; www.vietnamair.com.vn; Th Sukhumvit)

Tickets

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

In Thailand, most travel arrangements are done through an agent. Most firms are honest and solvent, but there are some rogue fly-by-night outfits around. Paying by credit card generally offers protection, as most card issuers provide refunds if you can prove you didn't get what you paid for. Agents who accept only cash should hand over the tickets straight away and not tell you to 'come back tomorrow'. After you've made a booking or paid your deposit, call the airline and confirm that the booking was made.

Booking flights in and out of Bangkok during the high season (December to March) can be difficult and expensive. For air travel

during these months you should make your bookings as far in advance as possible.

Also, be sure to reconfirm return or ongoing tickets when you arrive in Thailand. Failure to reconfirm can mean losing your reservation.

ROUND-THE-WORLD (RTW) TICKETS

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

Here are a few online companies that can arrange RTW tickets:

Airstop & Go (www.airstop.be)

Airtreks (www.airtreks.com)

Air Brokers International (www.airbrokers.com)

Around the Worlds (www.aroundtheworlds.com)

Asia

There are regular flights to Suvarnabhumi Airport from almost every major city in Asia. With the emergence of budget airlines, quick hops from, say, Bangkok to Kuala Lumpur, Singapore or Hong Kong are part of the Asian yuppies' weekend budget. Air Asia and Dragon are two discount carriers that run frequent promotions. A very good internet source for discounted fares leaving from Bangkok is www.bangkoktickets.com.

CLIMATE CHANGE & TRAVEL

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

Flying & Climate Change

Pretty much every form of motor transport generates CO₂ (the main cause of human-induced climate change) but planes are far and away the worst offenders, not just because of the sheer distances they allow us to travel, but because they release greenhouse gases high into the atmosphere. The statistics are frightening: two people taking a return flight between Europe and the US will contribute as much to climate change as an average household's gas and electricity consumption over a whole year.

Carbon Offset Schemes

Climatecare.org and other websites use 'carbon calculators' that allow travellers to offset the greenhouse gases they are responsible for with contributions to energy-saving projects and other climate-friendly initiatives in the developing world – including projects in India, Honduras, Kazakhstan and Uganda.

Lonely Planet, together with Rough Guides and other concerned partners in the travel industry, supports the carbon offset scheme run by climatecare.org. Lonely Planet offsets all of its staff and author travel.

For more information check out our website: www.lonelyplanet.com.

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

Australia

THAI and Qantas both have direct flights to Bangkok; in 2006, Jetstar announced that it would add more flights during peak travel times between Sydney and Melbourne to Thailand. Garuda Indonesia, Singapore Airlines, Philippine Airlines, Malaysia Airlines and Royal Brunei Airlines also have frequent flights with stopovers to Bangkok.

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

Canada

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

Continental Europe

Following are some recommended agencies across Europe.

France

Anyway (☎ 0 892 302 301; www.anyway.fr)
Lastminute (☎ 0 899 785 000; www.lastminute.fr)
Nouvelles Frontières (☎ 0 825 000 747; www.nouvelles-frontieres.fr)
OTU Voyages (www.otu.fr) This agency specialises in student and youth travellers.
Voyageurs du Monde (www.vdm.com)

Germany

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

Italy

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

Netherlands

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

Spain

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

Middle East

Some recommended agencies include the following:

Egypt Panorama Tours (☎ 2-359 0200; www.eptours.com) In Cairo.

Orion-Tour (www.oriontour.com) In Istanbul.

New Zealand

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

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

South America

Some recommended agencies include the following:

ASATEJ (www.asatej.com) In Argentina, Mexico and Uruguay.

Student Travel Bureau (☎ 3038 1555; www.stb.com.br) In Brazil.

UK

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

Recommended travel agencies include the following:

Bridge the World (☎ 0800 082 5000; www.b-t-w.co.uk)

Flight Centre (☎ 0870 499 0040; flightcentre.co.uk)

Flightbookers (☎ 0800 082 3000; www.ebookers.com)

North South Travel (www.northsouthtravel.com)

Part of this company's profit is donated to projects in the developing world.

Quest Travel (☎ 0871 423 0135; www.questtravel.com)

STA Travel (☎ 0871 230 0040; www.statravel.co.uk)

Popular with travellers under 26, sells tickets to all.

Branches throughout the UK.

Trailfinders (☎ 0845 058 5858; www.trailfinders.co.uk)
Travel Bag (☎ 0800 082 5000; www.travelbag.co.uk)

USA

It's cheaper to fly to Bangkok from West Coast cities than from the East Coast. You can get some great deals through the many bucket shops (which discount tickets by taking a cut in commissions) and consolidators (agencies that buy airline seats in bulk) in Los Angeles and San Francisco.

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

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

The following agencies are recommended for online bookings:

www.cheaptickets.com

www.expedia.com

www.itn.net

www.lowestfare.com

www.orbitz.com

www.sta.com (For travellers under the age of 26.)

www.travelocity.com

LAND

Thailand shares land borders with Laos, Malaysia, Cambodia and Myanmar. Travel between all of these countries can be done by land via sanctioned border crossings. With improved highways, it is also becoming easier to travel from Thailand to China. See Border Crossings (right) for specific immigration points and transport summaries.

Bicycle

Many visitors bring their own touring bicycles to Thailand. No special permits are needed for bringing a bicycle into the country, although it may be registered by customs – which means if you don't leave the country with your bicycle, you'll have to pay a huge customs duty. See p761 for more information about travelling by bike.

It's essential to bring a well-stocked repair kit and be sure to have your bike serviced before departure.

Bus

You can enter Thailand by bus through Laos and Malaysia at the moment – your bus will stop at a Thai immigration post at your point of entry so that each foreign passenger can receive an entry stamp in their passport. Thai visas are not normally included in bus fares. For overland routes through Cambodia, you'll need to hire a shared taxi. You can exit Thailand into portions of Myanmar by bus or shared taxi.

Car & Motorcycle

Road passage into Thailand is possible through Malaysia, Cambodia and Laos.

Passenger vehicles (eg car, van, truck or motorcycle) can be brought into Thailand for tourist purposes for up to six months. Documents needed for the crossing are a valid International Driving Permit, passport, vehicle registration papers (in the case of a borrowed or hired vehicle, authorisation from the owner) and a cash or bank guarantee equal to the value of the vehicle plus 20%. For entry through Khlong Toey Port or Suvarnabhumi Airport, this means a letter of bank credit; for overland crossings via Malaysia, Cambodia or Laos a 'self-guarantee' filled in at the border is sufficient.

Train

The only rail option into and out of Thailand is via Malaysia. The **State Railway of Thailand** (www.railway.co.th) and **Malaysian Railway** (www.ktmb.com.my) meet at Butterworth, 93km south of the Thai–Malaysian border, a transfer point to Penang or Kuala Lumpur.

