

History

EARLY CULTURES

Little evidence remains of the cultures that existed in Thailand before the middle of the 1st millennium AD, partly due to the destructive effects of the tropical climate and encroaching jungle. What is known about these civilisations comes from a handful of archaeological sites in the northeast and far south of the country, most notably Ban Chiang in Udon Thani Province and the area around Krabi in the south. These early peoples buried their dead with complex rituals and left mysterious cave paintings throughout the south and northeast of Thailand, including the caves of Tharnbok Korannee National Park (p332) near Krabi.

EMERGING EMPIRES

From the 3rd century BC Indian traders began visiting the Gulf of Thailand, introducing the peoples of the region to Hinduism, which rapidly became the principal faith in the area. By 230 BC, when Chinese traders began visiting these shores, large parts of Thailand had been incorporated into the kingdom of Funan, the first state in Southeast Asia. The name Funan means 'king of the mountain', a reference to Mt Meru, the home of the Hindu gods. Funan established its main port at Oc Eo at the mouth of the Mekong River in Vietnam, and traded as far afield as India and possibly even Europe. At its peak, the state included large parts of Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam and had active trade with the agrarian communities along the Malay Peninsula as far south as modern-day Pattani and Yala. A factory producing trade beads for the Funan empire was recently discovered at Khlong Thom near Krabi.

During the first few centuries AD, and possibly even much earlier, it is thought that present-day Thailand began to be populated by Tai peoples moving south from China (see the boxed text, p22).

After the peak of the Funan Kingdom, around AD 600, a new star was rising in Southeast Asia, the kingdom of the Khmer, from modern-day Cambodia. This Hindu kingdom became famous for its extravagant sculpture and temple building; Khmer styles of art and design – as featured on the magnificent Hindu temples at Angkor Wat in Cambodia – had a profound effect on the art, language and religion of the Thais. Many Thai men became mercenaries for the Khmer armies and are clearly depicted in the bas-relief carvings in the Angkor compound.

During this period, much of central Thailand was still dominated by the dark-skinned indigenous peoples of the Malay Peninsula, known today as Negritos. A few small pockets of tribal Negrito people still survive in the

Evidence of hunter-gatherer peoples from up to 180,000 years ago has been found in caves in northern Thailand.

Khmer influence on early Thai society was so strong, that even as late as the 15th century, public documents tended to be written both in Thai and Khmer.

TIMELINE

3rd Century BC

Hinduism is thought to have arrived in Southeast Asia from India, and will remain the dominant religion in the region for the next thousand years.

1-300 AD

Increasingly displaced by the spreading Han in China, the Tai people begin to arrive in the fertile river valleys of mainland Southeast Asia.

2nd-13th Century

Based in present-day Sumatra, the Srivijaya kingdom comes to dominate much of Indonesia and the Malay Peninsula, eventually extending as far as Madagascar.

THE TAIS THAT BIND

The Tai, an ethno-linguistic group that includes modern-day Thais, the Lao, the Shan and other smaller groups, range in area from Hainan Island in China to Assam in northeastern India. Although it was long assumed that modern-day Thais originally separated from Tai groups in southern China in the first few centuries AD and moved south, remains found in northeastern Thailand suggest Thais have been living in present-day Thailand much longer than previously thought. The evidence, some of it dating back to 2500 BC, suggests that the people living there were among the earliest farming societies in the world, as well as some of the first metalworkers. The Tai may have even introduced the concept of tone to the languages of China and Southeast Asia, and today China, not Southeast Asia, is home to the greatest diversity of Tai ethnic groups.

central forests of southern Thailand. Increasingly, the fertile river basins of central Thailand became inhabited by groups of Tai-speaking people moving south who formed various independent city-states known as *meu-ang*. These people, the forerunners of modern Thais, would eventually refer to their territory as Syam or Sayam, later transliterated to 'Siam' by the English trader James Lancaster in 1592.

As the power of the Khmer grew, another culture began to have an influence on Thailand – the Mon people of current-day Myanmar (Burma), who had been converted to Buddhism by the missionaries of the Indian king, Asoka. The Mon dominated western and upper-southwestern Thailand from the 3rd to 6th centuries, spreading Buddhism and building Thailand's first Buddhist stupa at Nakhon Pathom, west of Bangkok. The conversion of Nakhon Pathom, then capital of the Dvaravati kingdom, was recorded in the 5th century in the Mahavamsa (the sacred chronicle of Sri Lankan Buddhism). The Mon were later driven back into Myanmar by the Khmer and subsequent Thai kingdoms, but vestiges of Mon culture can still be seen on Ko Kret in north Bangkok.

KINGDOMS OF THE MALAY PENINSULA

Two distinct spheres of power existed within the region by the 12th century: the Khmer kingdom and minor Thai city-states dominated central Southeast Asia, while the Srivijaya kingdom of Sumatra and smaller entities dominated the Indonesian archipelago and Malay Peninsula, including parts of modern-day Thailand.

Of the series of city-states that grew to prominence along the Malay Peninsula, Tambralinga established its capital on the site of present-day Nakhon Si Thammarat. Tambralinga eventually became part of the Srivijaya kingdom, a confederation of maritime states that ruled southern Thailand and Malaysia from the 7th to 13th centuries. The Srivijaya became hugely wealthy from tolls extracted from traffic through the Strait of Malacca.

Remains of the Srivijaya culture can be seen around Chaiya, near modern-day Surat Thani, and Nakhon Si Thammarat, which has relics from Srivijaya times in its museum. Many art forms of the Srivijaya kingdom, such as Thai *nāng dā-lung* (shadow play) and *lākon* (classical dance-drama), were developed in Nakhon Si Thammarat and incorporated into modern Thai culture. Also in Nakhon Si Thammarat is the ancient monastery of Wat Phra Mahathat, reputedly founded at the height of the Srivijaya kingdom. (For more information on the historic attractions of Nakhon Si Thammarat, see p246.)

Although Buddhism is thought to have been introduced to the Chaopraya Basin by the Mon as early as the 5th century, it was not until the 13th century that trade between Sri Lanka and various Thai kingdoms resulted in the spread of Theravada Buddhism. The southern port city of Trang was a gateway for much of this exchange, which also saw the introduction of influential ideas in science, law, medicine and literature.

THE FIRST THAI KINGDOM & THE RISE OF ISLAM

During the 13th century, several Thai principalities in the Mekong Valley united and wrested control of central Thailand from the Khmer, making their new capital at Sukhothai (Rising of Happiness). Many Thais consider Sukhothai to have been the first true Thai kingdom. Under King Phor Khun Si Intharathit, Sukhothai declared its independence from the Khmer empire in 1238 and expanded its sphere of influence, taking over many parts of the Srivijaya kingdom in the south.

In its prime, the Sukhothai kingdom extended as far as Nakhon Si Thammarat in the south, to the upper Mekong River Valley in Laos and to Bago (Pegu) in southern Myanmar, an area larger than present-day Thailand.

Roughly in this same period, Islam was introduced to southern Thailand via Malaysia during the reign of Sultan Iskandar, reaching Pattani by 1387 and spreading as far north as Songkhla. The Malay dialect of Yawi became the main language of the deep south and Islam came to replace Buddhism through that region. Even many of the semi-nomadic *chow lair* (sea gypsies) who migrated up and down the coast were eventually converted. Although no great monuments from this time survive today, the culture of the deep south is still predominantly Malay, and Yawi is still widely spoken.

Another early Malay kingdom was Pattani, which evolved in the 15th century into a prosperous trading port on the gulf-coast side of the peninsula. Ancient Pattani included parts of modern-day Malaysia as well as the Thai provinces of Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat, Songkhla and Satun. After the decline of the Srivijaya kingdom in the 14th century and the rise of the Thai kingdoms, Pattani struggled with its northern neighbour for more than 100 years until it was successfully invaded in the late 18th century by Rama I.

During the Ayuthaya period, the upper classes flaunted their wealth by brandishing elaborate silver betel nut boxes.

Inscriptions written in Thai, Khmer, Chinese and Arabic have been found inside temples in Ayuthaya, showing just how cosmopolitan this early Thai kingdom was.

Thailand is 543 years ahead of the West, at least according to their calendar, which measures the beginning of the modern era from the birth of Buddha instead of Christ.

Thai script is based on southern Indian writing systems adopted and adapted by the Mon and Khmer; the first examples date back to the 13th century.

5th Century

Introduced by the Mon people, Theravada Buddhism gains a foothold in present-day Thailand. The religion initially mixes with eventually replaces Hinduism as the dominant religion in the region.

7th-11th Century

The Angkor kingdom extends its control from present-day Cambodia into northeastern and central Thailand, dominating the culture of much of mainland Southeast Asia for more than 500 years.

1238

Phor Khun Si Intharathit forms the first Thai kingdom at Sukhothai, which also sees the emergence of art, architecture and design that today are regarded as classically 'Thai'.

13th Century

Islam begins to gain a foothold in mainland Southeast Asia, having been introduced by Muslim traders from India up to 500 years previously.

1350

Under the leadership of U Thong, also known as Ramathibodi I, Ayuthaya usurps power from Sukhothai and begins building a regional empire that will last 400 years.

1511

The Portuguese are the first European visitors to Ayuthaya, eventually establishing a consulate and forming a cultural and economic relationship that will last 150 years.

THE RISE & FALL OF AYUTHAYA

The Thai kings of Ayuthaya extended their influence deep into Khmer territory, conquering Angkor in 1431. To this day, some Thais still regard Angkor as part of Thailand, a cause of frequent diplomatic rows between Thailand and Cambodia. Ayuthaya became one of the greatest and wealthiest cities in Asia, far larger and more powerful than most European capitals at that time, attracting trade and visitors from across the world. The kingdom sustained an unbroken monarchical succession through 34 reigns, from King U Thong (1350–69) to King Ekathat (1758–67).

By the early 16th century Ayuthaya was receiving European visitors, and a Portuguese embassy was established in 1511. The Portuguese were followed by the Dutch in 1604, the English in 1612, the Danes in 1621 and the French in 1662. In the mid-16th century, Ayuthaya and the independent kingdom of Lanna came under the control of the Burmese, but the Thais took back control of both by the end of the century.

The Burmese besieged Ayuthaya again in 1765 and conquered it two years later. The Burmese were determined to eliminate the rival capital, and proceeded to destroy not only the town itself, but all remnants of its cultural and intellectual life as well. Thai resentment ran high, and Phaya Taksin, a charismatic half-Chinese, half-Thai general, declared himself king of the Thais in 1769, ruling from a new capital at Thonburi on the banks of the Chao Phraya River, opposite present-day central Bangkok. Over time, Taksin's inner circle began to fear his power and claims of divinity, and the king was executed in the custom reserved for royalty: he was beaten to death with sandalwood clubs while enveloped in a velvet sack so that no royal blood would touch the ground.

BANGKOK RULE

Bangkok first appeared as a power in 1782, under another general, Chao Phaya Chakri – crowned as Phraphutthayotfa Chulalok. He moved the royal capital directly across the river to Bangkok and assumed a new hereditary title system, taking the name 'Rama I' for himself. The Chakri dynasty continues as the ruling family of Thailand to this day.

Rama I was successful in centralising power and employing the military to expand the borders of his kingdom, which eventually extended east into modern-day Laos and Cambodia, north into Chiang Mai (which, since the 16th century had been part of Myanmar) and as far south as the modern-day Malaysian states of Kedah and Terengganu.

Rama IV, commonly known as King Mongkut (r 1851–68), was one of the more interesting and innovative of the early Chakri kings. After being passed over as heir to the throne for 27 years – during which time he was a Buddhist monk and became adept in Sanskrit, Pali, Latin and English, and studied Western sciences – the new king expertly courted ties with European nations.

Thailand's first printed periodical was the *Bangkok Recorder*, a monthly newspaper founded in 1844 by American missionary Dr Dan Beach Bradley.

The relationship between King Mongkut and Anna Leonowens was given the full Hollywood treatment in *The King & I* (1956).

Male literacy rates in parts of Thailand during the 1890s were higher than those of Europe or America.

ALL THE KINGS' WOMEN

Until polygamy was outlawed by Rama VI, it was expected of Thai monarchs to maintain a harem consisting of numerous 'major' and 'minor' wives, and the children of these relationships. This led to some truly 'extended' families: Rama I had 42 children by 28 mothers; Rama II, 73 children by 40 mothers; Rama III, 51 children by 37 mothers (he would eventually accumulate a total of 242 wives and consorts); Rama IV, 82 children by 35 mothers; and Rama V, 77 children by 40 mothers. In the case of Rama V, his seven 'major' wives were all half-sisters or first cousins, a conscious effort to maintain the purity of the bloodline of the Chakri dynasty. Other consorts or 'minor' wives were often the daughters of families wishing to gain greater ties with the royal family.

In contrast to the precedence set by his predecessors, Rama VI had one wife and one child, a girl born only a few hours before his death. As a result, his brother, Prajadhipok, Rama VII, was appointed as his successor. Rama VII also had only one wife and failed to produce any heirs. After abdicating in 1935, he did not exercise his right to appoint a successor, and once again, lines were drawn back to Rama V, and the grandson of one of his remaining 'major' wives, nine-year-old Ananda Mahidol, was chosen to be the next king.

Mongkut became famous in Europe due to the largely fictitious memoirs of his English governess, Anna Leonowens. The stories spawned a Rogers and Hammerstein play and several movies; the most recent, *Anna & the King*, was banned in Thailand for some glaring historical inaccuracies.

The real Mongkut was notable for his savvy dealings with European powers. He instructed his followers: 'Whatever they have invented or done which we should know of and do, we can imitate and learn from them, but do not wholeheartedly believe in them.' Mongkut died of malaria in 1868 and was replaced by his son, King Chulalongkorn (Rama V, 1868–1910), who continued his father's steps toward modernisation and openness to the West. King 'Chula' abolished prostration before the king as well as slavery and *corvée* (state labour).

Like his father, Chula was regarded as a skilful diplomat and is credited for successfully playing European powers off against one another to avoid colonisation. However, in exchange for this independence, Thailand was forced to cede much of the territory originally gained by Rama I, and present-day Laos and Cambodia were ceded to French Indochina between 1893 and 1907. In 1902 the former Pattani kingdom was ceded to the British, who were then in control of Malaysia, but reverted back to Thailand five years later. Many from this region continue to consider it to be occupied by the Thai government (see p28).

Of all the historic kings, Rama V enjoys a cult-like devotion. He gladly embraced the new technology of photography and pictures of him in European dress, ordinary Thai farmer garb or military pomp decorate homes and businesses today.

At its peak in the late 1930s, Thailand's Opium Monopoly accounted for nearly 20% of the country's national budget.

During the first three decades of the 20th century more than half of Bangkok's population was Chinese.

1765

The Burmese sack Ayuthaya, essentially rendering the city to rubble and making it necessary to relocate the capital. The city is virtually abandoned until the early 20th century.

1769

Under the leadership of Taksin the Great, Siam expands its territory into the Malay Peninsula, northern Thailand and present-day Laos. By 1778 Cambodia would also be under the loose control of Siam.

1782

Phraphutthayotfa Chulalok, now known as King Rama I, re-establishes the Siamese court across the river from Thonburi, resulting in both the current Thai capital and the beginning of the Chakri dynasty.

1851–1910

The modernisation of Thailand occurs during the reigns of Rama IV and Rama V, which saw the introduction of Western culture and technology, reform of the role of the monarchy, and increased infrastructure.

1893

After a minor territory dispute, France sends gunboats to threaten Bangkok, forcing Siam to give up most of its territory east of the Mekong River. Siam takes on much of its modern boundaries.

1909

The Anglo-Siamese Treaty allows Siam to keep Yala, Pattani, Narathiwat and Songkhla, while relinquishing control of Kedah, Kelantan, Perlis, and Terengganu to Britain.

Four Reigns, a novel by Kukrit Pramoj, describes the changes in Thai society from absolute monarchy to the modern era as seen through the eyes of a fictitious noblewoman.

During WWII, much of southern Thailand's railway system was disassembled and relocated by the Japanese in order to build the 'Death Railway' into Burma.

REVOLUTION

In the early 20th century, the Thai military began to take an active interest in governing the kingdom, staging an unsuccessful coup in 1912. Thai students educated in France staged another bloodless coup in 1932, which led to the end of absolute monarchy in Siam. Thailand adopted a constitutional monarchy along British lines, with a mixed military-civilian group in power. King Rama VII abdicated in 1935 and retired to Britain. The king's nine-year-old nephew Ananda Mahidol was crowned King Rama VIII, but power really remained with Phibul Songkhram, one of the military masterminds of the 1932 coup. Under the influence of Phibul's government, the country's name was officially changed in 1939 from Siam to Thailand.

