

Destination Thailand's Islands & Beaches

Images of sweeping white-sand beaches, palm trees, colourful fish and dramatic karst formations rising from the sea are the essence of our idea of a tropical paradise. But this is reality in Thailand's islands and beaches – and a bit more. That southern Thailand can cater to almost any taste adds to the allure. The footprints in the sand could be yours and yours alone. Or you can stomp the ground with thousands of others at a heaving full moon party. Stay in a beachside hut or a resort with its own spa, go scuba diving or snorkelling, take out a kayak or climb those karst formations – or just lay in a hammock. Enjoy Thailand's islands and beaches whichever way you choose.

Enjoy, yes, but keep in mind that the wave of farang seeking a slice of paradise has had a variety of impacts on the local population. Tourism brings plenty of money and for that most Thais are thankful. It is also accompanied by rapid improvements to roads, schools and health centres. But tourists, and those who cater to their tastes, have also brought some less-desirable changes; most notably a sharp increase in drugs and prostitution.

The political volatility of the country is likely to be one of the talking points from a local point of view. The election of the People's Power Party, essentially the renamed party of ousted prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, suggests the continuation of Thaksin's approach to tackling Thailand's problems. New prime minister Samak Sundaravej is an old hardliner who has stumbled into the top job after an almost miraculous rehabilitation from the obscurity of a TV cooking show. Thaksin's return from exile saw newspapers gleefully featuring cartoons depicting Samak as Thaksin's puppet. Thaksin insists he will not return to politics, yet commentators believe he will remain a major influence in Thai politics.

For many in the south, Samak represents a continuation of the inflexible approach to the Islamic separatist movement. Talks with Thai Muslims to try to find a solution seem as far off as ever. Instead the insurgency looks likely to bubble on, with government officials, teachers and Buddhist monks being murdered and the army taking retribution on young Muslim men, in turn driving them deeper into the arms of the Islamic militants. Another example of a hardline policy is Samak's declaration of a second War on Drugs, which was cheered by many in the drug-fuelled southern islands. The UN Commission on Human Rights isn't so pleased; it hopes thousands are not summarily executed this time around.

Essentially, though, the locals of southern Thailand have many of the same concerns as you: jobs, money, safety, health and education for their kids. The uncertainty following the coup saw economic growth slump in 2007 as investors sat on their cash. But the rapid recovery from the devastating 2004 tsunami has seen tourism reach all-time highs, mitigating the impact. What you are most likely to hear about from taxi drivers and locals on the beaches, though, is the rising price of food. As rice prices climb so fast that rice is actually being 'rustled' from paddies at night, everyone will be affected.

The unrest in Thailand's deep south should not deter tourism in other parts of the peninsula, but travellers should monitor the situation through Thailand's English-language media at www.bangkokpost.com, and seek feedback from other travellers on the Thorn Tree bulletin board at lonelyplanet.com. For more on the south, see p28 and p255.

FAST FACTS

Population: 64,632,000
 Religion: Buddhist 94.6%, Muslim 4.6%
 GDP per capita: US\$9100
 Minimum daily wage: 185B
 Inflation: 5.6%
 Number of attempted coups d'etat since 1932: 19
 Coastline: 3219km
 Number of yellow shirts worn on Mondays: about 15 million
 Number of 7-Elevens: almost 4000, and rising

Getting Started

Thailand is a traveller's paradise and it's easy and cheap to eat, sleep and get around. If you have your heart set on staying at a particular place you should book it. But, if you're a bit flexible, outside the busiest periods of the high season you can pretty much just turn up and make all your decisions as you go. No immunisations are required (p420), visas are easy to obtain (p401), and seats on discount flights (p409) or on comfortable long-distance buses (p411) and trains (p417) keep most of Thailand within easy reach for not much money. Food (p44) and accommodation (p380) are plentiful and the beauty of Thailand is such that, even on a shoestring, you can see everything and still have money left over for a shopping binge before you head home.

WHEN TO GO

The best time to visit coastal Thailand is during the tourist high season between November and April. Accommodation prices are at their highest but almost everything in the country is open, the weather is mainly dry and temperatures are reasonable. During this time the mid-December to late January period is busiest (and priciest). Local festivals (p19) also cause spikes throughout the year, notably for a week either side of Songkran (Thai New Year; 13–15 April). At either end of the high season, resorts, tours and ferry routes will be just opening up or closing down. The rest of the year (May to October) is the low season and prices for accommodation plummet. However, many resorts and islands shut down completely and ferry routes don't run due to stormy seas and dwindling demand. Water visibility for diving also drops dramatically.