BORDER CROSSINGS

Cambodia

Thai–Cambodian border crossings are typically straightforward. Most visitors cross at

CHECKPOINTS

Military checkpoints are common along highways throughout northern, southern and northeastern Thailand, especially in border areas. Always slow down for a checkpoint – often the sentries will wave you through without an inspection, but occasionally you will be stopped and briefly questioned. Use common sense and don't act belligerently or you're likely to be detained longer than you'd like.

Poipet (Cambodia) to Aranya Prathet (Thailand; p270). This is the most direct land route between Bangkok and Angkor Wat.

You can also cross by boat from Ko Kong in southern Cambodia to the coastal town of Hat Lek in Trat Province (p256).

Several more remote crossings have opened between northeastern Thailand and southwestern Cambodia including: Kap Choeng-Chom Som, Chong Sa Ngam-Anlong Veng; Ban Laem-Daun Lem, Ban Phakkat-Pailin. Private or hired transport is required to access most of these crossings.

China

Plans for land and rail links between China and member countries of ASEAN, including Thailand, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam, have been increasing since the turn of the new millennium.

The China–Thailand highway will link Kunming, in China’s Yunnan Province, with Bangkok. As of 2006, 60% of the route (from Kunming to the Laos border town of Boten) has been completed. The routes from Boten, Laos across to Chiang Khong, Thailand, can be done relatively easily now, although roads between Boten and Huay Xai are rough.

Other roads emanating from China’s Yunnan Province will link to Myanmar and to Vietnam and then on to Thailand. The China–Myanmar highway stretches between Tachileik, which is on the border with Mae Sai, Thailand, to the Chinese town of Daluo (see p369).

It is possible to float along the Mekong River from the northern Thai town of Chian Saen to Jinghong in China’s Yunnan Province. See p372 for more information.

Laos

The Thai–Lao Friendship Bridge (1174m) spans a section of the Mekong River between Nong Khai, Thailand, and Tha Na Leng (near Vientiane, Laos) and is the main transport gateway between the two countries. You can easily reach the Thai border crossing from Vientiane by bus, taxi or sâamlâw (three-wheeled motorcycle taxi).

The construction of a second Mekong bridge between Mukdahan and Savannakhet opened in 2006 and creates a link between Thailand and Vietnam through Laos.

It’s legal for non-Thais to cross the Mekong River by ferry between Thailand and

Laos at the following points: Beung Kan (opposite Paksan), Nakhon Phanom (opposite Tha Khaek), Chiang Khong (opposite Huay Xai).

Malaysia

Due to the unrest in the southern provinces of Thailand, many border crossers are opting for flights from Bangkok to Kuala Lumpur, Penang or Singapore instead of crossing by land.

There are very regular public buses and private minivans between Hat Yai in Thailand and various destinations in Malaysia, which include immigration stops at the border.

The train heading into Malaysia from Bangkok splits at Hat Yai with one spur heading east toward the border town of Sungai Kolok (p640) and on to Kota Bharu. The western spur trundles travellers to Butterworth, the transfer point to Penang or other destinations along the west coast of Malaysia.

There are several ways of travelling between Thailand’s southern peninsula and Malaysia by sea. The simplest is to take a boat from Satun to Kuala Perlis or the island of Langkawi. For more details, see p728).

PRIVATE BOAT

All foreign-registered vessels, skippers and crew must check in with the relevant Thai authorities as soon as possible after entering Thai waters. Although major ports throughout Thailand offer port check-ins, most leisure boating visitors check in at Phuket, Krabi, Samui, Pranburi or Pattaya. Because Phuket’s Tha Ao Chalong brings customs, immigration and harbourmaster services together in one building, Phuket is the most popular check-in point nationwide.

Before departing from Thailand by boat, you must also check out with immigration, customs and harbourmaster. Vessels caught without harbour clearance may be fined up to 5000B. **Lee Marine** (www.leemarine.com) is a brokerage and dealership in Phuket.

Myanmar

The land crossings into Myanmar have peculiar restrictions that often don’t allow full land access to the country. Of the four border crossing open to foreigners, only two allow more than a day’s access into the country. These borders are also the most sensitive to periodic closures due to fighting on the

Myanmar side between ethnic armies and the Burmese government, or other unstable factors.

The crossing at Mae Sai–Tachileik is the only land point through which foreigners can really travel into Myanmar. From the border you can continue to Kengtung, as far as Mengla on the Thai–China border and into China as long as you have arranged the appropriate visas beforehand (see p365). Interestingly, the bridge that spans the two border towns is Lo Hsing-han’s former ‘Golden Triangle’ passageway for opium and heroin. Many travellers use this border as a way to renew their Thai visas.

In the past, Mae Sai immigration officials have been known to ask travellers to produce evidence of sufficient funds (10,000B cash, the legal requirement for a tourist visa) before issuing an entry stamp.

The Mae Sot–Myawadi border crossing is open to foreigners only as a day trip into a border market, even though the road continues to Mawlamyaing (Moulmein) via Kawkaeik. Unlike Three Pagodas Pass, this crossing can be used for visa renewal. For more information, see p424.

Once a gateway for various invading armies and an important smuggling route, Three Pagodas Pass is accessible to foreigners only as a day trip to a Burmese border market. You must surrender your passport on the Thai side and are unable to use this point for renewing your Thai visa. For more information, see p224.

In the southern part of Thailand, you can legally enter Myanmar by boat from Ranong to Kawthoung via the Gulf of Martaban and Pakchan estuary. You’ll need to arrange the appropriate visas before arrival in Myanmar. Many people use this crossing only as a day trip in order to renew their Thai visas; for day passes, no Myanmar visa is required. See the boxed text on p647 for more information.

GETTING AROUND

AIR

Hopping around the country by air is becoming more and more affordable these days thanks to airline deregulation. Most routes originate from Bangkok, but Chiang Mai, Ko Samui and Phuket both have routes to other Thai towns. See the Thai Airfares and Rail

Lines map (p762) for routes and estimated costs; for airline contact information, see the respective city sections.

Thailand’s national carrier is Thai Airways International (THAI), which operates many domestic air routes from Bangkok to provincial capitals. Bangkok Air provides some alternatives between Chiang Mai and the south that bypass Bangkok. One-Two-Go, Nok Air and Air Asia all tend to be cheaper than the older, more established carriers.

BICYCLE

For travelling just about anywhere outside Bangkok, bicycles are an ideal form of local transport – cheap, nonpolluting and slow moving enough to allow travellers to see everything.

Bicycle touring is also a popular way to see the country as most roads are sealed with roomy shoulders. Grades in most parts of the country are moderate; exceptions include the far north, especially Mae Hong Son and Nan Provinces. There is plenty of opportunity for dirt-road and off-road pedalling, especially in the north, so a sturdy mountain bike would make a good alternative to a touring rig. Favoured touring routes include the two-lane roads along the Mekong River in the north and northeast – the terrain is largely flat and the river scenery is inspiring.

You can take bicycles on the train for a little less than the equivalent of one 3rd-class fare. On ordinary buses they’ll place your bike on the roof, and on air-con buses it will be put in the cargo hold.