Ananda Mahidol ascended the throne in 1935, but was shot dead in his bedroom under mysterious circumstances in 1946 and to this day his death remains a taboo subject in Thailand. In the same year, his brother, Bhumibol Adulyadej (pronounced *Poomipon Adunyádet*), was appointed the ninth king of the Chakri dynasty. He continues to reign today, and you'll see his image everywhere, including at the cinema before the movie starts (see the boxed text, p30).

WWII & THE COUP ERA

Thailand's rulers collaborated with the Japanese during WWII, allowing troops access to the Gulf of Thailand, which helped in the annexation of the Malay Peninsula. In the process, the Japanese troops occupied a portion of Thailand, and Phibul went so far as to declare war on the USA and Great Britain in 1942. His ambassador in Washington, Seni Pramoj, refused to deliver the declaration, and Phibul later resigned under pressure from growing underground resistance to his rule.

After V-J Day (marking the Allied victory over Japan in WWII) in 1945, Seni Pramoj became prime minister. Thus began a political chess game in which one leader after another was displaced by popular uprisings, elections and military coups. First to go was Seni, who was unseated in a general election in 1946. A democratic civilian government took over under the leadership of Pridi Phanomyong, a law professor who had been instrumental in the 1932 revolution. Thailand reverted to its old name of 'Siam' for about a year, until Phibul returned to power and suspended the constitution, reinstating 'Thailand' as the country's official name. Phibul's political rivals and dissidents were sent to the prison island of Ko Tarutao (p376), off the coast of Satun. Under Phibul the government took an extreme anticommunist stance and became a loyal supporter of French and US foreign policy in Southeast Asia. This had profound implications for Thailand's role during the Vietnam War.

Phibul lost his post again in 1951 to another general, Sarit Thanarat, though he retained the title of prime minister until 1957 when Sarit finally

had him exiled. That same year, Sarit was voted out in the elections and went abroad for 'medical treatment', returning in 1958 and seizing control in another coup. He promptly abolished the constitution, dissolved the parliament and banned all political parties, maintaining effective power until he died of cirrhosis in 1963.

Meanwhile, in the south of the country, long-held Muslim resentments against the ruling Buddhist government began to boil over (see the boxed text, p28).

From 1964 to 1973, Thailand was governed by the army officers Thanom Kittikachorn and Praphat Charusathien, who negotiated a package of economic deals with the USA in exchange for allowing the US to develop military bases in Thailand to support the war in Vietnam. Thailand found itself flooded with American GIs, who pumped US dollars into the Thai economy and created a culture of financial dependency on foreign investment that continues to be a problem in Thailand. Another effect of the American presence was the massive expansion of the sex industry. Although prostitution and extramarital affairs were culturally accepted, Thailand's relationship with US troops as an R&R destination developed its lasting reputation as a destination for sex tourism.

Despite the effects of the USA presence, most Thais were more worried about military rule. Reacting to political repression, 10,000 students publicly demanded reinstatement of the constitution in June 1973. In October that year, the military brutally suppressed a large demonstration at Thammasat University in Bangkok, killing 77 and wounding over 800. King Bhumibol stepped in, forcing Thanom and Praphat to leave Thailand. Oxford-educated Kukrit Pramoj took charge of a 14-party coalition, creating a leftist government that introduced a national minimum wage, repealed anticommunist laws and ordered the departure of US forces from Thailand.

Constitutional government lasted until October 1976 when students demonstrated again, this time protesting against Thanom's return to Thailand as a monk. Thammasat University again became a battlefield as the Border Patrol Police, along with right-wing, paramilitary civilian groups, assaulted a group of 2000 students holding a sit-in. Hundreds of students were killed and injured; more than a thousand were arrested.

The breakdown of order gave the military the perfect excuse to step in and reinstall a right-wing military government, this time with Thanin Kraivichien as prime minister. After this, many Thai students and intellectuals joined the People's Liberation Army of Thailand (PLAT) – a group of armed communist insurgents, based in the hills of northern and southern Thailand. However, with the dramatic evidence of USA opposition to communism in Asia still fresh in people's minds, the most they were able to achieve was the replacement of Thanin with the more moderate General Kriangsak Chomanand in 1977.

The dominance of the central Thai dialect as the country's standard language didn't occur until centralisation of the education system under the reign of King Rama V.

Global Terrorism Analysis (www.jamestown.org/terrorism) publishes online articles about the southern Thai insurgency as well as other international hot spots.

The History of the Malay Kingdom of Patani, by Ibrahim Syukri, is a nationalistic history of the southern provinces from the Muslim perspective.

1914

Official opening of Don Muang, Thailand's first international airport; the airport will remain the country's main domestic and international airport until the opening of Suvarnabhumi in 2006.

1917

In a move meant to gain favour with France and Britain and assert its sovereignty, Siam joins the allied side in a mostly token role in Europe during WWI.

1932

A bloodless coup transforms Siam from an absolute to a constitutional monarchy. The deposed king, Rama VII, by most accounts a willing accessory, continues to remain on the throne until resigning three years later.

1939

Military dictator and 1932 coup leader Phibul Songkhram renames Siam as Thailand, a nationalistic gesture meant to imply the unity of all Tai people.

1946

King Bhumibol, Thailand's current king, is crowned after the death of his brother. This ushers in a period of revived interest in the monarchy, an institution that had been waning since the reign of Rama V.

1946

Pridi Phanomyong, an architect of the 1932 coup, becomes Thailand's first democratically elected prime minister. After a military coup the following year, Pridi flees Thailand, returning only briefly once in his life.

CONFLICT IN THE SOUTH

Long before being incorporated into Thailand in 1902, the three border provinces of Pattani, Narathiwat and Yala previously formed a Malay kingdom known as Pattani. The majority of inhabitants of these provinces continue to be ethnic Malay Muslims, and speak a Malay dialect called Yawi. During the 1930s, the Phibul government tried to impose Thai language and culture on the region, and proceeded to shut down religious schools and Islamic courts. This led to growing dissatisfaction with the central government, which eventually manifested itself as a desire for more autonomy, and in some cases, separatism. In 1948, in what is regarded as the beginning of the modern insurgency, Haji Sulong Tomina, a prominent religious leader, proposed that the people of the border provinces should be led by a locally born governor. He was charged with treason, prompting an uprising in the southernmost provinces that led to the death of hundreds. In 1954 Haji Sulong mysteriously disappeared, ostensibly executed by the authorities.

Throughout the latter 20th century, despite an official government policy of religious tolerance, the people of the region continued to be largely left out of state affairs, and their religious beliefs and language were viewed with scepticism by officials in Bangkok. In 1968 the Pattani United Liberation Organization (PULO) was created with the goal of creating a separate Muslim state. Unrest flared again in the 1970s and 1980s, but the issues raised by PULO were largely resolved by negotiation.

The most recent phase of the insurgency began in earnest in 2004 when a raid on an army depot in Narathiwat led to the death of four soldiers and the theft of hundreds of weapons. A brutal form of marshal law was immediately imposed on the three border provinces. In April of that year, after simultaneous attacks on several police outposts, 32 suspected militants hiding out in Pattani's Krue Sae Mosque were killed by the Thai military after a tense standoff. In October of the same year in the town of Tak Bai, Narathiwat, 78 Muslim protesters suffocated to death after being arrested and carelessly packed into military vehicles. In both cases the Thaksin government showed little remorse, claiming in the case of the Tak Bai incident, that the deaths were due to the fact that the protesters were already weak from fasting during the month of Ramadan.

Since the 2006 military coup, led by the Thai army's first Muslim commander, Sonthi Boonyaratglin, there has been only a slight lull in the virtually daily murders and bombings, which have moved as far north as Hat Yai, in Songkhla Province. Despite the scale of the rebellion, the identity of the insurgents and their goals are still largely unknown, although they are thought to have possible links to extremist groups such as Jemaah Islamiyah. Despite having resulted in over 2700 deaths since 2004, the conflict has received scant international attention.

The military subsequently appointed Prem Tinsulanonda in 1980, who set about dismantling the PLAT insurgency, banning the Communist Party of Thailand, launching military offensives against PLAT and granting amnesty to members who surrendered. Simultaneously, Prem created political and economic stability, removing the primary motivation for the armed uprisings. There was just one coup attempt in the 1980s and that was resolved peacefully through the intervention of King Bhumibol. Communism

briefly reared its head one more time, in the form of the Communist Party of Malaysia, which established a guerrilla base in the tunnels of Khao Nam Khang National Park, but the organisation was dissolved in 1989.

In 1988 Prem was replaced in elections by Chatichai Choonhavan, who created a government dominated by business executives and who set about transforming Thailand into an 'Asian Tiger' economy. Thailand seemed to be entering a new era during which the country's economic boom coincided with increasing democratisation. Yet, by the end of the 1980s, some high-ranking military officers had become increasingly dissatisfied, complaining that Thailand was being governed by a plutocracy.

MONEY POLITICS & THE POLITICS OF MONEY

Thailand had three peaceful years before the army seized power again in February 1991, handing power to the newly formed National Peace-Keeping Council (NPKC), led by General Suchinda Kraprayoon. It was Thailand's 18th coup attempt and one of 10 successful coups since 1932. Once again, the Thai constitution was abolished and parliament was dissolved.

The NPKC appointed a civilian leader, Anand Panyarachun, as prime minister, to dispel public fears that the junta was planning a return to 100% military rule. However, a new draft of the constitution effectively ensured that the real power would remain with the military, no matter who was in charge of parliament. The new charter also included a provisional clause allowing for a 'four-year transitional period' to full democracy.

General elections were held in March 1992 and a five-party coalition government came to power under Narong Wongwan, but the military promptly exercised its constitutional prerogative following a series of seemingly trumped-up allegations about Narong's involvement in the drugs trade and handed power back to General Suchinda.

In May 1992 Bangkok was once again rocked by demonstrations, this time led by charismatic Bangkok governor, Chamlong Srimuang. After street confrontations between protesters and the military near Bangkok's Democracy Monument resulted in nearly 50 deaths and hundreds of injuries, Chamlong and Suchinda were publicly scolded by King Bhumibol, and Suchinda resigned after less than six weeks as prime minister. The military-backed government also agreed to institute a constitutional amendment – Thailand's 15th – requiring that Thailand's prime minister come from the ranks of elected parliamentarians. Anand Panyarachun was reinstated as interim prime minister for a four-month term.

The September 1992 elections squeezed in veteran Democrat Party leader Chuan Leekpai with a five-seat majority. A food vendor's son and native of Trang Province, the new prime minister was well regarded for his honesty and high morals, but didn't really achieve a lot that the Thai people could take home with them. By the end of 1993, the opposition was calling for

A History of Thailand, by Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit, is a good source of information regarding the significant events of Thailand's modern era.

It is thought that Thai boxing may have its origins in unarmed warfare during the Ayutthaya period.

For one of the more readable 20th-century histories of Thailand, David Wyatt's *Thailand: A Short History* is still the definitive guide.

1957

1965

1967

1970s

1973

1975

Muslim separatists dissatisfied with unjust treatment from Bangkok initiate a guerrilla war with the aim of creating a separate Muslim state in southern Thailand.

Communist insurgency begins with the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) officially announcing an armed struggle. Thousands of university-age Thais take refuge in remote corners of the country.

Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) is formed by five core members: the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand. Other Southeast Asian states join throughout the 1980s and 1990s.

The beginning of a period of insurgency in Thailand's southernmost provinces. The unrest continued until the 1990s when the government agreed to provide more representation and funding.

Large-scale student protests in Bangkok lead to violent military suppression. The 1971 coup leader Thanom Kittikachorn is ordered into exile by King Bhumibol.

After 14 years of using the country as an operating base for the Vietnam War, US troops depart Thailand. The US presence has a large and lasting impact on Thai culture and economy.

THE KING

If you see a yellow Rolls Royce flashing by along city avenues, accompanied by a police escort, you've probably just caught a glimpse of Thailand's longest-reigning monarch – and the longest-reigning living monarch in the world – King Bhumibol Adulyadej. Also known in English as Rama IX (the ninth king of the Chakri dynasty), Bhumibol was born in the USA in 1927, while his father Prince Mahidol was studying medicine at Harvard University.

Fluent in English, French, German and Thai, His Majesty ascended the throne in 1946 following the death of his brother Rama VIII (King Ananda Mahidol), who reigned for 11 years before being shot in mysterious circumstances.

An ardent jazz composer and saxophonist when he was younger, King Bhumibol has hosted jam sessions with the likes of jazz greats Woody Herman and Benny Goodman. His compositions are often played on Thai radio.

His Majesty administers royal duties from Chitralada Palace (Map pp72–3) in the city's Dusit precinct, north of Ko Ratanakosin. As protector of both nation and religion, King Bhumibol traditionally presides over several important Buddhist and Brahmanist ceremonies during the year. Among the more colourful are the seasonal robe-changing of the emerald Buddha in Wat Phra Kaew and the annual Royal Ploughing Ceremony, during which ceremonial rice is sown to ensure a robust economy for the coming year, at Sanam Luang.

The king and Queen Sirikit have four children: Princess Ubol Ratana (born 1951), Crown Prince Maha Vajiralongkorn (1952), Princess Mahachakri Sirindhorn (1955) and Princess Chulabhorn (1957).

After over 60 years in power, and having reached his 80th birthday, the King is preparing for his succession. For the last few years the Crown Prince has performed most of the royal ceremonies the King would normally perform, such as presiding over the Royal Ploughing Ceremony, changing the attire on the Emerald Buddha and handing out academic degrees at university commencements.

Though Thailand's political system is officially classified as a constitutional monarchy, the constitution stipulates that the king be 'enthroned in a position of revered worship' and must not be exposed 'to any sort of accusation or action'. With or without legal writ, the vast majority of Thai citizens regard King Bhumibol as a sort of demigod, partly in deference to tradition but also because of his impressive efforts to promote public works.

parliamentary dissolution and King Bhumibol stepped in and appointed a new cabinet for Chuan in December 1994.

Chuan did not complete his four-year term, and was replaced by 63-year-old billionaire Banharn Silapa-archa, whom the Thai press called a 'walking ATM'. Banharn wasn't very popular with the Thai media, who immediately attacked his tendency to fill senior government positions with cronies known to be heavily involved in money politics. In September 1996 the Banharn government collapsed amid a spate of corruption scandals and a crisis of confidence. However, the Thai economy continued to grow and Thailand

appeared to be on the verge of joining its neighbours South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore as an Asian Tiger economy.

Banharn was replaced that November by former deputy prime minister and army commander, Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, of the New Aspiration Party, in an election marked by violence and accusations of vote-buying. Like his predecessor – and most other political leaders in Asia and around the world for that matter – Chavalit failed to see that the Asian economic bubble was about to burst. In mid-1997, the Thai currency fell into a deflationary tailspin, losing 40% of its value, and the economy crashed to a virtual halt.

On 27 September 1997, the Thai parliament voted in a new constitution, Thailand's 16th since 1932 and the first to be decreed by a civilian government. Known as *rát-tam-má-noon 'Bràchahchon* (people's constitution) it put new mechanisms in place to monitor the conduct of elected officials and political candidates and to protect civil rights, achieving many of the aims of the prodemocracy movement. Unfortunately this wasn't enough to save the Chavalit government, which was judged on its failure to deal effectively with the economic disaster. Chavalit was forced to resign in November 1997.

An election brought Chuan Leekpai back into office, just as many banks and finance companies went into total collapse. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) stepped in with US\$17.2 billion in loans, with the stipulation that the Thai government follow the IMF's prescriptions for recapitalisation and restructuring. The IMF medicine seemed to work, though it must be said, this benefited American and European global investors more than ordinary Thais. After shrinking 10% in 1998, the Thai economy grew nearly 5% in both 1999 and 2000. The weak baht helped make Thai products more attractive overseas and Thailand's exports grew by nearly 13%. These encouraging developments allowed Thailand to take an 'early out' from the IMF's loan package in 2000.

THE THAKSIN ERA

Economic survival wasn't enough to save Chuan, who was replaced in January 2001 by Thaksin Shinawatra, a billionaire telecommunications tycoon from Chiang Mai. Thaksin was able to capitalise on rural discontent by promising a suspension of farmers' debt payments and a million baht in development funds for each and every village in Thailand, and overwhelmingly defeated Chuan in the general elections. Thaksin was generally able to deliver on his populist promises and won another sweeping victory in 2005.

In 2003 a Thaksin-supported war on drugs led to the deaths of more than 2700 alleged drug dealers. Although the campaign was popular among Thais, some of the deaths were thought to be the result of extra-judicial score settling, and Thaksin was criticised by the UN Commission on Human Rights.