Between May and October the southwest monsoon drenches the country and during this time you can expect some rain every day, although often not that much. While this period is known as the rainy season, southern Thailand also receives rain from the northwest monsoon from November to January, so it can never be said to be truly 'dry' in the south. If you want to maximise your chances of sunny days, visit between December and March and prioritise the gulf coast over the Andaman coast, which gets more of the northwest monsoon and is generally wetter year-round.

Temperatures from November to March hover between 22°C and 30°C throughout Thailand, then rise from March to May when they almost always peak above 30°C. The south is usually a few degrees cooler during the monsoon, which can make the weather more bearable if the humidity isn't too bad.

COSTS

Thailand is cheap by Western standards and it's possible to get by on as little as US\$25 a day and still live reasonably comfortably. If you stay only in budget guesthouses, eat at street stalls or local restaurants and travel by train or government buses, you can get by on less, but even the smallest appetite for beer will soon stretch your budget. Guesthouse accommodation ranges from US\$10 to US\$30 a day on most beaches.

For a little more pampering (air-conditioned bungalows, flights in and out, romantic dinners, boat tours and motorbike rental on the islands), raise your daily budget to about US\$50. Style costs more but it's possible to get a quality room for between about US\$50 and US\$100, depending on the season. The upper midrange and associated lifestyle (think mud masks, diving, cocktails) is expanding fast, and you're looking at US\$100 a day minimum. At the top end, the sky (actually, maybe it's the outer atmosphere) is the limit. Luxury resorts start at about US\$150 and attached restaurants, bars and spa facilities

If the weather sounds too confusing, see the Climate Charts, p386, or check out Travelfish's excellent interactive weather map (www.travelfish.org/weather_fish.php) with stats on average rainfall and the number of rainy days per month for many southern provinces.

HOW MUCH?

Restaurant dinner
80-1000B

Entry to a national park
200B or 400B

Three-day dive trip
8000-15,000B

Boat trip between Surat
Thani and Ko Samui 150B

2nd-class air-con sleeper
train from Bangkok to
Surat Thani 768B

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

- Checking the visa situation (p401) – travellers of most nationalities can get an entry permit on arrival, but make sure you're one of them.
- Checking travel advisory warnings.
- A copy of your travel insurance policy details (p394).
- Earplugs (so you can hear yourself think on noisy long-tail boats).
- Long-sleeved and leg-covering clothes for showy dinners, visiting temples and staying warm on air-con buses.
- A mix of credit cards, travellers cheques and cash (p395).
- Unpacking all the useless things that make your bag weigh a tonne; lighten your load physically and mentally.
- Your sense of humour: you're on holiday, enjoy it.

are also expensive; though you can always pop out for a 40B green curry. To all these prices add about 20% to 30% in Bangkok.

Children can usually stay free in their parents' room. Discounts for children are available at museums and on internal flights, trains and some tours and activities.

TRAVEL LITERATURE

Most English-language books about Thailand, be they fiction or nonfiction, focus on Bangkok, but a few do take trips to the south.

The Beach, Alex Garland's account of a backpacker's discovery of a beach Eden that is spoiled somewhat by drug lords and sharks, is a highly appropriate Thai beach read. Emily Barr's *Backpack* is the chick-lit equivalent. It follows a young British woman's attempt to rediscover herself, against a backdrop of holiday romances and backpacker murders.

John Burdett's cop dramas are also great beach reads. In *Bangkok 8* and *Bangkok Tattoo*, hard-boiled Sonchai, a Bangkok police investigator, cracks open several page-turning whodunits.

Rattawat Lapcharoensap crawls into the head of Thai characters you might meet along the way – a guesthouse clerk, a coming-of-age Bangkok teen and a village girl – in his short-story collection *Sightseeing*.

Jasmine Nights, by Thai champion-of-the-arts SP Somtow, uses the fictional 1960s friendship between a 12-year-old Thai boy and an African-American boy to closely examine Thai culture.

On the nonfiction shelf *Very Thai: Everyday Pop Culture*, by Philip Cornwell-Smith, colourfully explains all manner of Thai oddities, from why taxis have dashboard shrines to why Thais put salt in their fruit drinks. *Travelers' Tales Thailand: True Stories* features travel essays by Charles Nicholls, Pico Iyer and others, with some savvy travel tips sprinkled throughout the text.