The 2500-member **Thailand Cycling Club** (☎ 08 1555 2901; www.thaicycling.com), established in 1959, serves as an information clearing house on biking tours and cycle clubs.

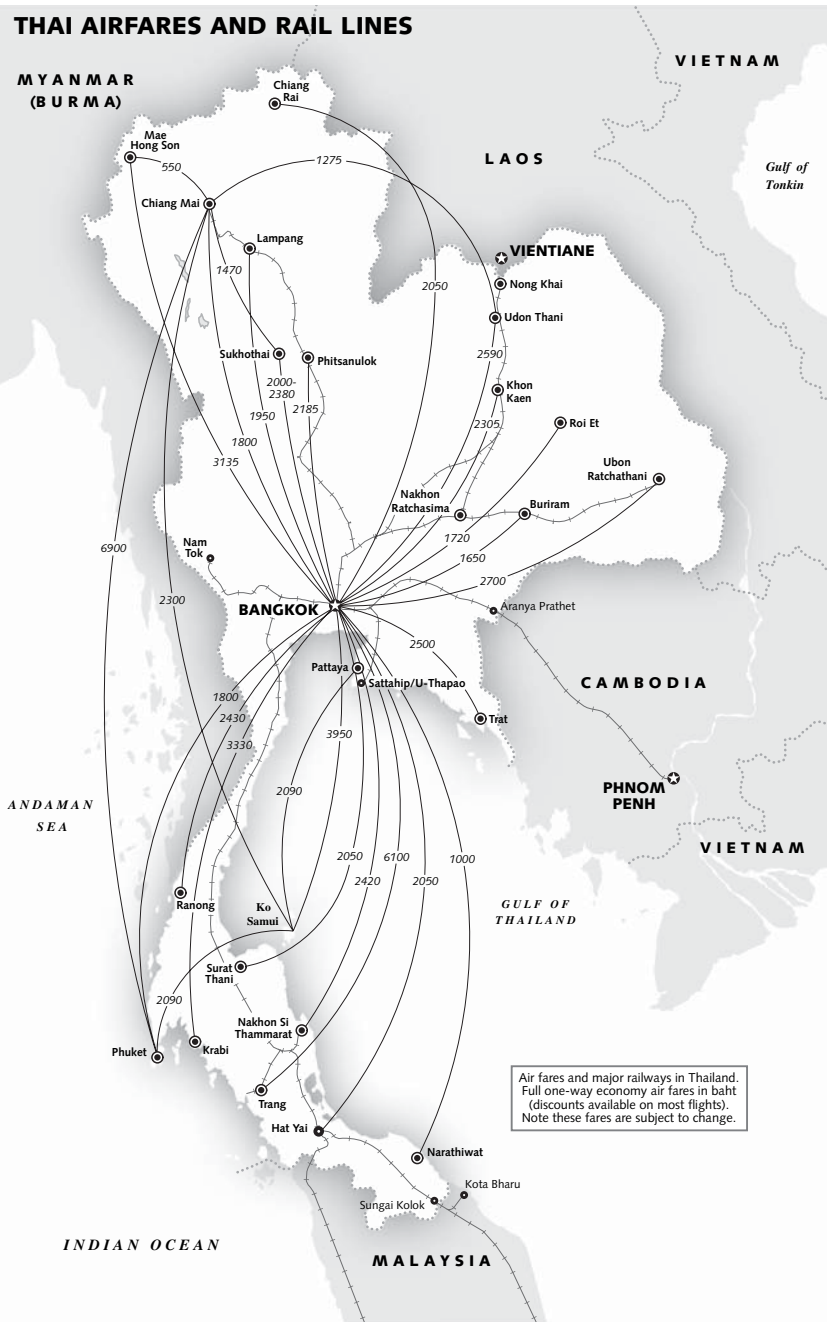
See p759 for more information on bringing a bike into Thailand.

Hire

Bicycles can be hired in many locations; guest-houses often have a few for rent at only 30B to 50B per day. In northern Thailand, particularly in Chiang Mai and Pai, sturdier mountain bikes can be rented for 80B to 100B a day. A security deposit isn’t usually required.

Purchase

Because duties are high on imported bikes, in most cases you’ll do better to bring your own bike to Thailand rather than purchase one here.



One of the best shops for cycling gear in Thailand is the centrally located **Probike** (Map p127; ☎ 0 2253 3384; www.probike.co.th; 237/1 Soi Sarasin, Bangkok) opposite Lumpini Park. Probike carries bikes and parts for Gary Fisher, Klein, Challenger, + LeMond and Trek. See p323 for details on bike shops in Chiang Mai.

BOAT

The true Thai river transport is the *reua hǎang yao* (long-tail boat), so-called because the propeller is mounted at the end of a long drive shaft extending from the engine. Long-tail boats can travel at a phenomenal speed.

The long-tail boats are a staple of transport on rivers and canals in Bangkok and neighbouring provinces. See p182 for details on canal travel around the city.

Between the mainland and islands in the Gulf of Thailand or Andaman Sea, the standard craft is an all-purpose wooden boat, 8m to 10m long, with a large inboard engine, a wheelhouse and a simple roof to shelter passengers and cargo. Faster, more expensive hovercraft or jetfoils are sometimes available in tourist areas.

BUS

Bus Companies

The bus network in Thailand is prolific and reliable and is a great way to see the countryside and sit among the locals. The Thai government subsidises the **Transport Company** (bàw-rí-sát khǒn sǒng; ☎ 0 2936 2841; www.transport.co.th), usually abbreviated to Baw Khaw Saw (BKS). Every city and town in Thailand linked by bus has a BKS station, even if it's just a patch of dirt by the side of the road.

The service on the government air-con buses is usually quite good and sometimes includes

beverage service and video courtesy of an 'air hostess', a young woman dressed in polyester uniform. Some privately run buses have concessions to operate out of the government-run BKS bus stations and are more reliable than the private companies operating out of the tourist centres like Th Khao San in Bangkok.

On overnight journeys the buses usually stop somewhere en route and passengers are awakened to get off the bus for a free meal of fried rice or rice soup. A few companies even treat you to a meal before a long overnight trip.

Out of Bangkok, the safest, most reliable private bus services are the ones that operate from the three official BKS terminals rather than from hotels or guesthouses. See p180 for information on the main bus terminals in Bangkok.

CLASSES

The cheapest and slowest are the fan-only *rót thammádaa* (ordinary buses) that stop in every little town and for every waving hand along the highway. Many of these ordinary buses are being replaced by air-con buses. But a few lines, especially in fairly rural locations, are still in operation.

The bus companies also run faster, more comfortable but less frequent air-con buses called *rót ae* (air bus), *rót pràp aakàat* (air-con bus) or *rót thua* (tour bus). Longer routes offer at least two classes of air-con buses: 2nd class and 1st class; the latter have toilets. 'VIP' and 'Super VIP' buses have fewer seats so that each seat reclines more. Sometimes these are called *rót nawn* or sleepers. For small- to medium-sized people they are more comfortable. Most private companies offer similar air-con classes.