However, soon after his second victory, the Thaksin era began to be filled with political high drama. First there were the troubles in southern

For an epic modern take on Thai history, seek out *The Legend of Suriyothai* (2003), the most expensive film ever made in Thailand.

In 2005 the government of Thaksin Shinawatra became the first elected civilian administration to complete a four-year term.

Thailand's King Bhumibol Adulyadej, who marked the 60th anniversary of his accession to the throne in 2006, is the world's longest-reigning monarch.

1976

1980

1985

1992

1997

July 1997

Former coup leader Thanom returns to Thailand as a monk. Protests at Thammasat University are brutally put down by the military, leading to the deaths of 46 students.

Prime Minister Prem Tinsulanonda successfully negotiates peace with the country's communist insurgents by following a dual policy of urging cadres to defect and offering amnesty.

Chamlong Srimuang is elected mayor of Bangkok. Three years later, after forming his own largely Buddhist-based political party, the Palang Dharma Party, he is elected mayor again.

Street protests led by Chamlong Srimuang against 1991 coup leader Suchinda Kraprayoon leads to violent confrontations. Both Chamlong and Suchinda are publicly scolded by the king, leading to Suchinda's resignation.

A civilian government introduces Thailand's first constitution drafted by an elected assembly. The document emphasises human rights, advances political reform, and empowers and protects citizens.

Thailand devalues its currency, the baht, heralding the Asian economic crisis; massive unemployment and personal debt, and a significant crash of the Thai stock market.

COBRA SWAMP

If you arrived in Bangkok by air, bear in mind that the sleek glass and steel terminal you most likely pulled into was nearly 40 years in the making. Suvarnabhumi (pronounced sū-wan-nā-poom), Sanskrit for 'Golden Land', could hardly be a more apt name for Thailand's new airport, particularly for the politicians and investors involved.

Originally begun in 1973, the location chosen for Thailand's new international airport was an unremarkable marshy area with the slightly less illustrious working title of Nong Ngu Hao, Thai for 'Cobra Swamp'. Despite the seemingly disadvantageous setting, over the years the flat marshland was eagerly bought and sold by politicians and developers hoping to make a quick profit.

It wasn't until the self-styled administration of Thaksin Shinawatra that work on the airport began in earnest. Thaksin harboured desires to make Bangkok a 'transportation hub' to rival Hong Kong and Singapore, and went on a virtual spending spree, commissioning construction of the world's tallest flight control tower, as well as the world's largest terminal building.

Not surprisingly, the construction of Suvarnabhumi was rife with allegations of corruption, including the use of faulty building materials and substandard, insufficient runways. Undoubtedly the most embarrassing single scandal associated with the airport was the suspect purchase of 20 CTX security scanners from a US company.

On 29 September 2005, Thaksin presided over a much-criticised 'soft' opening ceremony. The event was essentially little more than a face-saving measure considering that the airport was still far from operational. Suvarnabhumi eventually began flights a year later, on September 28, 2006. In an ironic twist of fate, Thaksin, the main catalyst behind the project, was in exile in England, having been ousted in a military coup the week before, the junta citing corruption and shoddy construction of the airport among their justifications for the takeover.

Despite being the largest airport in Southeast Asia, and among the largest in the world, in March 2007, many domestic flights were relocated back to the old Don Muang Airport, with officials citing overcrowding of runways and safety concerns as reasons for the move. With little foresight, a train link to the distant airport was only begun after its opening, and is not expected to be operating until early 2009.

Thailand (see p28), public discontent with Thaksin's desire to privatise certain state agencies, and even allegations of Thaksin's perceived ambitions to take on roles associated with the monarchy when Thaksin presided over the ceremonies during a merit-making ritual at Wat Phra Kaew, a role traditionally reserved for the monarch. The final nail in Thaksin's coffin occurred when members of his family sold their family-owned Shin Corporation shares to the Singaporean government for a tax-free profit of 73 billion baht (US\$1.88 billion), thanks to newly introduced telecommunications legislation that exempted individuals from capital gains tax. Thaksin responded to the growing displeasure by dissolving parliament and calling for re-elections in a month's time, promising to step down if his party did not win a majority.

In the lead up to the 2006 re-elections, Thaksin announced massive populist measures aimed directly at the rural poor. With just a month to organise and campaign, the opposition realised the task was monumental and chose to boycott the election. When the ballots were tallied, Thaksin proclaimed victory. However, just one day later, after a private council with the king, Thaksin announced that for the sake of national unity he would not accept the position of prime minister.

On the evening of 19 September 2006, while Thaksin was attending a UN conference in New York, the Thai military led by General Sonthi Boonyaratglin took power in a bloodless coup. Calling themselves the Council for Democratic Reform under the Constitutional Monarch, the junta cited the Thai Rak Thai (TRT) government's alleged *lèse majesté*, corruption, interference with state agencies and creation of social divisions as justification for the coup. The public initially overwhelmingly supported the coup, and scenes of tourists and Thai families posing in front of tanks remain the defining images of the event. Thaksin quickly fled to London, where he lived in exile and busied himself by buying the Manchester City football club.

In January 2007, an Assets Examination Committee put together by the junta found Thaksin guilty of concealing assets to avoid paying taxes. Two months later, Thaksin's wife and brother-in-law were also charged with conspiracy to evade taxes. In late May, a court established by the military government found TRT guilty of breaking election laws. The court dissolved the party and banned its executive members from public service for five years.

In a nationwide referendum held on 19 August, the Thai people approved a military-drafted constitution. Although the document includes a number of undemocratic provisions, including one that mandates a Senate not entirely comprised of elected politicians, its passage was largely regarded as a message that the Thai people want to see elections and progress.

Under the new constitution, long-awaited elections were finally held on 23 December. The newly formed People Power Party, of which Thaksin has an advisory role, won a significant number of seats in parliament, but failed to win an outright majority. After forming a loose coalition with several other parties, parliament choose veteran politician and close Thaksin ally Samak Sundaravej as prime minister. Samak has expressed his desire to clear Thaksin of all charges. This, and Thaksin's return to Thailand in March 2008, have ushered in another period of uncertainty in Thai politics.

The 2006 coup leader, General Sonthi Boonyaratglin, was the first Muslim to head the Buddhist kingdom's army.

One of the only sources of information during the 2006 coup, www.2Bangkok.com, features background and perspective on local news with summaries of the Thai-language press updated on a daily basis.

Thailand has had 19 coups since 1932, of which 10 resulted in a change of government.

2001

Thaksin Shinawatra, Thailand's richest man, is elected prime minister on a populist platform.

January 2004

The modern phase of southern Thailand's Muslim insurgency begins when militants raid an army base in Narathiwat, killing four guards and stealing hundreds of weapons.

December 2004

An earthquake-triggered tsunami on Boxing Day damages much of Thailand's Andaman Sea coast, causing deaths of more than 5000 and the destruction of much of the tourist industry.

September 2006

A bloodless coup sees the Thai military take power from prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra while he is at a UN meeting in New York.

August 2007

In a nationwide referendum, voters agree to approve a military-drafted constitution, Thailand's 17th, despite being regarded by many Thais and international observers as deeply flawed.

December 2007

A general election sees the Thaksin-allied People's Power Party gain a significant number of seats in parliament. A coalition, led by veteran politician, Samak Sundaravej, is formed.

The Culture

REGIONAL IDENTITY

Religion, royalty and tradition are the defining characteristics of Thai society. That Thailand is the only country in Southeast Asia never colonised by a foreign power has led to a profound sense of pride in these elements. However, the country is not completely homogenous, and in the south, another strong cultural identity prevails that is more in tune with the Islamic culture of nearby Malaysia.

Before modern political boundaries divided the Malay peninsula into two countries, the city-states, sultanates and villages were part of an Indonesian-based Srivijaya empire, sharing intermingled customs and language, all vying for local control over shipping routes. Many southern Thai towns and geographic names bear the hallmark of the Bahasa language, and some village traditions would be instantly recognized by a Sumatran but not by a northern Thai. Chinese culture is also prominent in southern Thailand, as seen in the numerous temples and clan houses, and it is this intermingling of domestic and 'foreign' culture that defines the south.

Saving Face & Having Fun

An important Thai concept across all religions is the idea of 'saving face', that is, avoiding confrontation and trying not to embarrass yourself or other people. For this reason, Thais shy away from negative topics in everyday conversation and generally won't interfere with others unless someone complains or asks for their help. This is one of the sources of the Thai smile – it's the best possible face to put on in almost any situation. Arguing over prices or getting angry while haggling causes everyone involved to lose face and should be avoided. The only time you'll see Thais failing to show due respect is when it may be a source of *sàn-ùk* (fun). The Thais love to joke and *sàn-ùk* plays an important part of saving face.

LIFESTYLE

The ordinary life of a southern Thai can be divided into two categories: country and city.

Those in rural areas are typically employed with rubber farming or fishing, though rice and livestock farming are also evident. Rubber farmers live in small, typically inland settlements identified by straight rows of trees and pale sheets of drying latex. Surviving fishing villages are typically as close to the sea as possible, so that their inhabitants can watch the tides and their boats. Traditional Muslim villages are built directly over the water in a series of connected stilt houses. Because the Andaman Sea had a history of tranquil behaviour, there was no fear of the ocean's wrath, a preconception painfully destroyed by the 2004 tsunami.

Within the cities, life looks a lot like the rest of the country (busy and modern), but the presence of Chinese and Indian merchants marks the uniqueness of southern Thai cities. The commercial centres are also the market towns, where the brightly coloured fishing boats ease into the harbour, unloading the catch and filling the marina with the aroma of fish.

Family Values

The importance of the family unit in Thai society is immediately apparent to a visitor in the many family-owned and operated businesses. It is still common to see three generations employed in a family-run guesthouse,

or sharing the same house. The elderly are involved in day-to-day life, selling sweets to neighbourhood kids, renting motorcycles to tourists and many other ways. Although tourism has significantly altered the islanders' traditional way of life, the presence of jobs helps to keep many ambitious children from seeking employment on the mainland.

DOS & DON'TS

The Thais are generally very understanding and hospitable, but there are some taboos you should be aware of.

Temple Etiquette

- Always dress neatly and conservatively when visiting temples. No shorts or sleeveless tops for men or women.
- Take your shoes off when you enter any building that contains a Buddha image.
- Women should not touch a monk or a monk's belongings. To avoid an accidental brush, don't sit next to a monk on a public bus and let them pass first on a crowded street.
- Sit with your feet pointed away from any Buddha images: the feet are regarded as the lowest part of the body and pointing your feet towards someone is highly disrespectful.

Everyday Etiquette

- Avoid disparaging remarks about the king, queen or anyone in the royal family.
- Treat objects with a picture or image of the king, including coins and banknotes, with respect.
- Stand with respect for the royal anthem, which is played in movie theatres before the show, and for the national anthem, often played through loudspeakers at 8am and 6pm.
- The rules of returning a *wái* are quite involved; in general return a *wái* to an adult but not to children or servers.
- A smile and '*sà-wàt-dee kráp*' (male) or '*sà-wàt-dee ká*' (female) is the standard all-purpose greeting and is acceptable for all ages.
- Don't show anger or lose your temper; it causes a 'loss of face' for everyone present. Even talking loudly is seen as rude by cultured Thais, whatever the situation.
- The head is regarded as the highest part of the body, so never touch Thais on the head or ruffle their hair. For the same reason, you should never sit on pillows meant for sleeping or put a hat on the floor.
- The feet are considered the lowest part of the body. You should never step over someone, even if they are lying on the floor – squeeze around them or ask them to move instead.
- When handing things to people, use your right hand and place your left hand on your elbow, a sign of good manners.
- Mind your appearance. Thais are very fastidious in their appearance and are sometimes displeased by foreigners' unkempt looks. Clean it up if you've got to pay a visit to a government office.
- If invited to a home, bring a small gift, either food or drinks, but not flowers, which are typically reserved for merit-making.

Beach Etiquette

- Avoid public nudity on the beaches. Thais are traditionally very modest and all but the most flamboyant Bangkok Thais will swim fully clothed.
- Men should wear shirts away from the beach unless they want Thai people to think that they are real lowlifes.

Culture Shock Thailand, by Robert and Nanthapa Cooper, is a humorous and helpful introduction to confusing Thai ways.

When speaking with or about royalty, a special vocabulary called *râh-chá-sáp* is used by Thais.

Instead of a handshake, the traditional Thai greeting is the *wái* – a prayer-like gesture with the palms placed together.

STOPPING CHILD-SEX TOURISM IN THAILAND

Sadly, Thailand has become a destination for a significant number of foreigners seeking to sexually exploit local children. A range of socioeconomic factors renders many children vulnerable to such abuse, and some deprived individuals seem intent to prey upon this vulnerability.

The sexual abuse and exploitation of children has serious, lifelong and even life-threatening consequences. Child-sex tourism is a crime and a violation of the rights of a child. Strong laws exist in Thailand to prosecute offenders. Many countries also have extraterritorial legislation that allows nationals to be prosecuted in their own country for such crimes.

Responsible travellers can help to stop the scourge of child-sex tourism by reporting suspicious behaviour. Don't ignore it! Your actions may be critical in helping to protect children from future abuse and exploitation.

In Thailand, travellers can report on a dedicated hotline number: ☎ 1300. If you know the nationality of the individual, you can report them directly to their embassy.

ECPAT (End Child Prostitution & Trafficking; ☎ in Bangkok 0 2215 3388; www.ecpat.net) is a global network focusing on these issues with more than 70 affiliate organisations around the world. Its head office is located in Bangkok. ECPAT is actively working to combat child-sex tourism in Thailand and around the world.

Child Wise (www.childwise.net) is the Australian member of ECPAT. Child Wise has been involved in providing training to the tourism industry in Thailand to counter child-sex tourism.

Even the Thai pronouns reflect a strong sense of family. Thais will refer to people in their own generation as an older (*pêe*) or younger (*nôrng*) sibling, regardless of bloodline. Sometimes Thais will translate this tribal custom into English, referring to non-family members as 'sister' or 'brother', inadvertently amazing foreigners with the vastness of Thai families.

ECONOMY

Due to tourism, fishing, shrimp farming and rubber, the south is Thailand's wealthiest region. Most rubber tappers are born into it, inheriting the profession of their fathers and mothers. Shrimp and fish farming, on the other hand, are relatively new industries, introduced as an economic development program for rural communities losing ground to commercial fishing operations. The venture proved profitable and Thailand is one of the leading exporters of farm-raised shrimp. However, fish farms have been largely unregulated until recently, leading to a host of environmental problems, such as water pollution and the destruction of mangrove forests.

Tourism has undoubtedly had the most tangible impact on the economy of the area, transforming many small villages into bilingual enterprises. Women who would otherwise sell products at the market have studied Thai traditional massage, and walk up and down the beach beseeching customers. Other do-it-yourself franchises, so prolific in Thai communities, have been tailored to tourists: shopfronts along the beach thoroughfares sell sunscreen and postcards instead of rice whisky and grilled fish, itinerant vendors hawk sarongs and henna tattoos instead of feather dusters and straw brooms, while fishermen sometimes abandon their nets for bigger catches – tourists on snorkelling trips.

Across Thailand, the size of the middle class is growing with successive decades, bridging the gap between rich and poor. Thailand doesn't suffer from poverty of sustenance; even the most destitute Thai citizens can have shelter and food. Rather, the lower rung of Thai society suffers from poverty of material: money isn't available for extensive education, material goods or health care. This is most obvious from an economic perspective: the average Thai income stands at around US\$2000 a year, but many in rural provinces earn as little as US\$570 a year.

Every Thai person has a nickname, which range from Thai words such as *Náy* ('small') or *Náo* ('mouse'), to English words such as 'Chief' or 'Ice'.

Pah-sáa-va tái, the southern dialect of the Thai language, is known for its rapid cadence and inclination to omit entire syllables and words.

POPULATION

Over one third of all Thais live in urban areas and Bangkok is, without doubt, the largest city in the kingdom, with nearly eight million inhabitants – more than 10% of the total population. The four next-most-populated cities are located in the northeast and the northern part of the country. Most of the other towns in Thailand have populations well below 100,000.

About 75% of the citizenry are ethnic Thais, predominantly Buddhist, and are divided into a number of cultural subgroups with their own dialects. People of Chinese ancestry make up 14% of the population and fill the shopkeeper niche in southern Thai society. The second-largest ethnic minority group living in Thailand are Muslims of Malay origin (4%), most of whom reside in the southern provinces of Songkhla, Yala, Pattani and Narathiwat. The remaining 10.5% of the population is made up of smaller non-Thai-speaking groups such as the Vietnamese, Khmer, Mon and Moken (*chow lair*, often spelt as *chao leh*; see boxed text, below), and small numbers of Europeans and other non-Asians in Bangkok, Phuket and Chiang Mai.