INTERNET RESOURCES

The Web is awash with websites about Thailand and Thai culture. Useful sites include:

- 2Bangkok.com** (www.2bangkok.com) English translations from the Thai press, ongoing monitoring of the situation in the south and other 'almost like being there' news.
- Lonely Planet** (www.lonelyplanet.com) General information, long reviews of hotels and resorts with a booking function and, of course, the Thorn Tree travellers forum.
- Thai Visa** (www.thaivisa.com) An expat message board dealing with Thai current events and FAQs.

Tourism Thailand (www.tourismthailand.org) Official website of the Tourist Authority of Thailand.

Travelfish (www.travelfish.org) The best independent travel site for backpackers coming to Thailand.

TOP PICKS



Best Adventure Experiences

When you're ready to climb out of the hammock there's plenty on offer. For more adventure activities, see [Diving & Other Activities](#) (p289).

- **Rock climbing** – The awesome limestone walls at Railay (p338).
- **Diving** – Coral? Wrecks? Whale sharks? Take your pick of some of Asia's best diving (see the boxed text, p290).
- **Hiking** – Stride into one of the world's oldest rainforests at Khao Sok National Park (p244).
- **Sea kayaking** – Paddle through the limestone cliffs, hidden lagoons and peach-coloured beaches of Ang Thong Marine National Park's 42 islands (p240).
- **Snorkelling** – The Gulf of Thailand and Andaman Sea are like one vast snorkelling possibility, but it's hard to beat the reefs around Ko Phi-Phi (p345).

Fabulous Resort Hotels

Thailand's best resort hotels come in all shapes, sizes...and price ranges. See also the boxed texts: p288 for our favourite resorts in Phuket, p199 for top-end and midrange resorts on Ko Samui, p347 for Ko Phi-Phi's accommodation gems, and p176 for Hua Hin's best.

- **Jungle retreat** – Anantara (p205) on Ko Samui, and Golden Buddha Beach Resort (p275) on Ko Phra Thong.
- **Arty chic** – Library (p201) and Zazen (p204) on Ko Samui, Putahracsá (p176) in Hua Hin and Indigo Pearl (p323) on Phuket.
- **Modern luxury** – Zeavola (p349) on Ko Phi-Phi, Evason Phuket Resort (p306), Amanpuri Resort (p320) on Phuket, and Sila Evason Hideaway (p203) on Ko Samui.
- **Private beach** – Four Seasons (p205) on Ko Samui, Chedi (p320) on Phuket and Birds & Bees Resort (p125) in Pattaya.
- **High style, low price** – Ko Kood (p158) on Ko Kut, Jungle Club (p199) on Ko Samui, and Sri Lanta (p355) on Ko Lanta.

Great Films

Get into the mood for exotic Thailand with these flicks. For more on Thailand's home-grown cinema, see p40.

- *Krung Thep Antara* (Bangkok Dangerous, 1999) – The Pang brothers' stylish, award-winning story of a deaf hitman who has a crisis of confidence after unexpectedly finding love. A Nicolas Cage remake was released in 2008.
- *OK Baytong* (2003) – A monk enters the modern world to care for his orphaned niece; set in southern Thailand, the story touches on the violence between Thais and Muslims.
- *Ploy* (2007) – Psycho-drama about a Thai couple who return to Bangkok after years in America and face a relationship acid-test when a young woman moves into their room.
- *The Beach* (2000) – A big and beautiful Hollywood spectacle based on the Alex Garland novel and often credited for turning Thailand's beach scene from backpacker to flashpacker.
- *The Man with the Golden Gun* (1973) – James Bond thwarts Scaramanga's plot for world domination via a long-tail boat chase and a showdown in the villain's idyllic island lair, filmed at Ao Phang-Nga.

Itineraries

COASTAL ROUTES

FIRST-TIMER ISLAND HOPPING

Two to Three Weeks

Spend some time in **Bangkok** (p65), before bussing south to **Chumphon** (p185), the jumping-off points for diving or snorkelling in **Ko Tao** (p227) and full-mooning in **Ko Pha-Ngan** (p211). These islands are supremely chilled with a dash (you say when) of hedonism thrown in. Ko Pha-Ngan is one of the most diverse islands in the Gulf: 20-somethings go for trance-crazed **Hat Rin** (p215), 30s-and-beyond burrow further north, maybe peeping into the party for old-time's sake, and families dig the toddler-friendly bays.