ON THE BUSES – WARNING

The service on many private lines can be very unreliable, especially on the Bangkok–Chiang Mai, Bangkok–Ko Samui, Surat–Phuket and Surat–Krabi routes.

Sometimes the cheaper lines – especially those booked on Th Khao San in Bangkok – will switch vehicles so that instead of the roomy air-con bus advertised, you're stuck with a cramped van with broken air-con. We've had reports of buses stopping for lunch halfway to Chiang Mai and then abandoning passengers – leaving them to finish the journey on their own. To avoid situations such as this, *always* book bus tickets directly at a bus office – or at the government Baw Khaw Saw (BKS) public bus terminal.

Private buses that leave from nonstandard locations (ie not a government bus terminal) generally spend time cruising the city for passengers, so they rarely leave at the advertised departure time. It's actually illegal for buses to do this, which is why the bus attendants often pull the curtains while driving around the city (so that police can't see that they're carrying passengers).

and ask for a helmet (which is required by law in some provinces).

Many tourists are injured riding motorcycles in Thailand because they don't know how to handle the vehicle and are unfamiliar with road rules and conditions. Be sure to have adequate health insurance and drive sensibly to avoid damage to yourself and to the vehicle. If you've never driven a motorcycle before, stick to the smaller 100cc step-through bikes with automatic clutches. Remember to distribute weight as evenly as possible across the frame of the bike to improve handling.

It is also possible to buy a new or used motorcycle and sell it before you leave the country. A used 125cc bike can be purchased for as low as 25,000B; you'll pay up to 60,000B for a reconditioned Honda MTX or AX-1, and more for the newer and more reliable Honda Degree or Yamaha TTR 250. If you're looking for a more narrowly defined dirt bike, check out the Yamaha Serow.

Insurance

Thailand requires a minimum of liability insurance for all registered vehicles on the road. The better hire companies include comprehensive coverage for their vehicles. Always verify that a vehicle is insured for liability before signing a rental contract; you should also ask to see the dated insurance documents. If you have an accident while driving an uninsured vehicle, you're in for some major hassles.

If you need auto insurance, a policy can be purchased through local companies inexpensively. Two of the more reliable ones are **Bangkok Insurance** (☎ 0 2285 8888; www.bki.co.th) and **AIA Thailand** (www.aiathailand.com).

Road Rules & Hazards

Thais drive on the left-hand side of the road (most of the time!). Other than that seemingly just about anything goes, in spite of road signs and speed limits.

The main rule to be aware of is that right of way belongs to the bigger vehicle; this is not what it says in the Thai traffic law, but it's the reality. Maximum speed limits are 50km/h on urban roads, 80km/h to 100km/h on most highways – but on any given stretch of highway you'll see vehicles travelling as slowly as 30km/h or as fast as 150km/h. Speed traps are common along Hwy 4 in the south and Hwy 2 in the northeast.

Indicators are often used to warn passing drivers about oncoming traffic. A flashing left indicator means it's OK to pass, while a right indicator means that someone's approaching from the other direction.

You'll need to have nerves of steel to drive around Bangkok and we really don't recommend it. Traffic is chaotic, roads are poorly signposted, and motorcycles and random contra flows mean you can suddenly find yourself facing a wall of cars coming the other way.

Outside of the capital city, the principal hazard when driving in Thailand, besides the general disregard for traffic laws, is having to contend with so many different types of vehicle on the same road – 18-wheelers, bicycles, *túk-túk* (motorised pedicabs) and customised racing bikes. This danger is often compounded by the lack of working lights. In village areas the vehicular traffic is lighter but you have to contend with stray chickens, dogs, water buffaloes and goats. Once you get used to the challenge, driving in Thailand is very entertaining.

HITCHING

Hitchhiking is never entirely safe in any country and we don't recommend it. Travellers who decide to hitch should understand that there's a small but serious risk. However, many people do choose to hitch, and the advice that follows should help to make the journey as fast and safe as possible.

People have mixed success with hitching in Thailand; sometimes it's great and at other times no-one wants to pick you up. It seems easiest in the more touristy areas of the north and south, and most difficult in the central and northeastern regions where tourists are a relatively rare sight. To stand on a road and try to flag every vehicle that passes by is, to the Thais, something only an uneducated village dweller would do.

If you're prepared to face this perception, the first step is to use the correct gesture for flagging a ride – the thumb-out gesture isn't recognised by the average Thai. When Thais want a ride they stretch one arm out with the hand open, palm facing down, and move the hand up and down. This is the same gesture used to flag a taxi or bus, which is why some drivers will stop and point to a bus stop if one is nearby.

In general, hitching isn't worth the hassle as buses are frequent and cheap. However,

there's no need to stand at a bus station – all you have to do is stand on any road going in your direction and flag down a passing bus or *sáwngháew* (pick-up truck).

The exception is in areas where there isn't any bus service, though in such places there's not likely to be very much private vehicle traffic either. If you do manage to get a ride, it's customary to offer food or cigarettes to the driver if you have any.

LOCAL TRANSPORT Bus

Bangkok has the largest city-bus system in the country. Elsewhere in the country, public transport is typically supplied by *sáwngháew* that run established routes, although Udon Thani and a few other provincial capitals have city buses. The etiquette for riding public transport is to hail the vehicle by waving your hand palm-side downward; you typically pay the fare once you've taken a seat or when you disembark. Occasionally in tourist centres, drivers operating a *sáwngháew* intended for shared use will try to convince foreigners to 'charter' the vehicle by quoting a large fare before boarding.

Motorcycle Taxi

Many cities in Thailand also have *mawtoesai ráp jáang*, 100cc to 125cc motorcycles that can be hired, with a driver, for short distances. They're not very suitable if you're carrying more than a backpack or small suitcase, but if you're empty-handed they can't be beaten for quick transport over short distances. In addition to the lack of space for luggage, motorcycle taxis also suffer from lack of shelter from rain or sun. Although most drivers around the country drive at safe, sane speeds, the kamikaze drivers of Bangkok are a major exception.

In most cities you'll find motorcycle taxis clustered near street intersections, rather than cruising the streets looking for fares. Fares tend to run from 10B to 30B, depending on distance. Some motorcycle taxis specialise in regular, short routes, eg from one end of a long street to another. In such cases the fare is usually a fixed 10B.

Sáamláw & Túk-túk

Sáamláw means 'three wheels' and that's just what they are – three-wheeled vehicles. There are two types of *sáamláw* – motorised and nonmotorised.

You'll find motorised *sáamláw* throughout the country. They're small utility vehicles, powered by horrendously noisy engines (usually LPG-powered); if the noise and vibration don't get you, the fumes will. Tourists commonly know motor *sáamláw* as *túk-túk*, because of the noise they make. Among themselves, the Thais still call these *sáamláw* – the term *túk-túk* is strictly foreigner talk but it's what most Thais use when speaking to Western tourists.

The nonmotorised *sáamláw*, ie the bicycle rickshaw or pedicab, is similar to what you may see in other parts of Asia. There are no bicycle *sáamláw* in Bangkok but you will find them elsewhere in the country. With either form of *sáamláw* the fare must be established by bargaining before departure.