RELIGION Buddhism

Approximately 95% of Thais follow Theravada Buddhism, also known as Hinayana or 'Lesser Vehicle' Buddhism to distinguish it from the Mahayana or 'Great Vehicle' school of Buddhism. The primary difference between the faiths is that Theravada Buddhists believe every individual is responsible for their own enlightenment, while Mahayana Buddhists believe society can work together to achieve enlightenment for all.

The ultimate end of all forms of Buddhism is to reach *nibbana* (from Sanskrit, nirvana), which literally means the 'blowing out' or extinction of all desire and thus of all *dukkha* (suffering). Having achieved *nibbana*, an individual is freed from the cycle of rebirths and enters the spiritual plane. In reality, most Thai Buddhists aim for rebirth in a 'better' existence in the next life, rather than striving to attain *nibbana*. To work towards this goal, Buddhists carry out meritorious actions (*tam bun*) such as feeding monks, giving donations to temples and performing regular worship at the local wát (temple). The Buddhist theory of karma is well expressed in the Thai proverb *tam dee, dài dee; tam chò-a, dài chò-a* (do good and receive good; do evil and receive evil).

There is no specific day of worship in Thai Buddhism; instead the faithful go to temple on certain religious holidays, when it is convenient or to commemorate a special family event. Most temple visits occur on *wan prá*

One in 10 Thai citizens lives and works in Bangkok.

Check out www.thai-blogs.com to peek into the lives of various Thais and expats and link to sites translating Thai music or offering free Thai cooking video downloads.

Every Thai Buddhist male over the age of 20 is expected to become a monk. This ordination can last as long as several months, or as brief as a few days.

CHOW LAIR

Southern Thailand is home to one of Thailand's smallest ethnic groups, the *chow lair*, literally, 'people of the sea.' Also known as Moken (*mòr gaang*), or sea gypsies, the *chow lair* are an ethnic group of Malay origin who span the Andaman coast from Borneo to Myanmar. The remaining traditional bands of *chow lair* are hunter-gatherers, living primarily off the sea. They are recognized as one of the few groups of humans that primarily live at sea, although many are turning to shanty-like settlements on various islands. Perhaps as a result of generations of this marine lifestyle, many *chow lair* can hold their breath for long periods of time and also have an uncanny ability to see underwater. Life at sea has also helped them in other ways; during the 2004 tsunami, virtually no *chow lair* were killed, as folk tales handed down from generation to generation alerted them to the dangers of the quickly receding tide, and they were able to escape to higher ground. For details on the threat to the *chow lair* culture, see p353.

After his death, the Buddha's body was supposedly dealt up into 84,000 relics, many of which are claimed to be entombed in various religious structures throughout Thailand.

Thais follow the lunar calendar, with the traditional New Year falling in mid-April.

(excellent days), which occur every full and new moon. Other activities include offering food to the temple *sangha* (community of monks, nuns and lay residents), meditating, listening to monks chanting *suttas* and attending talks on *dhamma* (right behaviour).

MONKS & NUNS

There are about 32,000 monasteries in Thailand and 200,000 monks, many of them ordained for life. Traditionally, every Thai male is expected to spend time as a monk, usually between finishing school and marrying or starting a career. Even his Majesty King Bhumibol served as a novice at Wat Bowonniwet (Map pp74–5) in Banglamphu, Bangkok. Traditionally boys would devote a year or more to monastic life, but these days most people enter the *sangha* (monastery) for two weeks to three months during *pan-sāh* (Buddhist lent), which coincides with the rainy season.

Women can become *māa chee* (eight-precept nuns) but this is held in slightly lower regard than the status of male monks, as most Thais believe that a woman can only achieve *nibbana* if she is reincarnated as a man. Both monks and nuns shave their heads and wear robes – orange for men, white for women – giving up most of their personal belongings and living on charity. Thais donate generously to the local wāt, so monks often live quite comfortable lives.

An increasing number of foreigners are coming to Thailand to be ordained as Buddhist monks or nuns. If you want to find out more, see p386 or visit the websites **Access to Insight** (www.accesstoinight.org) and **Buddha Net** (www.buddhanet.net).

MULTICULTURAL THAILAND

Buddhism typically enjoys a worldwide reputation for being peaceful and accommodating, which makes the current tensions (see p28) in the Muslim majority regions of southern Thailand (Narathiwat, Pattani and Yala provinces) perplexing. Why do the cultural and religious beliefs of the Muslim Thais clash with the Buddhist administration?

Firstly, Islam mandates concrete rules for living a good life; a Muslim's day is strictly governed by sacred rituals, from the performance of daily prayers to the preparation of meals and the education of children. But the laws outlined in the Quran aren't represented in the policy-making decisions of the national government, and several well-intentioned economic development schemes have deeply offended Muslim Thais. The government-run lottery, for example, is used to fund need-based scholarships, but gambling is viewed as sinful by Muslims, and clerics have instructed the faithful to reject these much-needed financial opportunities for their children. Interest-based loans for struggling villages also run counter to Islamic beliefs.

Another stumbling block for cross-cultural understanding is the private *pondok* (or *madrasah*) schools, where Muslim children receive religious education. A *pondok* is a village boarding school where male children live a studious and religiously contemplative life before returning to the village with religious leadership skills. The *pondok* custom is viewed as vital to the Islamic way of life but is lacking modern application, and increasingly, many are suspected of imparting a militant Muslim education. In the 1970s the Thai government forced the schools to start teaching secular subjects, a move viewed as distracting and destructive to the Islamic faith.

In recent years, the education ministry has been more sensitive to the importance of the *pondok* tradition while trying to educate its citizens, mainly in Thai language and other subjects that might help relieve the economic hardships of the region. This has been coupled with more conciliatory central government policies, as well as increased representation and funding, but continued scepticism of each other's traditions ensures that the conflict between Buddhists and Muslims is likely to continue.

For more on the conflict, see p28.

As long as you dress appropriately and observe the correct etiquette (p35) you will be welcome at most monasteries. However, take care not to disturb monks while they are eating or meditating – nothing breaks the concentration quite like tourists snapping photographs!

Islam

Thailand is home to 1.6 million Muslims (around 4% of Thailand's population), concentrated in the south of the country. Most Thai Muslims are of Malay origin and generally follow a moderate version of the Sunni sect mixed with pre-Islamic animism.

A decade-long revival movement has cultivated more devote Islamic practices and suspicions of outside influences. Under this more strenuous interpretation of Islam, many folk practices have been squeezed out of daily devotions and local people see the mainly Buddhist government and education system as intolerant of their way of life (see the boxed text, opposite). Schools and infrastructure in the Muslim-majority south are typically underfunded and frustration with the Bangkok government is sometimes defined as a religious rather than political struggle.

There are mosques throughout southern Thailand but few are architecturally interesting and most are closed to women. If you do visit a mosque, remember to cover your head and remove your shoes.

Other Religions

Half a percent of the population – primarily hill tribes converted by missionaries and Vietnamese immigrants – is Christian, while the remaining half percent is made up of Confucians, Taoists, Mahayana Buddhists and Hindus. Chinese temples and joss houses are a common sight in the south and in Bangkok's Chinatown, and Bangkok is also home to a large, colourful Hindu temple.

ARTS

Much of Thailand's creative energy has traditionally gone into the production of religious and ceremonial art. Painting, sculpture, music and theatre still play a huge role in the ceremonial life of Thais and religious art is very much a living art form.

Literature

The most pervasive and influential work of classical Thai literature is the Ramakian, based on the Hindu holy book, the Ramayana, which was brought to Southeast Asia by Indian traders and introduced to Thailand by the Khmer about 900 years ago. Although the main theme remains the same, the Thais embroidered the Ramayana by providing much more biographical detail on arch-villain Ravana (*Thótsàkan* in the Ramakian) and his wife Montho. The monkey-god, Hanuman, is also transformed into something of a playboy.

The epic poem, *Phra Aphaimani*, was composed by poet Sunthorn Phu (1786–1855) and is set on the island of Ko Samet. *Phra Aphaimani* is Thailand's most famous classical literary work, and tells a typically epic story of an exiled prince.

Modern Thai literature is usually written in Thai, so it isn't very accessible to non-Thais. Modern authors you may find translated include Seni Saowaphong, whose most famous title *Pisat*, *Evil Spirits* deals with conflicts between the old and new generations. Former prime minister, Kukrit Pramoj, is another respected author – his collection of short stories, *Lai Chiwit* (*Many Lives*), and the Rama V–based era novel *Si Phandin* (*Four Reigns*) have been translated into English.

Many Muslims from the southernmost regions of Thailand speak Yawi, a dialect of Malay, as their native language.

Elaborate wooden bird cages holding cooing doves can be found along the streets of many towns in southern Thailand. Even dove singing contests are held.

There is no universally accepted method of transliterating from Thai to English, so some words and place names are spelled a variety of ways.

Depending on the speaker's relationship with his listener, personal pronouns can take many forms in the Thai language.

Thailand's third sex, the *gà-teu-i* (often spelt *kàthoey*; transgender men), get a starring role in *Iron Ladies*, a movie about the true story of an all-transvestite volleyball team that became the national men's champions.

In 1913 King Rama VI introduced the concept of surnames to Thailand, granting many himself.

Celebrated contemporary writer Pira Sudham was born into a poor family in northeastern Thailand. *Monsoon Country*, one of several titles Sudham wrote in English, brilliantly captures the region's struggles against nature and nurture.

Chart Korbjitti is a two-time winner of the Southeast Asian Writers Award (SEA Write): in 1982 for *The Judgement*, the drama of a young village man wrongly accused of a crime; and in 1994 for a 'mixed-media' novel, *Time*.

SP Somtow has been described as 'Thailand's JD Salinger'. *Jasmine Nights*, Somtow's upbeat coming-of-age novel, fuses traditional ideas with modern Thai pop culture. *Jasmine Nights* won acclaim throughout the world.

Writer Sri Daoruang adapted the Ramayana into modern Bangkok in *Married to the Demon King*. Short stories by modern Thai women writers appear in the collection *A Lioness in Bloom*, translated by Susan Kepner.

The leading post-modern writer is Prabda Yoon, whose short story 'Probability' won the 2002 SEA Write award. Although his works have yet to be translated, he wrote the screenplay for *Last Life in the Universe* and other Pen-ek Ratanaruang-directed films.

Cinema

Thailand has a lively homespun movie industry, producing some very competent films in various genres. The most expensive film ever made in the country, not to mention the highest grossing, was director Prince Chatrichalerm Yukol's epic *Legend of Suriyothai* (2003), which tells the story of a 16th-century warrior princess. But what has propelled Thai viewers to forsake Hollywood imports are generally action flicks such as *Ong Bak: Thai Warrior* and the follow-up *Tom Yum Goong*, directed by Prachya Pinkaew.

Thailand has cropped up in various foreign film festivals over the years, with several critically acclaimed art house movies. Pen-Ek Ratanaruang's clever and haunting movies, such as *Last Life in the Universe* and *Sixty9ine* have created a buzz on the film-festival circuit. Apichatpong Weerasethakul leads the avant-garde pack with his Cannes-awarded *Tropical Malady* and *Sud Sanaeha*.

The Thai government is now actively touting Thailand as a location for foreign film-makers. The most famous film to be made here in recent years was *The Beach* (2000). Based on the Alex Garland novel, it was filmed at Maya Bay on Ko Phi-Phi, Phuket, and several jungle locations near Krabi and Khao Yai National Park. The film caused controversy for allegedly damaging the environment in Maya Bay, which was also a location for the 1995 pirate stinker *Cutthroat Island*. Other famous films made here include the James Bond romp *The Man with the Golden Gun* (1974), which was filmed in Ao Nang Bay, *Good Morning Vietnam* (1987), *The Killing Fields* (1984) and *The Deer Hunter* (1978).

Music

Traditional Thai music may sound a little strange to visitors, as the eight note Thai octave is broken in different places to the European octave. Thai scales were first transcribed by Thai-German composer Phra Chen Duriyanga (Peter Feit), who also composed Thailand's national anthem in 1932.

The classical Thai orchestra is called the *Bèe-pàht* and can include anything from five to 20 musicians. The most popular stringed instrument is the *ja-kêh*, a slender guitar-like instrument played horizontally on the ground, which probably evolved from the Indian *vina*. Woodwind instruments include the *khlùai*, a simple wooden flute, and the *Bèe*, a recorder-like instrument with a reed mouthpiece, based on the Indian *shennai*. You'll hear the *Bèe* being played if you go to a Thai boxing match. Other popular instruments include the *saw*, a three-stringed fretless instrument,

MADE IN THAILAND

You've undoubtedly seen his lanky frame on billboards, enthusiastically sporting his band's forked-finger salute to promote their eponymous energy drink. You may also have caught him on TV, singing a rallying anthem to sell Chang beer. And you've likely heard taxi drivers make passing references to his hit song, 'Made in Thailand'. All these sightings probably have you thinking, Who is this guy?

The guy is Yuengyong Ophakun, better known as Aed Carabao, lead singer of Carabao, a Thai band many consider the Rolling Stones of Asia.

The name Carabao comes from the Tagalog word for buffalo, and implies diligence and patience. Not unlike the Ramones, the founding members of Carabao, Aed and Khiao (Kirati Promsakha Na Sakon Nakhorn), adopted the word as a surrogate surname after forming the band as students in the Philippines in the early 1980s. Their style of music was inspired by Thai protest music, Filipino music, as well as a healthy dose of Western-style rock and roll. Since their first album, *Chut Khii Mao* ('Drunkard's Album'), and in the 24 that have followed, Carabao's lyrics have remained political and occasionally controversial. *Ganchaa* (marijuana), a song from their second album, was promptly banned from Thai radio – the first of many. In 2001 Carabao dedicated an album in support of Shan rebels in Myanmar, a source of consternation for the Thai government. When not generating controversy they are almost constantly performing, and have also played in most Southeast Asian countries, as well as Europe and the USA. Your best chance of seeing them is in Bangkok or a major tourist centre.

similar to the Japanese *shamisen*, and the *rá-nàht èhk*, a bamboo-keyed xylophone played with wooden hammers.

Perhaps the most familiar Thai instrument is the *kim* or hammer dulcimer, responsible for the plinking, plunking music you'll hear in Thai restaurants across the world. The dulcimer resembles a flat harp played with two light bamboo sticks and has an eerie echoing sound. Another unusual Thai instrument is the *kórng wong yài*, a semicircle of tuned gongs arranged in a wooden rack. The double-headed *dà-pohn* drum sets the tempo for the whole ensemble.

The contemporary Thai music scene is strong and diverse. The most popular genre is undoubtedly *lòok tùng*, a style analogous to country and western in the USA that tends to appeal most to working-class Thais. The 1970s ushered in a new style dubbed *pleng pèu-a chee-wit* (literally 'music for life'), inspired by the politically conscious folk rock of the USA and Europe. Today there are hundreds of youth-oriented Thai bands, from chirpy boy and girl bands to metal rockers, making music that is easy to sing along with and maddeningly hard to get out of your head. The three biggest modern Thai music icons include rock staple Carabao (see the boxed text, above), pop star Thongchai 'Bird' MacIntyre, and *lòok tùng* queen, Pumpuang Duangchan, who died tragically in 1995.

In the 1990s an alternative pop scene – known as *pleng tái din* (underground music) – grew in Bangkok. Modern Dog, a Britpop-inspired band, is generally credited with bringing independent Thai music into the mainstream, and their success paved the way for more mainstream alternative acts such as Apartment for Khun Pa, Futon, Chou Chou and Calories Blah Blah. Thai headbangers designed to fill stadiums include perennial favourite Loso, as well as Big Ass, Potato and Bodyslam.

Architecture

Most traditional Thai architecture is religious in nature. Thai temples, like Thai Buddhism, gladly mixes and matches different foreign influences from the corn-shaped stupa inherited from the Khmer empire to the bell-shaped

See www.seasite.niu.edu/thai/music for snatches of Thai tunes, from classical music to pop.

See www.thaistudents.com for Thai pop downloads, language tips and culture chat.

Nine is largely considered a lucky number in Thailand because it sounds similar to the Thai word for progress.

Thais believe it is unlucky to get a haircut on Wednesday, and it is on this day that barbers take their holiday.

stupa of Sri Lanka. Despite the foreign flourishes, all Thai temples' roof lines mimic the shape of the *naga* (mythical serpent) that protected the Buddha during meditation and is viewed as a symbol of life. Green and gold tiles represent scales while the soaring eaves are the head of the creature.