When you tire of your hammock head via Surat Thani to the beautiful Andaman coast, decorated with the iconic limestone sea cliffs that have made Thailand's beaches famous. From **Krabi** (p326) squeeze into a minivan to explore the surrounding beaches or go to **Railay** (p338) to climb the world-famous seaside karst cliffs. For more beaches, check out **Ko Lanta** (p350) before returning to Krabi via **Ko Phi-Phi** (p343) to see what all the fuss is about.

Balance out the prostrate position with some jungle trekking in **Khao Sok National Park** (p244) or **Khao Sam Roi Yot National Park** (p180), closer to Bangkok. Then back to Bangkok for a wrap up of souvenir shopping and city pampering.



Join the classic beach-hunters' trail by dipping your toes into both the Gulf and the Andaman seas and leap-frogging across the peninsula (1400km round trip).

HAMMOCK TOUR EXTRAORDINAIRE

One Month

A month, you say? There are thousands of perfectly good itineraries to think up but, well, why not consider a hammock tour extraordinaire. Not just any old beach trip, this is enough time to really get to know southern Thailand's islands, beaches, jungle parks and cuisine – you'll eat a lot of *kà-nòm jeen* (a southern noodle dish). On your way south from **Bangkok** (p65) stop in at **Cha-am** (p169) for a taste of beach culture Thai style (nary a faràng to be seen). Continue south via Chumphon out to the odd-couple island twins of **Ko Tao** (p227) and **Ko Pha-Ngan** (p211).

With a bit of experience under your (dive) belt it's time to leave the pack behind for some real travelling along the beaches between **Surat Thani** (p241) and **Nakhon Si Thammarat** (p246), where you can spend a day soaking up the Jatukham buzz (p248). Continue to **Hat Yai** (p253), the gateway to the 'deep south', and then west to the sleepy Muslim town of **Satun** (p369), the jumping-off point to the wildly beautiful natural islands of **Ko Tarutao Marine National Park** (p374).

Turning north, head up to **Trang** (p359) and pop over to the beaches of Hat Chao Mai National Park, including delightful **Ko Kradan** (p366) or the wild mangroves of **Ko Libong** (p367), home to endangered dugongs and exotic birds. Hopscotch through a series of beach resorts: quickly morphing **Ko Lanta** (p350), backwater **Ko Jum** (p358) and **Ko Phi-Phi** (p343), which can be crowded but is also stunningly beautiful. Don't forget the beaches around **Krabi** (p326) for real sand credibility. Then high-tail it to **Phuket** (p300), Thailand's most powerful tourist tractor beam, and push on north to more idyllic **Hat Khao Lak** (p276). From here, sail on out on a live-aboard dive or snorkelling safari into the **Similan Islands** (p279) or the **Surin Islands** (p274).

Take your time exploring the beauty of a broad range of Thailand's beaches, islands and national parks – above and below the water (1800km round trip).



EAST COAST POP-IN

Seven to 10 days...maybe more

Thailand's southern islands might draw the big crowds, but if you're pushed for time (or heading into Cambodia) this route along the eastern gulf coast is both easier to get to and relatively less touristed. From **Bangkok** (p65) head directly to **Ban Phe** (p128), the transfer point for trips to rustic **Ko Samet National Park** (p129), where Bangkokians kick off their flip-flops.

Continue along the mainland to **Trat** (p136) and take the boat into the Ko Chang Archipelago, where you can choose your level of comfort and how remote you want to be from almost 50 islands. Jungle-topped **Ko Chang** (p140) is the largest and most-developed island, with diversions ranging from **elephant trekking** (p143) and guided **hikes** (p143) of the rugged interior to diving into the underworld. To get further off the beaten beach, jump on a boat to more secluded **Ko Mak** (p159) or jungle-clad **Ko Kut** (p157), or further... You're entering the Thailand of *The Beach*, remote islands that are harder to get to and have fewer facilities. For now, anyway. If these charming isles aren't remote enough, then you'll definitely have to start thinking up excuses for not making it back to work on time. Having changed your ticket and informed your loved ones that your impending disappearance is entirely intentional, take a boat over to **Ko Kham** or **Ko Rayang** (p162) for some stunning coral, or to the national park at **Ko Rang** (p163) for a genuine *Survivor* experience, sans pesky host, cameramen and tribal councils.