Readers interested in pedicab lore and design may want to have a look at Lonely Planet's hardcover pictorial book, *Chasing Rickshaws*, by Lonely Planet founder Tony Wheeler.

Sáwngháew

A *sáwngháew* (literally, 'two rows') is a small pick-up truck with two rows of bench seats down both sides of the truck bed. They sometimes operate on fixed routes, just like buses, but they may also run a share-taxi type of service or can even be booked individually just like a regular taxi. *Sáwngháew* are often colour-coded, so that red ones, for example, go to one destination or group of destinations, while blue ones go to another.

Skytrain & Subway

Bangkok is the only city in Thailand to have either an above-ground or underground light-rail public transport system. Known as the Skytrain and the Metro, respectively, both systems have helped to alleviate the capital city's notorious traffic jams. There has been much unfulfilled talk about building a subway in Chiang Mai but little action.

Taxi

Bangkok has the most formal system of metered taxis. In other cities, a taxi can be a private vehicle with negotiable rates. You can also travel between cities by taxi but you'll need to negotiate a price as few taxi drivers will run a meter for intercity travel.

TOURS

Many operators around the world can arrange guided tours of Thailand. Most of them simply

serve as brokers for tour companies based in Thailand; they buy their trips from a wholesaler and resell them under various names in travel markets overseas. Hence, one is much like another and you might as well arrange a tour in Thailand at a lower cost – there are so many available. Long-running, reliable tour wholesalers in Thailand include the following:

Active Thailand (Map pp280-1; ☎ 0 5327 7178; www.activethailand.com; Contact Travel, 73/7 Th Charoen Prathet, Chiang Mai)

Asian Trails (Map pp128-9; ☎ 0 2626 2000; www.asiantrails.net; 9th fl, 5G Tower, 161/1 Soi Mahatlek Leung 3, Th Ratchadamri, Bangkok)

Diethelm Travel (Map p127; ☎ 0 2255 9150; www.diethelmtravel.com; Kian Gwan Bldg II, 140/1 Th Withayu, Bangkok) One of the largest tour operators in Bangkok.

World Travel Service (Map pp124-5; ☎ 0 2233 5900; www.wts-thailand.com; 1053 Th Charoen Krung, Bangkok) In business since 1947 and one of the largest tour operators in the city.

Overseas Companies

The better overseas tour companies build their own Thailand itineraries from scratch and choose their local suppliers based on which best serve these itineraries. Of these, several specialise in adventure and/or ecological tours:

Asia Transpacific Journeys (☎ 800-642 2742, 303-443 6789; www.southeastasia.com; 2995 Center Green Dr, Boulder, CO 80301, USA) Northern Thailand trekking to sea canoeing in the Phuket Sea, plus custom tour planning.

Club Adventure (☎ 514-527 0999; www.clubadventure.com; 757 ave du Mont-Royal Est, Montreal, QUE H2J 1W8, Canada) French-language tour operators.

Exodus (☎ 800 228 8747; www.exodus-travel.co.uk; 9 Weir Rd, London SW12 0LT) Winner of 2006 British Travel Award for most environmentally responsible tour agency.

Intrepid Travel (☎ 03 9473 2626; www.intrepidtravel.com) Specialises in small-group travel, with dozens of itineraries; check the website for contact details in the USA, UK & Australia.

Hands Up Holidays (☎ 0 776 5601 3631; www.handsupholidays.com; 21 Corayne Rd, Fulham, London SW6 3QA) Volunteer & sightseeing programmes.

Ms Kasma Loha-Unchit (☎ 510 655 8900; www.thai-foodandtravel.com; PO Box 21165, Oakland, CA 94620, USA) This Thai cookbook author offers personalised, 'cultural immersion' tours of Thailand.

TRAIN

The government rail network, the **State Railway of Thailand** (SRT; ☎ 1690; www.railway.co.th), is, on the whole, very well run. The rail network covers four main lines – the northern, southern,

northeastern and eastern lines (see map p762 for major routes). The train is most convenient as an alternative to buses for the long journey north to Chiang Mai or south to Surat Thani. But the emergence of cheap airfares are starting to undermine the 'romance' of the train in favour of time savings. The train is also ideal for trips to Ayuthaya and Lopburi from Bangkok.

Although they take longer (trains generally don't run on time), the trains offer many advantages over buses. To start with, there is more room to move and stretch out than there is on even the best buses. The scenery rolling by the windows is grander from the vantage point of rail than highway and there's usually more local commotion on the trains: hawkers selling food and drinks, babies staring wide-eyed at foreigners, sarong-clad villagers – to name a few.

Main Terminals

Almost all the long-distance trains originate from Bangkok's Hualamphong station. Bangkok Noi station in Thonburi serves the commuter and the short-line trains running to Kanchanaburi/Nam Tok, Suphanburi, Ratchaburi and Nakhon Pathom. You can also get to Ratchaburi and Nakhon Pathom by trains from Hualamphong. Thonburi's Wong Wian Yai station runs a short commuter line to Samut Songkhram.

Classes

The SRT operates passenger trains in three classes – 1st, 2nd and 3rd – but each class varies considerably depending on whether you're on an ordinary, rapid or express train.

THIRD CLASS

A typical 3rd-class carriage consists of two rows of bench seats divided into facing pairs. Each bench seat is designed to seat two or three passengers, but on a crowded rural line nobody seems to care about design considerations. On a rapid train, 3rd-class seats are padded and reasonably comfortable for shorter trips. On ordinary 3rd-class-only trains in the east and northeast, seats are sometimes made of hard wooden slats. Express trains do not carry 3rd-class carriages at all. Commuter trains in the Bangkok area are all 3rd class.

SECOND CLASS

The seating arrangements in a 2nd-class, non-sleeper carriage are similar to those on a bus,

with pairs of padded seats, usually recliners, all facing toward the front of the train.

On 2nd-class sleeper cars, pairs of seats face one another and convert into two fold-down berths, one over the other. Curtains provide a modicum of privacy and the berths are fairly comfortable, with fresh linen for every trip. The lower berth has more headroom than the upper berth and this is reflected in a higher fare (a difference of about 200B). A toilet stall and washbasins are at one end of the carriage.

2nd-class carriages are found only on rapid and express trains. Air-con 2nd class is more common nowadays than ordinary 2nd class (with the latter available only on rapid lines).

FIRST CLASS

Each private cabin in a 1st-class carriage has individually controlled air-con (older trains also have an electric fan), a washbasin and mirror, a small table and long bench seats that convert into beds. Drinking water and soap are provided free of charge. First-class carriages are available only on rapid, express and special-express trains.

Costs

Fares are calculated first by a base price then surcharges are added depending on the train type (special express, express, rapid, ordinary), class and distance. There is an 80B surcharge above the basic fare for *rôt dùan* (express trains) and 60B for *rôt rew* (rapid trains). These trains are somewhat faster than the ordinary trains, as they make fewer stops. Note that there are no 3rd-class carriages on either rapid or express trains. For the *rôt dùan phisènt* (special-express trains) that run between Bangkok and Padang Besar and between Bangkok and Chiang Mai there is a 100B to 120B surcharge. For distances under 500km, the base rate is 50B; over 500km, 70B to 80B.