Traditional teak-wood homes can be seen throughout northern Thailand, but are also present in the capital. The capital's finest teak building is Vimanmek Mansion (Map pp72–3), said to be the largest golden-teak building in the world. Teak houses are typically raised on stilts to minimise the damage caused by flooding and provide a space for storage and livestock. The whole structure is held together with wooden pegs and topped by sweeping eaves that rise to distinctive gables at either end of the house. Houses are traditionally roofed with glazed tiles or wooden shingles.

In the south, houses have traditionally been simpler, relying heavily on bamboo poles and woven bamboo fibre. You might also see Malay-style houses, which use high masonry foundations rather than wooden stilts.

Architecture over the last 100 years has been influenced by cultures from all over the world. In the south, you can still see plenty of Sino-Portuguese *hôngg tãa-ou* (shophouses) – plastered Chinese-style masonry houses with shops below and living quarters above. Classic examples of this style can be found in Phuket's main city (p300). Since WWII the main trend in Thai architecture has been one of function over form, inspired by the European Bauhaus movement. As a result, there are lots of plain buildings that look like egg cartons turned on their sides.

Thai architects began experimenting during the building boom of the mid-1980s, resulting in creative designs such as Sumet Jumsai's famous robot-shaped Bank of Asia on Th Sathon Tai in Bangkok, or the Elephant Building off Th Phaholyothin in northern Bangkok.

Painting

Except for the prehistoric and historic cave paintings found in the south of the country, not much ancient formal painting exists in Thailand, partly due to the devastating Burmese invasion of 1767. The vast majority of what exists is religious in nature, and typically takes the form of temple

TEMPLE MURALS

Because of the relative wealth of Bangkok, as well as its role as the country's artistic and cultural centre, the artists commissioned to illustrate the walls of the city's various temples were among the most talented around, and Bangkok's temple paintings are generally regarded as the finest in the country. Some particularly exceptional works include:

- **Wat Bowonniwet** (Map pp74–5) Painted during the reign of Rama II (r 1809–24), the murals in the panels of the *bòht* (chapel) of this temple show Thai depictions of Western life during the early 19th century.
- **Wat Chong Nonsi** (Map pp70–1) Bangkok's earliest surviving temple paintings are faded and missing in parts, and depict everyday Thai life, including bawdy illustrations of a sexual manner.
- **Phra Thii Nang Phutthaisawan** (Buddhaisawan Chapel; Map pp74–5) These murals, finished during the reign of Rama III (r 1824–51), depict the conception, birth and early life of the Buddha – common topics among Thai temple murals.
- **Wat Suthat** (Map pp74–5) Almost as impressive in their vast scale as much as their quality, these murals are among the most awe-inspiring in the country.
- **Wat Suwannaram** (Map pp70–1) These paintings inside a late Ayuthaya-era temple in Thonburi contain skilled and vivid depictions of battle scenes and foreigners.

paintings illustrating the various lives of the Buddha. Several Bangkok wát have accomplished 17th- and 18th-century paintings; see the boxed text, p42.

Since the 1980s boom years Thai secular sculpture and painting have enjoyed increased international recognition, with a handful of Impressionism-inspired artists among the initial few to have reached this vaunted status. Succeeding this was the 'Fireball' school of artists such as Mani Sriwanichpoom, who specialise in politically motivated, mixed-media art installations. And in recent years Thai artists have again moved away from both traditional influences and political commentary and towards contemporary art. For information about visiting Bangkok's galleries and art museums, see p87.

Theatre & Dance

Traditional Thai theatre consists of four main dramatic forms: *kòhn* is a formal masked dance-drama traditionally reserved for royalty, depicting scenes from the Ramakian; *lá-kon* are dance-dramas performed for common people; *lí-gair* are partly improvised, often bawdy, folk plays featuring dancing, comedy, melodrama and music; and *hùn lǎo-ang* (*lá-kon lék*) is traditional puppet theatre enacting religious legends or folk tales.

Most of these forms can be enjoyed in Bangkok, both at dinner shows for tourists and at formal theatrical performances. There are also some distinctively southern theatrical styles, predating the arrival of Islam on the Malay Peninsula. The most famous is *má-noh-rah*, the oldest surviving Thai dance-drama, which tells the story of Prince Suthon, who sets off to rescue the kidnapped Mánohraa, a *gin-ná-ree* (woman-bird) princess. As in *lí-gair*, performers add extemporaneous comic rhymed commentary. Trang also has a distinctive form of *lí-gair*, with a storyline depicting Indian merchants taking their Thai wives back to India for a visit.

Another ancient theatrical style in the south is shadow-puppet theatre, which also occurs in Indonesia and Malaysia, in which two-dimensional figures carved from buffalo hide are manipulated against an illuminated cloth screen. The capital of shadow puppetry today is Nakhon Si Thammarat, which has regular performances at its festivals. There are two distinctive shadow-play traditions. *Nàng dà-lung* uses delicate puppets manipulated by a single puppet master to tell stories from the Ramakian, while *nàng yài* (literally, 'big hide'), uses much larger puppets with several operators, but is sadly a dying art. Both kinds of puppets are popular souvenirs for tourists.

Much of Thai culture and art, particularly literature and dance and a significant amount of language, originally came from India along with Buddhism.

Food & Drink

Eating is one of the highlights of any trip to Thailand, and it doesn't take long to see that the locals are equally enthusiastic about their national cuisine. Thais appear to spend a significant part of their lives snacking and eating, and rightfully so: the spectrum of things to eat in even an average sized Thai city is mind-boggling, and a visit to Thailand's southern provinces will expand your culinary horizons even further (see the boxed text, p47). Such an abundance of eats would result in waistline problems elsewhere, but Thai food, with its fresh ingredients and emphasis on bold tastes, fills diners with flavour rather than bulk.

The closest thing to being Thai without surrendering your passport is to jump headfirst into this jungle of flavour. To guide you, we've put together a primer of the essential ingredients and dishes you're bound to run into along the way.

STAPLES & SPECIALITIES

Rice

Thailand has been a leader in rice exports since the 1960s and the quality of Thai rice, according to many discerning Asians, is considered the best there is. Thailand's *kôw hõrm má-lí* (jasmine rice) is so coveted that there is a steady underground business in smuggling bags of the fragrant grain to neighbouring countries.

Rice is so central to Thai food culture that the most common term for 'eat' is *gin kôw* (consume rice) and one of the most common greetings is '*Gin kôw láa-ou rêu yang?*' (Have you eaten rice yet?). All dishes eaten with rice – whether curries, stir-fries or soups – are simply classified as *gáp kôw* (with rice).

Two dishes that use rice as a principal ingredient are *kôw pát* (fried rice), which is found all over the country, and *kôw mòk gàì* (chicken biryani), typically a Muslim–Malay dish. A sure sign that the staff at your guesthouse are from the northeastern part of the country is if you spot them eating *kôw nêe-o* (sticky rice), usually eaten with the hands and accompanied by fried chicken and *sôm-dam* (spicy green-papaya salad).

Noodles

You'll find four basic kinds of noodle in Thailand. Given the Thai fixation with rice, the overwhelming popularity of *gõo-ay dëe-o* (rice noodles) is hardly surprising. They're made from pure rice flour mixed with water to form a paste, which is then steamed to form wide, flat sheets. These are then sliced into noodles of varying sizes.

The king of Thai noodledom, *gõo-ay dëe-o* comes as part of many dishes. The simplest, *gõo-ay dëe-o nám*, is noodles served in a bowl of meat stock along with bits of meat (usually pork), bean sprouts and *pák chee* (coriander leaf) as garnish. When you order a bowl of noodle soup from a vendor, you'll need to call your noodle size – *sên lék* (flat, thin rice noodles), *sên yài* (flat, wide rice noodles) or *bà-mèe* (egg noodles) – and the meat of your choice. You then flavour the bowl with the four seasonings that appear on the table – a dash of sugar, dried chillies, fish sauce and vinegar. Foreigners think that curries define the national food consciousness, but the humble noodle dish is more emblematic: Thais eat *gõo-ay dëe-o* for breakfast and lunch, and as a predinner snack and hangover cure.

Chilli-heads must give *gõo-ay dëe-o pát kée mow* (drunkard's fried noodles) a try. A favourite lunch or late-night snack, this spicy stir-fry consists of wide rice noodles, fresh basil leaves, chicken or pork, and a healthy dose of chillies.

For foreigners, the most well-known *gõo-ay dëe-o* dish is *gõo-ay dëe-o pát tai* (*pát tai* for short), a plate of thin rice noodles stir-fried with dried or fresh shrimp, bean sprouts, fried tofu, egg and seasonings. On the edge of the plate the cook usually places little piles of ground peanuts and ground dried chilli, along with lime halves and a few stalks of Chinese chives for self-seasoning.

A speciality of southern Thailand, *kà-nòm jeen* is stark white noodles produced by pushing rice-flour paste through a sieve into boiling water. The noodles are topped with spicy fish curry and loaded up with an assortment of pickled and fresh vegetables.

Finally there's *wún-sên*, an almost clear noodle made from mung-bean starch and water. *Wún-sên* (jelly thread) is used for only a few dishes in Thailand: *yam wún-sên*, a hot and tangy salad made with lime juice, fresh sliced *prik kée nõo* (mouse-dropping peppers), fresh shrimp, ground pork and various seasonings; and *Tõo òp wún-sên*, which is bean thread noodles baked in a lidded clay pot with crab and seasonings.

Curries

For many people, *gaang* (curries; it rhymes with 'gang') are the definitive Thai dish, but few visitors have met the real McCoy. A well-made curry should possess a balance of the four main flavours: salty, fishy, spicy and a little sweet. Usually restaurants with a Western clientele will overdose on coconut milk and sugar to cater to their customers' sweet teeth.

All chilli-based *gaang* start as fresh – not powdered – ingredients that are smashed, pounded and ground in a stone mortar and pestle to form a thick, aromatic and extremely pungent paste. Typical ingredients include dried or fresh chilli, galangal (also known as Thai ginger), lemon grass, kaffir lime

Despite their importance in modern Thai food, chillies are a relatively new addition to the Thai kitchen, and were brought by Portuguese traders more than 400 years ago.

Curries and soups are generally ladled onto a plate of rice, rather than eaten directly out of the bowl.

CURRYING FAVOUR

Every morning at 4.30am, Paa Som, the owner of a nondescript but popular curry shop in Nakhon Sri Thammarat gets up to prepare a variety of curries, fried dishes, soups and spicy salads. On an average day she'll make immense servings of at least 12 different dishes, which, when finished, will sit in stainless steel bowls for the rest of the day, waiting to be consumed.

This is the typical routine of a curry shop owner in southern Thailand. Due to the importance of curries in southern Thai cooking, *râhn kôw gaang*, literally 'rice and curry shops', are the most common eating places in this part of the country. Found in virtually every town, *râhn kôw gaang* can range from proper air-conditioned restaurants to basic roadside shacks, but are always inexpensive and are never far away.

Although the Thai word *gaang* tends to get translated into English as curry, it actually encompasses a variety of dishes that can range from watery soups to thick stews. These dishes are the heart of southern Thai cooking and differ from curries in other parts of the country in several ways. To begin with, southern-style curries are generally much spicier, their curry pastes liberally employing small dried chillies as opposed to the larger and milder ones used elsewhere. Coconut, one of the largest cash crops in southern Thailand, finds its way into many dishes in the form of coconut milk. And many southern Thai curries have a distinct yellow hue, a result of the use of turmeric, a bright orange root.

At Paa Som's stall, you simply point to the two or three dishes you want, and they will be served, usually at room temperature, over a plate of steaming rice. Each table has a small bowl of *prik nám plah*, sliced chillies in fish sauce, if somehow you find the spice lacking. And as an added bonus, Paa Som will also give you a complimentary tray of fresh herbs and vegetables to help soothe the burn of her fiery handiwork.

Cookbook writer Kasma Loha-Unchit features recipes and other culinary events on her website www.thaifoodandtravel.com.

Written and photographed by the author of this chapter, RealThai (www.austinbushphotography.com) is one of the few blogs that details food and dining in Thailand.

You eat rice dishes with a spoon and a fork, treating the spoon like the fork and the fork like a knife. Noodle soups and *pát tai* are the only dishes eaten with chopsticks.

SOMETHING'S FISHY

Westerners might scoff at the all-too-literal name of this condiment, but for much Thai food, fish sauce is more than just another ingredient, it is *the* ingredient.

Essentially the liquid obtained from salted and fermented fish, fish sauce takes various guises depending on the region. In northeastern Thailand, discerning diners prefer a thick, pasty mash of fermented freshwater fish and sometimes rice. Elsewhere, where people have access to the sea, fish sauce takes the form of a thin liquid extracted from salted anchovies. In both cases the result is highly pungent, generally salty (rather than fishy) in taste, and used in much the same way as the salt shaker is in the West.

zest, shallots, garlic, shrimp paste and salt. Certain curries employ dried spices such as coriander seeds or a touch of cumin.

During cooking, most *gaang* pastes are blended in a heated pan with coconut cream, to which the chef adds the rest of the ingredients. These include watery coconut milk, used to thin and flavour the *gaang*, although some recipes omit coconut milk entirely to produce a particularly fiery *gaang* known as *gaang Bảh* (forest curry).

Salads

Standing right alongside *gaang* in terms of Thai-ness are *yam*, the ubiquitous hot and tangy salads combining a blast of lime, chilli and fresh herbs and a choice of seafood, roast vegetables, noodles or meats. Thais prize *yam* dishes so much that they are often eaten on their own, without rice, before the meal has begun. On Thai menus the *yam* section will often be the longest. The usual English menu translation is either 'Thai-style salad' or 'hot and sour salad'.

Lime juice provides the tang, while fresh chillies produce the heat. Other ingredients vary, but there are usually plenty of leafy vegetables and herbs present, including lettuce (often lining the dish) and Chinese celery. Lemon grass, shallots, kaffir lime leaves and mint may also come into play. Most *yam* are served at room temperature or just slightly warmed by any cooked ingredients.

Yam are the spiciest of all Thai dishes, and if you're not so chilli-tolerant, a good *yam* to start off with is *yam wún-sên*: mung bean noodles tossed with shrimp, ground pork, coriander leaves, lime juice and fresh sliced chillies.

Stir-fries & Deep-Fries

The simplest dishes in the Thai culinary repertoire are *pàt* (stir-fries), brought to Thailand by the Chinese, who are famous for being able to stir-fry a whole banquet in a single wok.

The list of Thai dishes that you can *pàt* is seemingly endless. Many are better classified as Chinese, such as *néu-a pàt nám-man hōy* (beef in oyster sauce). Some are clearly Thai-Chinese hybrids, such as *gài pàt prik kīng*, in which chicken is stir-fried with ginger, garlic and chillies – ingredients shared by both traditions – but seasoned with fish sauce.

Tòrt (deep-frying in oil) is generally reserved for snacks such as *glò-ay tòrt* (fried bananas) or *Bò-Bée-a* (egg rolls). One exception is *Blah tòrt* (crisp fried fish). Only a very few dishes require ingredients to be dipped in batter and then deep-fried, including *gài tòrt* (fried chicken) and *gung chúp Bảang tòrt* (batter-fried shrimp).

Soups

Thai soups fall into two broad categories – *đôm yam* (also spelt as *tôm yam*) and *gaang jèut* – which are worlds apart in terms of seasonings. *Đôm yam*

is almost always made with seafood, though chicken may also be used. It's often translated on English menus as 'hot and sour Thai soup', although this often leads non-Thais to mistakenly relate the dish to Chinese hot-and-sour soup, which is thinner in texture, milder and includes vinegar. *Đôm yam* is meant to be eaten with rice, not alone, and the first swallow often leaves the uninitiated gasping for breath.

In contrast, *gaang jèut* (mild soup with vegetables and pork) is a soothing broth seasoned with little more than soy or fish sauce and black pepper. It isn't a very interesting dish by itself, but provides a nice balance when paired with other spicier dishes. It is also a good option if your tummy is feeling tender.

Fruit

Thai fruits are so decadent and luscious that some visitors concoct entire meals of the different varieties. Common fruits that are in season all year include *má-prów* (coconut), *fa-ràng* (guava), *kà-nùn* (jackfruit), *má-káhm* (tamarind), *sôm* (orange), *má-lá-gor* (papaya), *sôm oh* (pomelo), *đaaang moh* (watermelon) and *sáp-Bả-rót* (pineapple).