If and when you're heading back to Bangkok, consider a stop in (brace yourself) **Pattaya** (p119), where the sleazy, cheesy side is giving way to some more appealing aspects – temples, a zoo and live shows that don't involve ping pong balls.



Pressed for time or tied to the capital? You can deposit your beach towel on silky sand within a half-day's journey of Bangkok, or go a couple of hours further to the relatively untouched Ko Chang Archipelago (500-600km round trip).

TAILORED TRIPS

HONEYMOON DREAMING

One to Two Weeks

Wedding = stress. Honeymoon = romantic. With just a week, touchdown for a night in a boutique hotel in **Bangkok** (p96) then fly direct to **Ko Samui** (p191) or **Phuket** (p286) to minimise your travelling time. These islands have long, voluptuous beaches and amenities developed for package tourists, but they also have quiet corners for down-to-earth relaxing.

Skip Samui's rowdier beaches for less beautiful but more romantic **Hat Bo Phut** (p204). Drop into a **spa resort** (p197) for a well-earned chance to be rubbed and revitalised while just laying back and thinking of...anything except seating plans. Suitably distressed, join a tour to the wilderness of nearby **Ang Thong Marine National Park** (p240).

Phuket is Thailand's most famous island but there's more to it than gaudy resorts. Stay at a romantic, out-of-the-way beach, such as **Hat Mai Khao** (p322). Once settled, soak up some culture in **Phuket Town** (p300), a spice trade-era port with mixed Chinese, Indian and Portuguese influences – and some fine restaurants. For a little more action dive or snorkel in the Andaman Sea (p288) or explore the beaches of **Sirinath National Park** (p322).

With two weeks, you can split your affections between two islands. Motor from Phuket over to stunning **Ko Phi-Phi** (p343). Too much civilisation? Then embrace your inner Tarzan and Jane and go 'native' on the napping islands of **Ko Lanta** (p350) or **Ko Jum** (p358).



THE ANTI-HAMMOCK

Two to Three Weeks

If you prefer climbing limestone rock faces than climbing out of your hammock, diving into the unknown realm than diving into the infinity pool, then you've come to the right part of the world. While **Ko Tao** (p227) is undoubtedly a good place to get your dive licence, Thailand's best diving, snorkelling and climbing is spread along the remarkable Andaman coast. Fly south from **Bangkok** (p65) to **Trang** (p359) and kick on to lesser-known but stunning beaches and islands such as **Ko Ngai** (p363). This area is a favourite hangout for endangered dugongs among many others. Take a boat up to **Ko Phi-Phi** (p343) for a change of scene, both above and below the surface.

Time to trade your flippers for carabiners so head to **Krabi** (p326) and around to pretty **Railay** (p338), where you can ascend the karst limestone walls in Thailand's most-renowned rock-climbing region and sneak in a little hammock time (it is fun, after all). But we're not done yet. The cliffs conquered, it's time to strap on the tanks or snorkelling gear again for the *coup de grace*. Meet up with your live-aboard yacht in **Phuket** (p288) or **Hat Khao Lak** (p277) – yes, invite your new dive friends to share the cost – and set sail for the tropical archipelago of the **Similan Islands** (p279). With enough time and money, finish the trip in the **Surin Islands** (p274), where you might meet some of Jacques Cousteau's old manta mates at Richelieu Rock.



Events Calendar

Exact dates for most festivals vary from year to year. Some, particularly the Muslim festivals, follow the lunar calendar, while others are changed by organisers or local authorities. Some smaller festivals are covered in the regional chapters. The website of **Tourism Authority of Thailand** (www.tourismthailand.org) has dates for some festivals; for more on Buddhist festivals see www.buddhanet.net/thai_cal.htm. For dates of some Muslim festivals, see p392; for public holidays, see p393.

JANUARY

NEW YEAR'S DAY 30 Dec-1 Jan
This is the first of Thailand's three New Year's celebrations and features Western-style revelry.

FEBRUARY–MARCH

PHRA NAKHON KHIRI FAIR early Feb
Notable temple festival in Phetchaburi with classical dance and dramatic performances and a beauty contest for local widows; see p168.

CHINESE NEW YEAR Jan-Feb
On the first day of Chinese Lunar Year the Chinese celebrate *drùd jeen* with lion dances and fireworks, most spectacularly in Bangkok and Phuket.