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

All 1st-class cabins come with individually controlled air-con. For a two-bed cabin the surcharge is 400B per person. Single 1st-class

cabins are not available, so if you're travelling alone you may be paired with another passenger, although the SRT takes great care not to mix genders.

Reservations

Advance bookings may be made one to 60 days before your intended date of departure. During holidays – especially around holiday time, eg the middle of April approaching the Songkran Festival, during Chinese New Year and during the peak tourist-season months of December and January – it is advised to book as far in advance as possible as all public transport options become very crowded during this time. You can make bookings from any train station. Throughout Thailand SRT ticket offices are generally open 8.30am to 6pm on weekdays, and 8.30am to noon on weekends and public holidays. Train tickets can also be purchased at certain travel agencies in Bangkok. It is much simpler to book trains through these agencies than to book them at the station; however, they usually add a service charge to the ticket price.

Trains out of Bangkok should be booked as far in advance as possible – a minimum of a week for popular routes such as the northern line to Chiang Mai and the southern line to Hat Yai, especially if you want a sleeper. For the northeastern and eastern lines a few days will suffice. Midweek departures are always easier to book than weekends; during some months of the year you can easily book a sleeper even one day before departure, as long as it's on a Tuesday, Wednesday or Thursday. With the exception of Surat Thani and Chiang Mai, booking trains back to Bangkok is generally not as difficult as booking trains out of Bangkok.

Station Services

You'll find that all train stations in Thailand have baggage-storage services (or 'cloak rooms'). The rates and hours of operation vary from station to station. At Bangkok's Hualamphong station, for example, rates are 20B to 30B per day. Most stations have a ticket window that will open between 15 and 30 minutes before train arrivals. There are also newsagents and small snack vendors, but no full-service restaurants.

Train Dining

Meal service is available in *rôt sa-biang* (dining carriages) and at your seat in 2nd- and

1st-class carriages. Menus change as frequently as the SRT changes catering services. All the meals seem a bit overpriced (80B to 200B on average) by Thai standards. Many Thai passengers bring along their own meals and snacks to avoid the relatively high cost of SRT-catered meals.

Train Information

Most train stations have printed timetables in English; although this isn't always the case for smaller stations. Bangkok's Hualamphong station is a good spot to load up on timetables. There are two types of timetable available: four condensed English timetables with fares, schedules and routes for rapid, express and special express trains on the four trunk lines; and four Thai timetables for each trunk line, and side lines. These latter timetables give fares and schedules for all trains – ordinary, rapid and express. The English timetables only display a couple of the ordinary routes; eg they don't show the wealth of ordinary trains that go to Ayuthaya and as far north as Phitsanulok.

Train Passes

The SRT issues a Thailand Rail Pass that may save on fares if you plan to use the trains extensively over a relatively short interval. This pass is only available in Thailand and may be purchased at Hualamphong station.

The cost for 20 days of unlimited 2nd- or 3rd-class train travel is 1500B, or 3000B including all supplementary charges; children aged four to 12 pay half the adult fare. Supplementary charges include all extra charges for rapid, express, special express and air-con. Passes must be validated at a local station before boarding the first train. The price of the pass includes seat reservations that, if required, can be made at any SRT ticket office. The pass is valid until midnight on the last day of the pass, although if the journey is commenced before midnight on the last day of validity, the passenger can use the pass until that train reaches its destination.

Train Routes

Four main rail lines cover 4500km along the northern, southern, northeastern and eastern routes. There are several side routes, notably between Nakhon Pathom and Nam Tok (stopping in Kanchanaburi) in the western central region, and between Thung Song and Kantang (stopping in Trang) in the south. The southern line splits at Hat Yai: one route goes to Sungai Kolok on the Malaysian east-coast border, via Yala; and the other goes to Padang Besar in the west, also on the Malaysian border. A Bangkok–Pattaya spur has not been as popular as expected but is still running.

Health Dr Trish Batchelor

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Health issues and the quality of medical facilities vary enormously depending on where and how you travel in Southeast Asia. Many of the major cities are now very well developed, although travel to rural areas can expose you to a variety of health risks and inadequate medical care.

Travellers tend to worry about contracting infectious diseases when in the tropics, but infections are a rare cause of serious illness or death in travellers. Pre-existing medical conditions such as heart disease, and accidental injury (especially traffic accidents), account for most life-threatening problems. Becoming ill in some way, however, is relatively common. Fortunately most common illnesses can either be prevented with some commonsense behaviour or be treated easily with a well-stocked traveller's medical kit.

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

BEFORE YOU GO

Pack medications in their original, clearly labelled, containers. A signed and dated letter from your physician describing your medical conditions and medications, including generic

names, is also a good idea. If carrying syringes or needles, be sure to have a physician's letter documenting their medical necessity. If you have a heart condition bring a copy of your ECG taken just prior to travelling.

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

INSURANCE

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

Find out in advance if your insurance plan will make payments directly to providers or reimburse you later for overseas health expenditures. (In many countries doctors expect payment in cash.) Some policies offer lower and higher medical-expense options; the higher ones are chiefly for countries that have extremely high medical costs, such as the USA. You may prefer a policy that pays doctors or hospitals directly rather than you having to pay on the spot and claim later. If you have to claim later, make sure you keep all documentation. Some policies ask you to call back (reverse charges) to a centre in your home country where an immediate assessment of your problem is made.

VACCINATIONS

Specialised travel-medicine clinics are your best source of information; they stock all available vaccines and will be able to give specific

recommendations for you and your trip. The doctors will take into account factors such as past vaccination history, the length of your trip, activities you may be undertaking and underlying medical conditions, such as pregnancy.

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

Recommended Vaccinations

The following vaccinations are those recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO) for travellers to Southeast Asia:

Adult diphtheria and tetanus Single booster recommended if none in the previous 10 years. Side effects include sore arm and fever. There is a new vaccine that includes protection against whooping cough. Ask your doctor if it is recommended for you.

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

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

Measles, mumps and rubella Two doses of MMR required unless you have had the diseases. Occasionally a

rash and flu-like illness can develop a week after receiving the vaccine. Many young adults require a booster.

Polio In 2006–07, Indonesia was the only Southeast Asian country with reported cases of polio. Only one booster required as an adult for lifetime protection. Inactivated polio vaccine is safe during pregnancy.

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

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

These immunisations are recommended for long-term travellers (more than one month) or those at special risk:

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

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

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

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

Required Vaccinations

The only vaccine required by international regulations is yellow fever. Proof of vaccination will only be required if you have visited a country in the yellow-fever zone within the six days prior to entering Southeast Asia. If you are travelling to Southeast Asia from Africa or South America you should check to see if you require proof of vaccination.