Seasonal fruits to look for include: *chom-pồo* (rose apple; April to July), *mang-kút* (mangosteen; April to September), *má-mồ-ang* (mango; several varieties and seasons), *ngó* (rambutan; July to September) and *nóy-nàh* (custard apple; July to October).

Sweets

Sweets mostly work their way into the daily Thai diet as between-meal snacks and are typically sold by market or street vendors.

SOUTHERN FLAVOUR

Fans of subtle flavours beware: southern Thai cooking is undoubtedly the spiciest regional cooking style in a country of spicy regional cuisines. The food of Thailand's southern provinces also tends to be very salty, and seafood, not surprisingly, plays an important role, ranging from fresh fish that is grilled or added to soups, to fish or shrimp that have been pickled or fermented and served as sauces or condiments. Two of the principal crops in the south are coconuts and cashews, both of which find their way into a variety of dishes. In addition, southern Thais love their greens, and nearly every meal is accompanied by a platter of fresh herbs and veggies and a spicy 'dip' of shrimp paste, chillies, garlic and lime. Specific southern greens to look out for include *sả-đor* (a pungent green beanlike vegetable), *lòok nêe-ang* (a round dark-green bean) and *mét ree-ang* (similar to large, dark-green bean sprouts).

Dishes you are likely to come across include the following:

- *Gaang đai Bảh* – an intensely spicy and salty fish curry that includes *đai Bảh* (salted fish stomach); much better than it sounds.
- *Kà-nôm jeen nám yah* – this dish of fermented rice noodles served with a fiery currylike sauce is always accompanied by a tray of fresh vegetables and herbs.
- *Kôw yam* – this popular breakfast includes rice topped with thinly sliced herbs, bean sprouts, dried shrimp, toasted coconut and powdered red chilli served with a sour-sweet fish-based sauce.
- *Gaang sôm* – known as *gaang lêu-ang* (yellow curry) in central Thailand, this sour-spicy soup gets its hue from the copious use of turmeric, a root commonly used in southern Thai cooking.
- *Ngóp* – something of a grilled curry, this dish takes the form of a coconut milk and herb paste containing seafood that is wrapped in a banana leaf and grilled until firm.
- *Gài tòrt hàht yài* – the famous deep-fried chicken from the town of Hat Yai gets its rich flavour from a marinade containing dried spices.

One of the most popular breakfasts in southern Thailand is *kôw yam*, a 'salad' of rice topped with thinly sliced herbs, bean sprouts, dried shrimp, toasted coconut and powdered red chilli served with a sour-sweet fish-based sauce.

This is among the biggest consumers of garlic in the world.

Thai Food, by David Thompson, is widely considered the most authoritative book on Thai cooking, and includes authentic recipes from the country's south.

The wok and technique of stir-frying were probably brought to Thailand by Chinese immigrants.

Not everything in your bowl of *đôm yam* is edible. Like bay leaves, the ingredients with the texture of bark are only there for flavouring.

Ingredients for many *körng wähn* (Thai sweets) include grated coconut, coconut milk, rice flour, cooked sticky rice, tapioca, mung-bean starch, boiled taro and fruits. For added texture and crunch some may also contain fresh corn kernels, sugar-palm kernels, lotus seeds, cooked black beans and chopped water chestnuts. Egg yolks are a popular ingredient in Thai sweets, particularly in the ubiquitous *föy torng* ('golden threads' that actually look like strands of gold), a sweet of Portuguese origin.

Thai sweets similar to the European concept of 'sweet pastry' are called *kà-nôm*. Probably the most popular *kà-nôm* are bite-sized items wrapped in banana or pandanus leaves, especially *kôw đôm mát*, which consists of sticky rice grains steamed with coconut milk inside a banana-leaf wrapper to form a solid, almost toffeelike, mass.

DRINKS

Coffee & Tea

For the best of Lonely Planet's culinary wisdom, seek out *World Food Thailand*, by Joe Cummings.

Thais are big coffee drinkers, and good-quality Arabica and Robusta are cultivated in hilly areas of northern and southern Thailand. The traditional filtering system is nothing more than a narrow cloth bag attached to a steel handle. The bag is filled with ground coffee and hot water poured through, producing *gah-faa tông* (traditional filtered coffee) or *gah-faa boh-rahñ* (traditional coffee).

Black tea, both local and imported, is available at the same places that serve real coffee. *Chah tai* derives its characteristic orange-red colour from ground tamarind seed added after curing. *Chah rôrn* (hot tea), like coffee, will almost always be served with condensed milk and sugar, so specify if you want black tea. Chinese-style tea is *nám chah*. *Chah yen* is a tall glass of Thai iced tea with sugar and condensed milk, while *chah má-now* (chilled black tea) comes without milk, and usually with a slice of lime.

Fruit Drinks

The all-purpose term for fruit juice is *nám* (water/juice) *pôn-lá-mái* (fruit). When a blender or extractor is used, you've got *nám kán* (squeezed juice), hence *nám sàp-Bà-rót kán* is freshly squeezed pineapple juice. *Nám ôy* (sugar-cane juice) is a Thai favourite and a very refreshing accompaniment to *gaang* dishes. A similar juice from the sugar palm, *nám-đahn sôt*,

COFFEE, SOUTHERN STYLE

In virtually every town or city in southern Thailand you'll find numerous old-world cafés known locally as *ráhn goh-bêe*. The shops are almost exclusively owned by Thais of Chinese origin, and often seem suspended in time, typically sporting the same décor and menu for decades. Characteristics of *ráhn goh-bêe* include marble-topped tables, antique mugs and dishes, and an almost exclusively male clientele that also seems not to have budged since opening day. Some of the most atmospheric *ráhn goh-bêe* in Thailand can be found in the town of Trang (p359).

The beans used at *ráhn goh-bêe* are sometimes grown abroad, but are roasted domestically, and although they're as black as the night, the drink typically tends to lack body. This may be due to the brewing method, which involves pouring hot water through a wind-socklike piece of cloth that holds the loose grounds. Typically, *goh-bêe* is served over a dollop of sweetened condensed milk and a tablespoon (or more) of sugar in small, handleless glasses. For those lacking a sweet tooth, try *goh-bêe or* (black coffee), or just ask them to hold the sugar. All hot coffee drinks are served with a 'chaser' of weak green tea.

Ráhn goh-bêe are also a great place for a quick bite. Upon arriving at the more traditional ones, you'll be greeted by a tray of steamed Chinese buns or sweet snacks, such as sticky rice wrapped in banana leaf or baked goods.

is also very good and both are full of vitamins and minerals. Mixed fruit blended with ice is *nám Bàn* (mixed juice) as in *nám má-lá-gor Bàn*, a papaya shake.

Beer & Whisky

Advertised with such slogans as *Brà-têht row, bee-a row* (Our Land, Our Beer), the Singha label is considered the quintessential 'Thai' beer by faràng and locals alike. Pronounced 'sing' (not 'sing-hah'), it claims about half the domestic market, and has an alcohol content of 6%. Singha is sold in bottles and cans, and is also available on tap as *bee-a sôt* (draught beer) in many pubs and restaurants. Dutch-licensed but Thailand-brewed Heineken and Singapore's Tiger brand are also popular selections. You'll find other, even cheaper, Thai beers in supermarkets, but rarely in restaurants.

Rice whisky is a favourite of the working class because it's more affordable than beer. Most rice whiskies are mixed with distilled sugar-cane spirits and thus have a sharp, sweet taste not unlike rum, with an alcohol content of 35%. The most famous brand, Mekong, costs around 120B for a *glom* (large bottle) or 60B for a *baan* (flask-sized bottle). More popular nowadays is the slightly more expensive Sang Som.

WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

All restaurants, large and small, are referred to by the single Thai term *ráhn ah-háhn* ('food shop', the term for restaurants). Decoration may be limited to a few beer posters and a small shrine or something more incongruous, such as a faded picture of the Swiss Alps. Fluorescent lighting – cheap and cool – is the norm. Such restaurants typically specialise in a single cuisine, whether local or regional.

At the more generic *ráhn ah-háhn đahm sàng* (food-to-order shop), cooks can whip up almost any Thai dish you can name, including any kind of rice or noodle dish as well as more complex multidish meals. Most of the standard Thai dishes are available, including those in the *đôm yam, yam* and *pát* categories. You can recognise this type of restaurant by the raw ingredients displayed out front.

More upmarket restaurants have printed menus, usually with broken English translations, where you'll find tablecloths, air-con and the Western idea of 'ambience'. Average Thais prefer to order their favourite dishes without referring to a menu at all, so these more expensive restaurants only cater to an upper-class clientele with international tastes.

Quick Eats

One of the simplest, most pleasurable venues for dining out in Thailand is the night market, which can vary from a small cluster of metal tables and chairs alongside the road to more elaborate affairs that take up whole city blocks. What they all have in common is a conglomeration of *rót kên* (vendor carts) whose owners have decided that a particular intersection or unused urban lot makes an ideal location to set up their mobile kitchens.

There are two types of night markets: the *đà-làht yen* (evening market) sets up just before sunset and stays open until around 9pm or 10pm – possibly later in large cities. The second type is the *đà-làht đòh rúng* (open until dawn), which begins doing business around 11pm and keeps going until sunrise. Typical places to look for both types of night market include in front of day markets, next to bus or train stations and at busy intersections.

Check out the international message board at www.chowhound.com, where culinary hobbyists post reviews of Thailand's restaurants.

Thai Hawker Food, by Kenny Yee and Catherine Gordon, is an illustrated guide to recognising and ordering street food in Thailand.

The website www.happy-cow.net has a searchable index of vegetarian restaurants across the world, including entries for Thailand.

VEGETARIANS & VEGANS

The number of vegetarian restaurants in Thailand is increasing, thanks largely to Bangkok's former governor Chamlong Srimuang, whose strict vegetarianism inspired a nonprofit chain of *râhn ah-hâhn mang-sà-wí-rát* (vegetarian restaurants) in Bangkok and several provincial capitals. The food at these restaurants is usually served buffet-style and is very cheap. Dishes are almost always 100% vegan; that is, no meat, poultry, fish, dairy or egg products have been used in their creation.

Chinese restaurants are also a good bet because many Chinese Buddhists eat vegetarian food during Buddhist festivals. Other easy, though less common, venues for vegetarian meals include Indian restaurants, which usually feature a vegetarian section on the menu.

The phrase 'I'm vegetarian' in Thai is *pôm gin jair* (for men) or *dì-chân gin jair* (for women). Loosely translated this means 'I eat only vegetarian food', which includes no eggs and no dairy products – in other words, totally vegan.

HABITS & CUSTOMS

There are no 'typical' times for meals, though the customary noon to 1pm lunch break tends to cluster diners in local restaurants at that hour. Nor are certain genres of food restricted to certain times of day. Practically anything can be eaten first thing in the morning, whether it's sweet, salty or chilli-ridden.

THE MUSLIM INFLUENCE

Muslims are thought to have first visited southern Thailand during the late 14th century. Along with the Koran, they brought with them a meat and dried spice-based cuisine from their homelands in India and the Middle East. Nearly 700 years later, the impact of this culinary commerce can still be felt. While some Muslim dishes such as roti, a fried bread similar to the Indian *paratha*, have changed little, if at all, others such as *gaang mât-sà-màn* are a unique blend of Thai and Indian/Middle Eastern cooking styles. In more recent years, additional Muslim dishes have arrived via contact with Thailand's neighbour to the south, Malaysia.

Typical Muslim dishes include the following:

- *Kôw mòk* – biryani, a dish found across the Muslim world, also has a foothold in Thailand. Here the dish is typically made with chicken and is served with a sweet/sour sauce and a bowl of chicken broth.
- *Sà-dé (satay)* – these grilled skewers of meat probably came to Thailand via Malaysia. The savoury peanut-based dipping sauce is often mistakenly associated with Thai cooking.
- *Má-dà-bà* – known as *murtabak* in Malaysia and Indonesia, these are roti that have been stuffed with a savoury or sometimes sweet filling and fried until crispy.
- *Súp hâhng woo-a* – oxtail soup, possibly another Malay contribution, is even richer and often more sour than the 'Buddhist' Thai *đóm yam*.
- *Sà-lát kàak* – literally 'Muslim salad' (*kàak* is a slightly derogatory word used to describe people or things of Indian and/or Muslim origin), this dish combines iceberg lettuce, hearty chunks of firm tofu, cucumber, hard-boiled egg and tomato, all topped with a slightly sweet peanut sauce.
- *Gaang mât-sà-màn* – 'Muslim curry' is a rich coconut milk-based dish, which, unlike most Thai curries, gets much of its flavour from dried spices. As with many Thai-Muslim dishes, there is an emphasis on the sweet.

Thais tend to avoid eating alone, especially for the evening meal. When forced to fly solo – such as during a lunch break – a single diner usually sticks to one-plate dishes such as fried rice or curry over rice.

If an opportunity presents itself, dining with a group of Thais will reveal more about Thai culture than watching canned classical dance performances. A big group means everyone has a chance to sample several different kinds of dishes. Traditionally, the party orders a curry, a fish, a stir-fry, a *yam*, a vegetable dish and a soup, taking care to balance cool and hot, sour and sweet, salty and plain.

When serving yourself from a common platter, put no more than one spoonful onto your plate at a time. Sometimes serving spoons are provided. If not, you simply dig in with your own spoon.

It is polite to leave a little rice on your plate to signal that you are full. To clean your plate is to indicate that you are still hungry. This is why Thais tend to over-order at social occasions – the more food that is left, the more generous the host appears.

COOKING COURSES

The standard one-day course features a shopping trip to a local market to choose ingredients, followed by preparation of curry pastes, soups, curries, salads and desserts. Some of the better cooking classes in Bangkok and southern Thailand include the following:

Boathouse (p299) Phuket Town, Phuket.

Blue Elephant Cooking School (p89) In Bangkok.

KATI Culinary (p144) Ko Chang.

Koh Chang Thai Cooking School (p144) Ko Chang.

Krabi Thai Cookery School (p334) Ao Nang, Krabi.

Pum Restaurant & Cooking School (p346) Ko Phi-Phi.

Pum Thai Cooking School (p299) Hat Patong, Phuket.

Same Same Lodge Thai Cooking School (p217) Ko Pha-Ngan.

Samui Institute of Thai Culinary Arts (p197) Ko Samui.

Silom Thai Cooking School (p89) Bangkok.

Time for Lime (p353) Ko Lanta.

EAT YOUR WORDS

Many travellers never experience the full wonder of Thai cuisine because they have difficulty negotiating the language barrier. The following guide should help you negotiate your way around some of the more common culinary options. Dishes are listed with Thai script and a transliterated pronunciation guide.

Useful Phrases

EATING OUT

restaurant

râhn ah-hâhn

ร้านอาหาร

Can I see the menu please?

kôr doo rai gahn ah-hâhn dâi mǎi?

ขอดูรายการอาหารได้ไหม

Do you have a menu in English?

mee rai gahn ah-hâhn ben pah-sâh

มีรายการอาหารเป็น

ang-grít mǎi?

ภาษาอังกฤษไหม

Meals in southern Thailand are often accompanied by a complimentary tray of fresh herbs and vegetables and a fiery shrimp paste-based dipping sauce.

It Rains Fishes: Legends, Traditions and the Joys of Thai Cooking, by Kasma Loha-Unchit, is both a cookbook and a charming culinary text.

I'd like ...*kǎi ...*

ขอ...

What is that?*nán à-rai?*

นั่นอะไร

I don't eat ...*pǎm/di-chǎn gīn ... mǎi dài***meat***néu-a sàt***chicken***gài***fish***blāh***seafood***ah-hǎhn tá-lair***pork***mǎo*

ผม/ดิฉันกิน...ไม่ได้

เนื้อสัตว์

ไก่

ปลา

อาหารทะเล

หมู

I'm allergic to ...*pǎm/di-chǎn páa ...*

ผม/ดิฉันแพ้...