MAGHA PUJA (MAH-KÁ BOO-CHAH) Feb-Mar
The full moon of the third lunar month is celebrated countrywide to commemorate the Buddha's spontaneous, unannounced preaching to 1250 enlightened monks. It culminates in a candle-lit walk around the main chapel at every wát.

APRIL

CHAKRI DAY 6 Apr
Across the country, celebrations are held for the founding of the Chakri royal dynasty.

SONGKRAN 13-15 Apr
Buddha images are 'bathed' and a lot of water is tossed about in a nationwide water fight to celebrate the Thai New Year. Tourists are not exempt, so dress to be soaked!

MAY–JUNE

SAILBOAT REGATTA early May
Hat Chao Mai (p363), near Trang, holds an annual regatta for traditional wooden sailboats, accompanied by music and theatre.

VISAKHA PUJA (WÍ-SĀH-KĀ BOO-CHAH) May-Jun
The full moon of the sixth lunar month commemorates the Buddha's birth, enlightenment and *parinibbana* (passing away). Activities are centred around the wát, with candle-lit processions, chanting and sermons.

HUA HIN JAZZ FESTIVAL Jun
This is Thailand's best jazz festival; see <http://jazzfestivalhuahin.com>.

JULY

ASALHA PUJA (AH-SĀHN-HĀ BOO-CHAH) Jul-Aug
Full moon of the eighth lunar month commemorates the sermon preached by the Buddha upon attaining enlightenment.

KHAO PHANSA (KÓW PAN-SĀH) Jul-Aug
The day after Asalha Puja is the beginning of Buddhist 'lent', when young men enter the monkhood for the rainy season and monks station themselves in a single monastery for three months.

BANGKOK INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL late Jul
One of two Bangkok film festivals. The dates vary, but it was held in late July in 2007; see www.bangkokfilm.org.

AUGUST

PHUKET GAY PRIDE Aug-Sep
A multiday event that's been running for years. The dates change a lot. See p316 and www.phuketpride.org.

SEPTEMBER–OCTOBER**VEGETARIAN FESTIVAL**

Sep-Oct

For nine days at the start of the ninth lunar month, devout Chinese Buddhists give up meat and engage in stomach-turning acts of self-mutilation. Mainly celebrated in Phuket, though Krabi and Phang-Nga celebrate on a smaller scale. See p302.

OK PHANSA

Oct-Nov

The end of Buddhist lent on the full moon of the 11th lunar month sets off a national party. It celebrates the Buddha's three-month retreat to heaven to talk to his mother.

NOVEMBER**LOI KRATHONG**

Nov-Dec

During the full moon, Thais launch hand-made lotus-shaped baskets and boats bearing a candle

and flowers into rivers, lakes and canals to thank the water goddess for life.

DECEMBER**KING'S BIRTHDAY**

5 Dec

Across the country, formal processions and cultural displays take place. Bangkok's festival centres around the Grand Palace.

BANGKOK JAZZ FESTIVAL

Dec

Three-nights of jazz are held in Dusit Park, Bangkok featuring international and Thai performers; see www.bangkokjazzfestival.com.

CONCERT IN THE PARK

Dec-Feb

The Bangkok symphony plays at Lumpini Park every Sunday (5.30pm to 7.30pm) between mid-December and mid-February; see www.bangkoksymphony.net.

On The Road



ANDREW BURKE **Coordinating Author**

People say Banglamphu is not the 'real Thailand', but for me the little alternative bars on Th Phra Athit and Th Samsen are both very real and very Thai. Modern Thai. I love the energy, the creativity and the atmosphere on what is Bangkok's most progressive edge.



BRANDON PRESSER

There I was posing for this picture at Sail Rock, arguably the Gulf Coast's best dive site, when 30 seconds later I had my first encounter with an elusive, school-bus-sized whale shark. I was lucky enough to swim with the gentle creature for 45 minutes.



AUSTIN BUSH

Chinatown is Bangkok's most hectic neighbourhood, and in my opinion, the most ripe for exploration. Tiny alleys can lead to crumbling hundred-year-old homes, a previously unknown food vendor, or if you're lucky, a rare performance of *ngéw*, a type of Chinese drama.



CELESTE BRASH

On a calm day with just enough sunshine, nothing beats travel by long-tail boat. This was my primary mode of transport for my research in the Trang islands – it's more expensive but saves time and is a perfect way to soak up both culture and scenery.

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