INTERNET RESOURCES

There is a wealth of travel-health advice on the internet. For further information, **Lonely Planet** (www.lonelyplanet.com) is a good place to start. *International Travel & Health* is a superb book published by WHO (www.who.int/ith), which is revised annually and is available online at no cost. Another website of general interest is **MD Travel Health** (www.mdtravelhealth

.com), which provides complete travel-health recommendations for every country and is updated daily. The **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention** (CDC; www.cdc.gov) website also has good general information.

FURTHER READING

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

IN TRANSIT

DEEP VEIN THROMBOSIS (DVT)

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

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

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

JET LAG & MOTION SICKNESS

Jet lag is common when crossing more than five time zones; it results in insomnia, fatigue, malaise or nausea. To avoid jet lag try drinking plenty of fluids (nonalcoholic) and eating light meals. Upon arrival, seek exposure to natural sunlight and readjust your schedule (for meals, sleep etc) as soon as possible.

Antihistamines such as dimenhydrinate (Dramamine) and meclizine (Antivert,

MEDICAL CHECKLIST

The following are recommended items for a personal medical kit:

- antibacterial cream (eg Muciprocin)
- antibiotics for skin infections (eg Amoxicillin/Clavulanate or Cephalexin)
- antibiotics for diarrhoea (eg Norfloxacin or Ciprofloxacin); for bacterial diarrhoea (eg Azithromycin); for giardiasis or amoebic dysentery (eg Tinidazole)
- anti-diarrhoeal treatments – consider an oral rehydration solution (eg Gastrolyte); diarrhoea 'stopper' (eg Loperamide); and anti-nausea medication (eg Prochlorperazine)
- antifungal cream (eg Clotrimazole)
- antihistamine (eg Cetrizine for daytime and Promethazine for night)
- antiseptic (eg Betadine)
- antispasmodic for stomach cramps (eg Buscopan)
- contraceptives
- decongestant (eg Pseudoephedrine)
- DEET-based insect repellent
- first-aid items such as scissors, Elastoplasts, bandages, gauze, thermometer (but not mercury), sterile needles and syringes, safety pins and tweezers
- Ibuprofen or another anti-inflammatory
- indigestion medication (eg Quick Eze or Mylanta)
- iodine tablets (unless you are pregnant or have a thyroid problem) to purify the water
- laxative (eg Coloxyl)
- paracetamol
- Permethrin to impregnate clothing and mosquito nets
- steroid cream for allergic/itchy rashes (eg 1% to 2% hydrocortisone)
- sunscreen and hat
- throat lozenges
- thrush (vaginal yeast infection) treatment (eg Clotrimazole pessaries or Diflucan tablet)
- Ural or equivalent if you are prone to urine infections

Bonine) are usually the first choice for treating motion sickness. Their main side effect is drowsiness. A herbal alternative is ginger, which works like a charm for some people.

IN THAILAND

AVAILABILITY OF HEALTH CARE

Most large cities in Thailand now have clinics catering specifically to travellers and expats. These clinics are usually more expensive than local medical facilities, but are worth using, as they will offer a superior standard of care. Additionally they understand the local system, and are aware of the safest local hospitals and best specialists. They can also liaise with insurance companies should you require evacuation. Clinics are listed under Information in the city sections of this book.

It is difficult to find reliable medical care in rural areas. Your embassy and insurance company are also good contacts.

Self-treatment may be appropriate if your problem is minor (eg traveller's diarrhoea), you are carrying the appropriate medication and you cannot attend a recommended clinic. If you think you may have a serious disease, especially malaria, do not waste time – travel to the nearest quality facility to receive attention. It is always better to be assessed by a doctor than to rely on self-treatment.

Buying medication over the counter is not recommended, because fake medications and poorly stored or out-of-date drugs are common.

INFECTIOUS DISEASES

Avian Influenza

To date Thailand has reported 25 cases of human 'bird flu'. The majority of these occurred in 2004, and at the time of writing there have been no reports in 2007. Transmission from domestic birds to humans is rare and requires close contact with an infected bird or its droppings. Human to human transmission has occurred, but it is even more uncommon. Thus far there have been no cases reported in travellers or expatriates. Avoid live poultry markets, and eating raw or undercooked poultry or eggs; wash your hands frequently and seek medical attention if you develop a fever and respiratory symptoms (cough, shortness of breath etc).

Cutaneous Larva Migrans

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

Dengue Fever

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

Filariasis

A mosquito-borne disease that is very common in the local population, yet very rare in travellers. Mosquito-avoidance measures are the best way to prevent this disease.

Hepatitis A

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

Hepatitis B

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

Hepatitis E

Hepatitis E is transmitted through contaminated food and water and has similar symp-

toms to hepatitis A, but is far less common. It is a severe problem in pregnant women and can result in the death of both mother and baby. There is currently no vaccine, and prevention is by following safe eating and drinking guidelines.

HIV

HIV is now one of the most common causes of death in people under the age of 50 in Thailand. Heterosexual sex is now the main method of transmission in Thailand.

Influenza

Present year-round in the tropics, influenza (flu) symptoms include high fever, muscle aches, runny nose, cough and sore throat. It can be very severe in people over the age of 65 or in those with underlying medical conditions such as heart disease or diabetes; vaccination is recommended for these individuals. All travellers should consider vaccination as influenza is the most common vaccine-preventable disease to affect travellers. There is no specific treatment, just rest and paracetamol.

Japanese B Encephalitis

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

Leptospirosis

Leptospirosis is most often contracted after river rafting or canyoning. Early symptoms are very similar to the flu and include headache and fever. It can vary from a very mild ailment to a fatal disease. Diagnosis is made through blood tests and it is easily treated with Doxycycline.

Malaria

For such a serious and potentially deadly disease, there is an enormous amount of misinformation concerning malaria. You must get expert advice as to whether your trip actually puts you at risk. Many parts of Southeast Asia, particularly city and resort areas, have minimal to no risk of malaria, and the risk of side

AVOIDING MALARIA

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

- use a DEET-containing (ideally 20-30% concentration) insect repellent on exposed skin. Wash this off at night, as long as you are sleeping under a mosquito net. Natural repellents such as citronella can be effective, but must be applied more frequently than products containing DEET.
- sleep under a mosquito net impregnated with Permethrin.
- choose accommodation with screens and fans (if not air-conditioned).
- impregnate clothing with Permethrin in high-risk areas.
- wear long sleeves and trousers in light colours.
- use mosquito coils.
- spray your room with insect repellent before going out for your evening meal.

effects from the tablets may outweigh the risk of getting the disease. For most rural areas, however, the risk of contracting the disease far outweighs the risk of any tablet side effects. Remember that malaria can be fatal. Before you travel, seek medical advice on the right medication and dosage for you.

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

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

There is a variety of preventive medication available:

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

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

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

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

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

A final option is to take no preventive medication but to have a supply of emergency medication should you develop the symptoms of malaria. This is less than ideal, and you'll need to get to a good medical facility within 24 hours of developing a fever. If you choose this option the most effective and safest treatment is Malarone (four tablets once daily for three days). Other options include Mefloquine and Quinine but the side effects of these drugs at treatment doses make them less desirable. Fansidar is no longer recommended.