Does it contain ...?*néu sài ... mǎi?*

นี่ใส่...ไหม

Not too spicy please.*kǎi mǎi pèt mǎhk.*

ขอไม่เผ็ดมาก

Can I have a (beer) please?*kǎi (bee-a) nòy*

ขอ(เบียร์) หน่อย

Can you please bring me ...?*kǎi ... dài mǎi?*

ขอ...ได้ไหม

some water*nám nòy***some rice***ków nòy***a fork***sòrm***a glass***gáa-ou***a knife***méet***a napkin***grà-dàht chét bàhk***a plate***jahn blòw***a spoon***chórn*

น้ำน้อย

ข้าวน้อย

ส้อม

แก้ว

มีด

กระดาษเช็ดปาก

จานเปล่า

ช้อน

This food is ...*ah-hǎhn néu ...***delicious***a-ròy***cold***yen***undercooked***mǎi sùk*

อาหารนี้

อร่อย

เย็น

ไม่สุก

Please bring the bill.*kǎi bin nòy*

ขอบิลหน่อย

**Food Glossary
MENU DECODER****ah-hǎhn tá-lair***gǔng tòrt**blāh jěe-an*

อาหารทะเล

กุ้งทอด

ปลาเจียน

seafood

fried prawns

whole fish cooked in ginger, onions
and soy sauce*blāh mèuk pàt pèt**blāh bré-e wǎhn**blāh tòrt*

ปลาหมึกผัดเผ็ด

ปลาเปรี้ยวหวาน

ปลาทอด

spicy fried squid

sweet and sour fish

crisp-fried fish

gaang*gaang gà-rèe gài**gaang kěe-ow wǎhn**blāh/gài/néu-a**gaang mǎt-sà-màn**gài/néu-a**gaang pèt gài/**néu-a/mǎo**gaang pá-naang*

แกง

แกงกะหรี่ไก่

แกงเขียวหวานปลา/

ไก่/เนื้อ

แกงมัสมั่นไก่/เนื้อ

แกงเผ็ดไก่/เนื้อ/

หมู

แกงพะแนง

curries

mild, Indian-style curry with chicken

green curry with fish/chicken/beef

Muslim-style curry with chicken/beef
and potatoes

red curry with chicken/beef/pork

Penang curry (red curry with
sweet basil)**ków***ków man gài**ków mǎo daang**ków nǎh gài**ków nǎh bét**ków pàt mǎo/**gài/gǔng*

ข้าว

ข้าวมันไก่

ข้าวหมูแดง

ข้าวหน้าไก่

ข้าวหน้าเป็ด

ข้าวผัดหมู/

ไก่/กุ้ง

riceboned, sliced Hainan-style chicken
with rice

red pork with rice

chicken with sauce over rice

roast duck over rice

fried rice with pork/chicken/shrimps

gǎo-ay dǎe-o/bà-mèe*bà-mèe nám/háng**gǎo-ay dǎe-o nám/háng**pàt see-éw**pàt tai*

ก๋วยเตี๋ยว/บะหมี่

บะหมี่น้ำ/แห้ง

ก๋วยเตี๋ยวน้ำ/แห้ง

ผัดซีอิ้ว

ผัดไทย

noodles

wheat noodles with vegetables

and meat in broth/dry

rice noodles with vegetables and

meat in broth/dry

fried noodles with soy sauce

thin rice noodles fried with tofu,
vegetables, egg and peanuts**súp***gaang jèut**ków dóm blāh/gài/gǔng**dóm kàh gài**dóm yam gǔng*

ซूप

แกงจืด

ข้าวต้มปลา/ไก่/กุ้ง

ต้มข่าไก่

ต้มยำกุ้ง

soups

mild soup with vegetables and pork

rice soup with fish/chicken/shrimps

soup with chicken, galangal root and
coconutprawn and lemon grass soup with
mushrooms**ah-hǎhn èun***gài pàt bai gà-prow**gài pàt mèt má-móo-ang*

อาหารอื่น

ไก่ผัดใบกะเพรา

ไก่ผัดเม็ดมะม่วง

other dishes

chicken fried with basil

chicken fried with cashews

<i>gài tǒt</i>	ไก่ทอด
<i>kài jīe-o</i>	ไข่เจียว
<i>kài yát sài</i>	ไข่ยัดไส้
<i>kà-nǎm jeen nám yah</i>	ขนมจีนน้ำยา
<i>gée-o gròrp</i>	เกี้ยวกรอบ
<i>lǎhp gài/néu-a</i>	ลาบไก่/เนื้อ
<i>néu-a pàt nám man hǎy</i>	เนื้อผัดน้ำมันหอย
<i>bò-bé-e-a</i>	เปาะเปี๊ยะ
<i>pàt pàk roo-am</i>	ผัดผักรวม
<i>sà-dé (satay)</i>	สะเต๊ะ
<i>sòm dam</i>	ส้มตำ
<i>tǒt man blah</i>	ทอดมันปลา
<i>yam néu-a</i>	ยำเนื้อ
<i>yam wún sên</i>	ยำวุ้นเส้น

néu-a láa ah-hǎhn tá-lair	เนื้อและอาหารทะเล
<i>néu-a</i>	เนื้อ
<i>gài</i>	ไก่
<i>boo</i>	ปู
<i>bèt</i>	เบ็ด
<i>blah</i>	ปลา
<i>mǎo</i>	หมู
<i>ah-hǎhn tá-lair</i>	อาหารทะเล
<i>gúng</i>	กุ้ง
<i>blah mèuk</i>	ปลาหมึก

pàk	ผัก
<i>má-rá jeen</i>	มะระจีน
<i>gà-lám ǎlee</i>	กะหล่ำปลี
<i>dòrk gà-lám</i>	ดอกกะหล่ำ
<i>daang gwah</i>	แตงกวา
<i>má-kéu-a</i>	มะเขือ
<i>grà-tee-am</i>	กระเทียม
<i>pàk gáht</i>	ผักกาด
<i>tò-a fák yow</i>	ถั่วงอก
<i>grà-jée-ap</i>	กระเจี๊ยบ
<i>hǎo-a hǎrm</i>	หัวหอม
<i>tò-a lí-sǎng</i>	ถั่วงอก
<i>man fà-ràng</i>	มันฝรั่ง
<i>fák torng</i>	ฟักทอง
<i>pèu-ak</i>	เผือก
<i>má-kéu-a tèt</i>	มะเขือเทศ

fried chicken
plain omelettes
omelette with vegetables and pork
noodles with fish curry
fried wonton
spicy chicken/beef salad
beef in oyster sauce
spring rolls
stir-fried mixed vegetables
skewers of barbecued meat
spicy green papaya salad
fried fish cakes with cucumber sauce
hot and sour, grilled beef salad
cellophane noodle salad

meat & seafood

beef
chicken
crab
duck
fish
pork
seafood
shrimp/prawn
squid

vegetables

bitter melon
cabbage
cauliflower
cucumber
eggplant
garlic
lettuce
long bean
okra
onion
peanuts
potato
pumpkin
taro
tomato

pǎn-lá-mái	ผลไม้
<i>glòo-ay</i>	กล้วย
<i>má-prów</i>	มะพร้าว
<i>nǎy-nàh</i>	น้อยหน่า
<i>tú-ree-an</i>	ทุเรียน
<i>fà-ràng</i>	ฝรั่ง
<i>kà-nǎn</i>	ขนุน
<i>má-now</i>	มะนาว
<i>má-móo-ang</i>	มะม่วง
<i>mang-kút</i>	มังคุด
<i>sòm</i>	ส้ม
<i>má-lá-gor</i>	มะละกอ
<i>sáp-bà-rót</i>	ต้ปะรด
<i>sóm oh</i>	ส้มโอ
<i>ngó</i>	เงาะ
<i>má-káhm</i>	มะขาม
<i>daang moh</i>	แตงโม

kǒng wǎhn

<i>glòo-ay bǎo-at chee</i>	ของหวาน
<i>sǎng-kà-yǎh má-prów</i>	กล้วยบวชชี
<i>mòr gaang</i>	สังขยามะพร้าว
<i>glòo-ay kàak</i>	หม้อแกง
<i>kòw nǎe-o daang</i>	กล้วยแขก
<i>sǎng-kà-yǎh</i>	ข้าวเหนียวแดง
<i>đà-gòh</i>	สังขยา
	ตะโก้

krèu-ang dèum

<i>bee-a</i>	เครื่องดื่ม
<i>kòo-at</i>	เบียร์
<i>nám kòo-at/deum</i>	ขวด
<i>nám chah</i>	น้ำขวด
<i>gah-faa tǒong (go-bé)</i>	น้ำชา
<i>gah-faa rón</i>	กาแฟลุง(โกบี)
<i>gáa-ou</i>	กาแฟร้อน
<i>nám kǎang</i>	แก้ว
<i>oh-lé-ang</i>	น้ำแข็ง
<i>nom jèut</i>	โอเลี้ยง
<i>nám blòw</i>	นมจืด
<i>nám soh-dah</i>	น้ำเปล่า
<i>chah rón</i>	น้ำโซดา
<i>chah dam rón</i>	ชาร้อน
<i>wai</i>	ชาดำร้อน
	ไวน์

fruit
banana
coconut
custard apple
durian
guava
jackfruit
lime
mango
mangosteen
orange
papaya
pineapple
pomelo
rambutan
tamarind
watermelon

sweets

banana in coconut milk
coconut custard
egg custard
fried, Indian-style banana
sticky rice with coconut cream
Thai custard
Thai jelly with coconut cream

beverages

beer
bottle
bottled drinking water
Chinese tea
coffee (traditional filtered)
hot coffee with milk and sugar
glass
ice
iced coffee with sugar, no milk
milk
plain water
soda water
tea with milk and sugar
hot black tea
wine

Environment

THE LAND

Thailand's odd shape – bulky and wide up north, with a long pendulous arm draping to the south – has often been compared to the head of an elephant. Roughly the size of France, about 517,000 sq km, Thailand stretches an astounding 1650km along a north-south axis and experiences an extremely diverse climate, including monsoons from both the southwest and northwest. The north of the country rises into high forested mountains, while the south consists of a long ridge of limestone hills, covered in tropical rainforest.

Bound to the east by the shallow Gulf of Thailand and to the west by the Andaman Sea, an extension of the Indian Ocean, Thailand possesses one of the most alluring coastlines in the world, with exquisitely carved limestone formations above water and tremendously rich coral reefs below. Hundreds of tropical islands of all shapes and sizes adorn the coast, from flat sand bars covered in mangroves to looming karst massifs licked by azure waters and ringed by white sand beaches. Both coasts have extensive coral reefs, particularly around the granitic Surin Islands (p274) and Similan Islands (p279) in the Andaman Sea. More reefs and Thailand's most dramatic limestone islands sit in Ao Phang-Nga (p281) near Phuket. The west coast is of particular interest to divers because the waters are stunningly clear and extremely rich in marine life.

WILDLIFE

With its diverse climate and topography, it should come as no surprise that Thailand is home to a remarkable diversity of flora and fauna. What is more surprising is that Thailand's environment is still in good shape, particularly considering the relentless development going on all over the country; although see also opposite on endangered species and p62 on marine environmental issues.

Animals

Animals that live on the coasts and islands of Thailand must adapt to shifting tides and the ever-changing mix of salt and freshwater. Rather than elephants and tigers, keep your eyes open for smaller creatures, like the odd little mud-skipper, a fish that leaves the water and walks around on the mud flats when the tide goes out; or the giant water monitor, a fearsome 350cm lizard that climbs and swims effortlessly in its search for small animals.

Without a doubt you will see some of the region's fabulous birdlife – Thailand is home to 10% of the world's bird species – especially sandpipers and plovers on the mud flats, and herons and egrets in the swamps. Look overhead for the sharply attired, chocolate brown and white Brahminy kite, or scan low-lying branches for one of the region's many colourful kingfishers. You are likely to spot a troop of gregarious and noisy crab-eating macaques, but don't be surprised to see these monkeys swimming from shore. With luck you may glimpse a palm civet, a complexly marbled catlike creature, or a serow, the reclusive 'goat-antelope' that bounds fearlessly among inaccessible limestone crags.

The oceans on either side of the Thai peninsula are home to hundreds of species of coral, and the reefs created by these tiny creatures provide the perfect living conditions for countless species of fish, crustaceans and tiny invertebrates. You can find one of the world's smallest fish (the 10mm-long goby) or the largest (an 18m-long whale shark), plus reef denizens such as

The famous white sands of Thailand's beaches are actually tiny bits of coral that have been defecated by coral-eating fish.

If anyone in Thailand comes across a white elephant, it must be reported to the Bureau of the Royal Household, and the King will decide whether it meets the criteria to be a royal white elephant.

The estuarine crocodile was one of Thailand's most formidable predators, reaching over 6m in length and 1000kg, but they are now thought to be extinct in the kingdom.

IT'S ALL CORAL

If there's one thing visitors to Thailand notice right away, it's the dramatically sculpted limestone formations towering over land and water throughout the country. These formations are the fossilised remains of sea shells and coral reefs, and their widespread presence in Thailand demonstrates that much of the region lay underwater more than 200 million years ago. Pushed upward by the crushing forces of two earth plates colliding 30 million years ago, these limestone formations are now exposed to rain and waves that dissolve calcium carbonate in the limestone creating bizarre towers and caves of all sizes. Sometimes the roof of a limestone chamber will collapse, forming a hidden *hông* (also spelt *hong*) that lets in sunlight or sea water.

Not only is Thailand the site of a massive fossil reef, it is also one of the best places in the world to see living corals (over 250 species of coral can be found on the Andaman coast alone). Whether old or young, reefs are composed of the skeletal remains of tiny marine organisms that extract calcium carbonate from sea water to build mineral homes. Coral reefs are biologically complex and diverse habitats for countless sea creatures. See p62 for the environmental issues surrounding coral degradation.

clownfish, parrotfish, wrasse, angelfish, triggerfish and lionfish. Deeper waters are home to larger species such as grouper, barracuda, sharks, manta rays, marlin and tuna. You might also encounter turtles, whales and dolphins.

ENDANGERED SPECIES

Thailand is a signatory to the UN Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (Cites) but the enforcement of these trade bans is notoriously lax – just walk around the animal section of Bangkok's Chatuchak Weekend Market (p108) to see how openly the rules are flouted. Due to habitat loss, pollution and poaching, a depressing number of Thailand's mammals, reptiles, fish and birds are endangered, and even populations of formerly common species are diminishing at an alarming rate. Rare mammals, birds, reptiles, insects, shells and tropical aquarium fish are routinely smuggled out to collectors around the world or killed to make souvenirs for tourists.

Many of Thailand's marine animals are under threat, including whale sharks, seen in Thai waters in ever-decreasing numbers, and sea turtles, which are being wiped out by hunting for their eggs, meat and shells. Many other species of shark are being hunted to extinction for their fins, which are used to make shark-fin soup.

The rare dugong (also called manatee or sea cow), once thought extinct in Thailand, is now known to survive in a few small pockets, mostly around Trang in southern Thailand, but is increasingly threatened by habitat loss and the lethal propellers of tourist boats.

The Thai government is slowly recognising the importance of conservation, perhaps due to the efforts and leadership of Queen Sirikit, and many of the kingdom's zoos now have active breeding and conservation programs. Wildlife organisations such as the Phuket Gibbon Rehabilitation Centre (p324) are working to educate the public about native wildlife and have initiated a number of wildlife rescue and rehabilitation projects.

Plants

Southern Thailand is chock-full of luxuriant vegetation, thanks to its two monsoon seasons. The majority of forests away from the coast are evergreen rainforests, while trees at the ocean edge and on limestone formations are stunted due to lack of fresh water and exposure to harsh minerals.

The most beautiful shoreline trees are the many species of palm trees occurring in Thailand, including some found nowhere else in the world. All

Bird-lovers will definitely want to carry *A Guide to Birds of Southeast Asia* by Craig Robson.

When threatened, the lionfish spreads its set of multicoloured fins into an impressive mane, giving fair warning not to touch this poisonous fish.

Palm trees have been around for over 100 million years.

have small tough leaves with characteristic fanlike or featherlike shapes that help dissipate heat and conserve water. Look for the elegant cycad palm on limestone cliffs, where this 'mountain coconut' (*Blông*) grows from cracks in the complete absence of soil. Collected for its beauty, this common ornamental plant is disappearing from its wild habitat.

Thailand is also home to nearly 75 species of salt-tolerant mangroves – small trees highly adapted to living at the edge of salt water. Standing tiptoe-like on clumps of tall roots, mangroves perform a vital ecological function by trapping sediments and nutrients, and by buffering the coast from the fierce erosive power of monsoons. This habitat serves as a secure nursery for the eggs and young of countless marine organisms, yet Thailand has destroyed at least 50% of its mangrove swamps to make way for shrimp farms and big hotels.

NATIONAL PARKS

National parks in Thailand are a huge draw for beach visitors. The popular island getaways of Ko Chang and Ko Samet sit just off the mainland along the eastern gulf coast. Ko Tarutao Marine National Park is remote and undeveloped for real back-to-nature vacations. Ao Phang Nga, north of Phuket, competes for one of the most photogenic awards: limestone cliffs jut out of the aquamarine water while knotted roots of mangroves cling to thick mud flats. Similan Islands and Surin Islands National Parks, off the coast of Phuket, have some of the world's best diving.

Approximately 13% of Thailand is covered by 112 national parks and 44 wildlife sanctuaries, which isn't bad going by international standards. Of Thailand's protected areas, 18 parks protect islands and mangrove environments. Thailand's parks and sanctuaries contain more than 850 resident and migratory species of birds and dwindling numbers of tigers, clouded leopards, kourprey, elephants, tapirs, gibbons and Asiatic black bears, among other species.

Despite promises, official designation as a national park or sanctuary does not always guarantee protection for habitats and wildlife. Local farmers, well-motivated developers, and other business interests easily win out, either legally or illegally, over environmental protection in Thailand's national parks. Islands that are technically exempt from development often don't adhere to the law and there is little government muscle to enforce regulations. Ko Chang, Ko Samet and Ko Phi-Phi are all curious examples of national parks with development problems.

Parks charge entry fees of 200B per adult and 100B for children under 14 years. These rates were recently doubled, then rescinded on a case-by-case basis, so what you pay may differ from park to park. In some cases the **Royal Forestry Department** (Map pp70-1; ☎ 0 2561 4292/3; www.forest.go.th/default_e.asp; 61 Th Phahonyothin, Chatuchak, Bangkok 10900) rents out accommodation; make reservations in advance as this is a popular option for locals. All parks are best visited in the dry season, particularly marine national parks which can have reduced visibility in the water during the monsoon.

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

Environmental issues in Thailand are a mixed bag, with many issues kept (perhaps intentionally) off the radar screen of tourists. Simple issues, such as pollution and development, are easily observed in Thailand because basic infrastructure, such as sewage treatment and garbage collection, isn't always in place and land use is at a different developmental stage than in Western countries. But consider a hidden issue such as Thailand's phenomenal economic boom, which most visitors take for granted, and peel back the

Islands along the Andaman coast are one of the few places in the world where you can find living reefs growing on the edges of limestone cliffs that were themselves once coral reefs.

For detailed descriptions of all of Thailand's protected areas, the definitive text is *National Parks and Other Wild Places of Thailand*, by Stephen Elliot. The book has loads of colour pictures and covers conservation projects around the country.



THAILAND'S NATIONAL PARKS

Park	Features	Activities	Page
Eastern Gulf Coast			
Ko Chang Marine National Park	archipelago marine park with virgin rainforests, waterfalls beaches and coral reefs	snorkelling, diving, elephant trekking, hiking	p138
Ko Samet National Park	marine park with beaches; near-shore coral reefs	snorkelling, diving, boat trips, sailboarding	p129
Northwestern Gulf Coast			
Kaeng Krachan National Park	mainland park with waterfalls and forests; plentiful birdlife and jungle mammals	bird-watching	see boxed text, p168
Khao Sam Roi Yot National Park	coastal park with caves, mountains cliffs and beaches; serow, Irrawaddy dolphins and 300 bird species	cave tours, bird-watching, kayaking	p180
Southwestern Gulf Coast			
Ang Thong Marine National Park	40 scenic tropical islands with coral reefs, lagoons and limestone cliffs	sea kayaking, hiking, snorkelling	p240
Khao Luang National Park	mainland park with forested mountain peaks, streams and waterfalls; jungle mammals, birds and orchids	hiking	see boxed text, p249
Khao Sok National Park	mainland park with thick rainforest, waterfalls and rivers; tigers, monkeys, <i>rafflesia</i> and 180 bird species	hiking, elephant trekking, tubing	p244
Northern Andaman Coast			
Ao Phang-Nga National Park	coastal bay with limestone cliffs, islands and caves; coral reefs and mangroves	sea kayaking, snorkelling, diving	p283
Khao Lak/Lam Ru National Park	coastal park with cliffs and beaches	hiking, boat trips	p276

curtain to reveal that the energy for this explosive growth comes from massive dams being built in Laos and other neighbouring countries. Or consider the fact that Thailand's marine parks were first established to stop destructive dynamite and cyanide fishing by local villagers, but those same fish are now being killed to feed scads of hungry tourists.

So many well-meaning laws have been put on the books that it might seem Thailand is turning the corner towards greater ecological consciousness, but lawyers at a 2008 UN conference revealed that corruption and lack of political resolve have severely hampered efforts to enforce these environmental laws. Meanwhile, plans for gigantic projects, such as the new deep-sea port at Pak Bara (see p372) on the southern Andaman coast, suggest even greater environmental destruction in the near future.

The Land Environment

The main area in which Asia exceeds the West in terms of environmental damage is deforestation, though current estimates are that Thailand still has about 25% of its forests remaining, which stands up favourably against the UK's dismal 5%. The government's National Forest Policy, introduced in 1985, recommended that 40% of the country should be forested, and a complete logging ban in 1989 was a big step in the right direction. Officially decreed 'conservation forests' now comprise 79% of the land area, but

For a colourful and comprehensive overview of Thailand's natural ecosystems check out *Wild Thailand* by Belinda Steward-Cox.

Park	Features	Activities	Page
Northern Andaman Coast (continued)			
Laem Son National Park	coastal and marine park with 100km of mangroves; jungle and migratory birds	bird-watching, boat trips	p270
Similan Islands Marine National Park	marine park with granite islands; coral reefs and seabirds; underwater caves	snorkelling, diving	p279
Sirinart National Park	coastal park with casuarina-backed beaches; turtles and coral reefs	walking, snorkelling, diving	p322
Surin Islands Marine National Park	granite islands; coral reefs, whale sharks and manta rays	snorkelling, diving	p274
Southern Andaman Coast			
Hat Chao Mai National Park	coastal park with sandy beaches, mangroves, lagoons and coral islands; dugong and mangrove birds	sea kayaking, snorkelling, diving	p363
Ko Phi-Phi Marine National Park	archipelago marine park with beaches, lagoons and sea-cliffs; coral reefs and whale sharks	sea kayaking, snorkelling, diving	p343
Khao Phanom Bencha National Park	mainland mountain jungle with tumbling waterfalls; monkeys	hiking	see boxed text, p330
Ko Tarutao Marine National Park	archipelago marine park with remote jungle islands and tropical beaches; monkeys, jungle mammals and birds	snorkelling, hiking, diving	p374
Mu Ko Lanta Marine National Park	archipelago marine park with scenic beaches; coral reefs and reef sharks	sea kayaking, elephant trekking, hiking, snorkelling, diving	p352
Mu Ko Phetra Marine National Park	rarely visited archipelago marine park; dugong, birds and coral reefs	sea kayaking, snorkelling	see boxed text, p374
Tharnbok Korannee National Park	coastal park with mangrove forests and limestone caves; monkeys, orchids and seabirds	sea kayaking	p332

predictably the logging ban simply shifted the need for natural resources elsewhere. Illegal logging persists in Thailand, plus a great number of logs are being illegally slipped over the border from neighbouring countries, putting a huge burden on countries with lax enforcement. Raw building materials, once provided by cheap lumber, are now replaced with cement obtained by dynamiting Thailand's spectacular karst formations.

Despite Thailand being a signatory to Cites, all sorts of land species are still smuggled out of Thailand either alive or as body parts for traditional Chinese medicines. Tigers may be protected by Thai law, but the kingdom remains the world's largest exporter of tiger parts to China (tiger penis and bone are believed to have medicinal effects and to increase libido). Other animal species are hunted (often illegally) to make souvenirs for tourists, including elephants, jungle spiders, giant insects and butterflies; and along the coast clams, shells and puffer fish.

The government has cracked down on restaurants serving *ah-hahn* *Bàh* (jungle food), which includes endangered wildlife species such as barking deer, bear, pangolin, gibbons, civet and gaur. A big problem is that national park officials are underpaid and undertrained, yet they are expected to confront armed poachers and mercenary armies funded by rich and powerful godfathers. Rising unemployment after the economic crisis of 1997 has made profitable wildlife poaching all the more attractive.

For ideas on ecotourism destinations and venues, see www.thailand.com/travel/eco/eco.htm.

Producers of the Hollywood movie *The Beach* had a protected beach in Ko Phi-Phi National Park bulldozed for the film, while paying the lead actor US\$2 million for his role in the film.

The widely touted idea that ecotourism can act as a positive force for change has been extensively put to the test in Thailand. In some instances tourism has definitely had positive effects. The expansion of Thailand's national parks has largely been driven by tourism. In Khao Yai National Park, all hotel and golf-course facilities were removed to reduce damage to the park environment. As a result of government and private-sector pressure on the fishing industry, coral dynamiting has been all but eliminated in the Similan and Surin Islands, to preserve the area for tourists.

However, tourism can be a poison chalice. Massive developments around and frequently in national parks have ridden roughshod over the local environment in their rush to provide bungalows, luxury hotels, beach-bars and boat services for tourists. Ko Phi-Phi (p343) and Ko Samet (p129) are two national parks where business interests have definitely won out over the environment. In both cases, the development began in areas set aside for *chow lair* (sea gypsies, the semi-nomadic people who migrate up and down the coast; see boxed text, p353). Ko Lipe in Ko Tarutao Marine National Park (p374) and Ko Muk in Hat Chao Mai National Park (p364) now seem to be heading the same way.

Rubbish and sewage are growing problems in all populated areas, even more so in heavily toured areas where an influx of visitors overtakes the local infrastructure. For example, 80% of the freshwater wells at Ko Phi-Phi proved to be contaminated in recent tests due to the sheer number of tourists (and in 2004 all of Thailand's beaches ranked far below satisfactory health standards for similar reasons). One encouraging development was the passing of the 1992 Environmental Act, which set environmental quality standards, designated conservation and pollution-control areas, and doled out government clean-up funds. Pattaya built its first public wastewater treatment plant in 2000 and conditions have improved ever since.

Ordinary Thai people are increasingly environmentally aware and many are taking direct action to prevent environmental damage, stopping developers from accessing forests and demonstrating against bad environmental practices. The filming and destruction of a favourite beach by the movie *The Beach* in Ko Phi-Phi National Park triggered demonstrations around the country and the filming of the US TV show *Survivor* in Ko Tarutao Marine National Park provoked a similar outcry. The construction of a petroleum pipeline to Songkhla in 2002 created a remarkable level of grassroots opposition by ordinary village people.

A group of ecologically engaged Buddhist monks, popularly known as Thai Ecology Monks, have courageously set one of the best examples by using their peaceful activism to empower local communities in their fight against monolithic projects. One such project was saving trees around the Elephant Nature Park in Chiang Mai.

The Marine Environment

Thailand's coral reef system, including the Andaman coast from Ranong to northern Phuket and the Surin and Similan Islands, is one of the world's most diverse. Some 600 species of coral reef fish, endangered marine turtles and other rare creatures call this coastline home.

The 2004 tsunami caused high-impact damage to about 13% of the Andaman coral reefs. However, damage from the tsunami was relatively minor compared to the ongoing environmental degradation that accompanies an industrialised society. It is estimated that about 25% of Thailand's coral reefs have died as a result of industrial pollution and that the annual loss of healthy reefs will continue at a rapid rate. Even around the dive centre of Phuket, dead coral reefs are visible on the northern coast. The biggest threat to corals is sedimentation from coastal development: new condos, hotels,

Students at Dulwich International College in Phuket collected 5000kg of garbage from the beach in a single day; help them out by picking up trash whenever you can.

roads and houses. High levels of sediment in the water stunts the growth of coral. Other common problems include pollution from anchored tour boats or other marine activities, rubbish and sewage dumped directly into the sea, and agricultural and industrial run-off. Even people urinating in the water as they swim creates by-products that can kill sensitive coral reefs.

The environmental wake-up call from the tsunami emphasised the importance of mangrove forests, which provide a buffer from storm surges. Previously mangroves were considered wastelands and were indiscriminately cut down. It is estimated that about 80% of the mangrove forests lining the gulf coast and 20% on the Andaman coast have been destroyed for conversion into small-scale fish farms, tourist development or to supply the charcoal industry. Prawn farms constitute the biggest threat because Thailand is the world's leading producer of black tiger prawns, and the short-lived, heavily polluting farms are built in pristine mangrove swamps at a terrific environmental and social cost. Many are run by a mafia of foreign investors and dodgy politicians. These farms are such big business (annual production in Thailand has soared from 900 tonnes to 277,000 tonnes in the past 10 years) that protesting voices are rapidly silenced.

Contributing to the deterioration of the overall health of the ocean are Thailand and its neighbours' large-scale fishing industries, frequently called the 'strip-miners of the sea'. Fish catches have declined by up to 33% in the Asia-Pacific region in the past 25 years and the upper portion of the Gulf of Thailand has almost been fished to death. Most of the commercial catches are sent to overseas markets and rarely see a Thai dinner table. The seafood sold in Thailand is typically from fish farms, another large coastal industry for the country.

Making a Difference

It may seem that the range of environmental issues in Thailand is too overwhelming, but there is actually much that travellers can do to minimise

Fragile mud flats are so full of life that on a low tide it is common to see a hundred local villagers out gathering seafood for their meals.

RESPONSIBLE TOURISM

What can the average visitor to Thailand do to minimise the impact of tourism on the environment? While many of Thailand's environmental issues are dependent upon the enforcement of environmental regulations, there are small measures you can take that will leave less of a footprint during a visit.

- Reduce your garbage. Buy drinking water in returnable glass bottles, which are available in some restaurants. Alternatively, reuse plastic bottles by refilling them when drinking water is provided from returnable containers.
- Refuse the plastic straws and plastic bags that are provided every time you buy a drink in Thailand.
- Don't toss cigarette butts into the ocean or on the beach; dispose of them in designated receptacles.
- Try to double up with other travellers for snorkelling outings to conserve fuel.
- Avoid restaurants serving exotic wildlife species, including endangered marine life, bird's nest soup and shark-fin soup. Report offending restaurants to the Tourist Authority of Thailand (TAT) or Royal Forest Department.
- On boat trips or visits to islands – including while diving – collect any rubbish you see and dispose of it properly on the mainland.
- Never buy souvenirs made from rare plants or animals, including anything made of ivory, mounted giant insects, sea shells, turtle products and shark teeth.

A growing number of overseas tourism companies now insist that Thailand's tourism operators have environmental policies in place before doing business with them.

the impact of their visits, or to even leave a positive impact. The way you spend your money has a profound influence on the kingdom's economy and on the pocketbooks of individual businesses. Ask questions up front and take your money elsewhere if you don't like the answers. For instance, a number of large-scale resorts that lack road access transport clients across fragile mud flats on tractors (a wantonly destructive practice), so when booking a room inquire into transport to the hotel. Of the region's countless dive shops, some are diligent about minimising the impact their clients have on the reefs; however, if a dive shop trains and certifies inexperienced divers over living reefs, rather than in a swimming pool, then it is causing irreparable harm to the local ecosystem. As a rule, do not touch or walk on coral, monitor your movements so you avoid accidentally sweeping into coral, and do not harass marine life (any dead puffer fish you see on the beach probably died because a diver poked it until it inflated).

Make a positive impact on Thailand by checking out one of the many environmental and social groups working in the kingdom. If you do some research and make arrangements before arriving, you may connect with an organisation that matches your values, but here are some favourites to start the juices flowing.

The **Wild Animal Rescue Foundation of Thailand** (Map pp70-1; WAR; ☎ 0 2712 9715; www.warthaai.org; 65/1 3rd fl, Soi 55, Th Sukhumvit, Bangkok 10110) is one of the leading advocates for nature conservation in Thailand and currently runs four wildlife sanctuaries that use volunteers to rehabilitate and return former pets to the wild.

The **Bird Conservation Society of Thailand** (Map pp70-1; ☎ 0 2691 4816; www.bcst.or.th/eng; 43 Vipawadi 16/Th Vipawadi-Rangsit, Sam sen nok, Din Daeng, Bangkok 10400) provides a plethora of information about the birds of Thailand, offering field trip reports, sightings of rare birds, bird festivals and bird surveys.

Make a big change by checking out the **Sanithirakoses-Nagapateepa Foundation** (www.sulak-sivaraksa.org), which was started by the 1995 Alternative Nobel Prize winner, Sulak Sivaraksa. This umbrella group is associated with numerous environmental and social justice groups in Thailand including the Foundation for Children, Forum of the Poor, the Thai-Tibet Centre, and Pun Pun, an organic farm and sustainable living centre. These groups offer countless opportunities to help empower local communities, and to get involved in issues important to the people of Thailand. They have also started an alternative college called Spirit in Education Movement (SEM) that offers a spiritually based, ecologically sound alternative to mainstream education.

Other groups promoting environmental issues in Thailand:

Thailand Environment Institute (☎ 0 2503 3333; www.tei.or.th)

Wildlife Friends of Thailand (☎ 0 3245 8135; www.wfft.org)

World Wildlife Fund Thailand (☎ 0 2524 6168; www.wwfthai.org)