Measles

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

Melioidosis

This infection is contracted by skin contact with soil. It is rare in travellers, but in some

parts of northeast Thailand up to 30% of the local population are infected. The symptoms are very similar to those experienced by tuberculosis (TB) sufferers. There is no vaccine but it can be treated with medications.

Rabies

This uniformly fatal disease is spread by the bite or lick of an infected animal – most commonly a dog or monkey. You should seek medical advice immediately after any animal bite and commence post-exposure treatment. Having a pretravel vaccination means the post-bite treatment is greatly simplified. If an animal bites you, gently wash the wound with soap and water, and apply iodine-based antiseptic. If you are not prevaccinated you will need to receive rabies immunoglobulin as soon as possible.

STDs

Sexually transmitted diseases most common in Thailand include herpes, warts, syphilis, gonorrhoea and chlamydia. People carrying these diseases often have no signs of infection. Condoms will prevent gonorrhoea and chlamydia but not warts or herpes. If after a sexual encounter you develop any rash, lumps, discharge or pain when passing urine seek immediate medical attention. If you have been sexually active during your travels have an STD check on your return home.

Strongyloides

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

Tuberculosis

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

Typhoid

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

Typhus

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

TRAVELLER'S DIARRHOEA

Traveller's diarrhoea is by far the most common problem affecting travellers – between 30% and 50% of people will suffer from it within two weeks of starting their trip. In over 80% of cases, traveller's diarrhoea is caused by a bacteria (there are numerous potential culprits), and therefore responds promptly to treatment with antibiotics. Treatment with antibiotics will depend on your situation – how sick you are, how quickly you need to get better, where you are etc.

Traveller's diarrhoea is defined as the passage of more than three watery bowel movements within 24 hours, plus at least one other symptom such as vomiting, fever, cramps, nausea or feeling generally unwell.

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

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

Amoebic Dysentery

Amoebic dysentery is very rare in travellers but is often misdiagnosed by poor-quality labs in

Southeast Asia. Symptoms are similar to bacterial diarrhoea, ie fever, bloody diarrhoea and generally feeling unwell. You should always seek reliable medical care if you have blood in your diarrhoea. Treatment involves two drugs; Tinidazole or Metronidazole to kill the parasite in your gut and then a second drug to kill the cysts. If left untreated complications such as liver or gut abscesses can occur.

Giardiasis

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

ENVIRONMENTAL HAZARDS Air Pollution

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

Diving

Divers and surfers should seek specialised advice before they travel to ensure their medical kit contains treatment for coral cuts and tropical ear infections, as well as treatment for the standard problems.

Divers should also make sure that their insurance covers them for decompression illness – get specialised dive insurance through an organisation such as **Divers Alert Network** (DAN; www.danseap.org). Have a dive medical before you leave your home country – there are certain medical conditions that are incompatible with diving and economic considerations may override health considerations for some dive operators in Thailand.

Food

Eating in restaurants is the biggest risk factor for contracting traveller's diarrhoea. Ways

to avoid it include eating only freshly cooked food, avoiding shellfish, and not eating food that has been sitting around in buffets. Peel all fruit, cook vegetables, and soak salads in iodine water for at least 20 minutes. Eat in busy restaurants with a high turnover of customers.

Heat

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

Dehydration is the main contributor to heat exhaustion. Symptoms include feeling weak; headache; irritability; nausea or vomiting; sweaty skin; a fast, weak pulse; and a normal or slightly elevated body temperature. Treatment involves getting out of the heat and/or sun; fanning the victim and applying cool wet cloths to the skin; laying the victim flat with their legs raised; and rehydrating with water containing ¼ teaspoon of salt per litre. Recovery is usually rapid and it is common to feel weak for some days afterwards.

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

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

Tropical fatigue is common in long-term expats based in the tropics. It's rarely due to

disease and is caused by the climate, inadequate mental rest, excessive alcohol intake and the demands of daily work in a different culture.

Insect Bites & Stings

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

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

Leeches are found in humid rainforest areas. They do not transmit any disease but their bites are often intensely itchy for weeks afterwards and can easily become infected. Apply an iodine-based antiseptic to any leech bite to help prevent infection.

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

Most jellyfish in Southeast Asian waters are not dangerous, just irritating. First aid for jellyfish stings involves pouring vinegar onto the affected area to neutralise the poison. Do not rub sand or water onto the stings. Take painkillers, and anyone who feels ill in any way after being stung should seek medical advice. Take local advice if there are dangerous jellyfish around and keep out of the water.

Parasites

Numerous parasites are common in local populations in Southeast Asia, but most of these are rare in travellers. The two rules to follow if you wish to avoid parasitic infections are to wear shoes and to avoid eating raw food, especially fish, pork and vegetables. A number of

parasites, including strongyloides, hookworm and cutaneous *larva migrans*, are transmitted via the skin by walking barefoot.

Skin Problems

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

Cuts and scratches become easily infected in humid climates. Take meticulous care of any cuts and scratches to prevent complications such as abscesses. Immediately wash all wounds in clean water and apply antiseptic. If you develop signs of infection (increasing pain and redness) see a doctor. Divers and surfers should be particularly careful with coral cuts as they can easily become infected.

Snakes

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

Sunburn

Even on a cloudy day, sunburn can occur rapidly. Always use a strong sunscreen (at least factor 30), making sure to reapply after a swim, and always wear a wide-brimmed hat and sunglasses outdoors. Avoid lying in the sun during the hottest part of the day (10am to 2pm). If you become sunburnt stay out of the sun until you have recovered, apply cool compresses and take painkillers for the dis-

comfort. One per cent hydrocortisone cream applied twice daily is also helpful.

WOMEN'S HEALTH

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

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

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

In the urban areas of Southeast Asia, supplies of sanitary products are readily available. Birth-control options may be limited so bring adequate supplies of your own form of contraception. Heat, humidity and antibiotics can all contribute to thrush. Treatment of thrush is with antifungal creams and pessaries such as Clotrimazole. A practical alternative is a single tablet of fluconazole (Diflucan). Urinary-tract infections can be precipitated by dehydration or long bus journeys without toilet stops; bring suitable antibiotics.

TRADITIONAL MEDICINE

Traditional medical systems are practised widely throughout Southeast Asia. There is a big difference between these traditional healing systems and 'folk' medicine. Folk remedies should be avoided, as they often involve rather dubious procedures with potential complications. In comparison, traditional healing

systems such as traditional Chinese medicine are well respected, and aspects of them are being increasingly used by Western medical practitioners.

All traditional Asian medical systems identify a vital life force, and see blockage or imbalance as causing disease. Techniques such as herbal medicines, massage and acupuncture are used to bring this vital force back into balance, or to maintain balance. These therapies are best used for treating chronic

disease such as chronic fatigue, arthritis, irritable bowel syndrome and some chronic skin conditions. Traditional medicines should be avoided for treating serious acute infections such as malaria.

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