

Chiang Mai

Introduction

Chiang Mai is Thailand's principal northern province. It is some 700 kilometres north of Bangkok and covers an area of 20,000 square kilometres. The city is located in a fertile valley some 300 metres above sea level.

Chiang Mai was founded as the capital of Lanna Thai (Kingdom of One Million Ricefields) in 1296. It flourished as a major religious, cultural and trading centre until 1556 when a Burmese invasion reduced it to a vassal state. The Burmese were expelled in 1785, whereupon Lanna Thai once again became part of northern Thailand.

Many lowland Thais regard Chiang Mai as being something of a national Shangri-la, thanks to its distinctive festivals, historic temples dating from the 1300s, arresting scenic beauty, temperate fruits and a crisp, invigorating cool season climate.

The people of Chiang Mai enjoy one of the most distinctive cultural identities in the whole of Thailand. Largely farmers and artisans, they have their own lilted dialect, their own indigenous handicrafts, their own dances and their own distinctive cuisine. Hilltribes also lend a great deal of character and colour to the crisply beautiful mountainous landscape.

Attractions

CITY ATTRACTIONS

Wat Phra Sing Located on Sam Lan Road, this lovely temple dates from 1345 and is one of the focal points of Songkran festivities each April 13-15 when people bathe the revered Phra Phutthasahing Buddha image. The temple compound includes the lovely Lai Kham chapel with its exquisite woodcarvings and northern-style murals, and a magnificent scriptural repository with striking bas relief.

Wat Suan Dok Located on Suthep Road, this temple was built in a 14th century Lanna Thai monarch's pleasure gardens and is a favourite spot for photographers, particularly for striking sunsets. Several of the white chedis contain ashes of Chiang Mai's former royal family. The 500-year-old bronze Buddha image in a secondary chapel is one of Thailand's largest metal images.

Wat Chiang Man Located on Ratchaphakkinai Road, this is Chiang Mai's oldest temple and probably dates from 1296. The temple was the residence of King Mengrai, who founded Chiang Mai, and is noteworthy for a chedi supported by rows of elephantine buttresses, and a small ancient Buddha image, Phra Kaeo Khao.

Wat Ku Tao This temple is near the Chiang Mai Stadium. It is noteworthy for an unusual bulbous pagoda. The structure is decorated with colourful porcelain chips and is believed to represent five Buddhist monks' alms bowls which symbolise five Lord Buddhas.

Wat Chedi Luang Located on Phrapokklao Road, this temple is the site of an enormous pagoda, originally 280 feet high, and which was partially destroyed by an earthquake in 1545. At one time, Wat Chedi Luang housed the revered Emerald Buddha image now enshrined in Bangkok's Wat Phra Kaeo. One of Wat Chedi Luang's most striking architectural features is a magnificent Naga staircase adorns the chapel's front porch.

Wat Chet Yot Located on Super Highway, north of the Huai Kaeo Nimmanhemmin Roads intersection. This temple dates from 1458. The seven-spired square chedi was inspired by designs at Bodhagaya, the site of the Buddha's Enlightenment in north India over 2,500 years ago, and was built by Lanna Thai architects after visiting the holy site.

Wat U-Mong Located on Suthep Road in a bucolic forest setting, this delightful meditation temple is completely different from Chiang Mai's other major temples. It was built in 1296. The ancient chedi is of particular interest.

Chiang Mai National Museum This is located beside Wat Chet Yot. The museum houses a collection of Lanna Thai works of art, ancient Buddha images, and war weapons. It is open daily, except Mondays, Tuesdays and official holidays, from 9.00 a.m. until noon, and 1.00 until 4.00 p.m.

OUT-OF-CITY ATTRACTIONS

Chiang Mai-Lamphun Route (Highway No. 106)

Wiang Kum Kam An ancient town founded by King Mengrai is located 4 kilometres on Chiang Mai-Lamphun route in the area of Amphoe Saraphi. The main historical remains are found in Wat Chedi Liam, Wat Chang Kham, Wat Noi and Wat Kum Kam.

Chiang Mai-Doi Suthep Route (Road No.1004)

Tribal Research Centre Located in the Chiang Mai University Campus, this contains a permanent cultural exhibition of northern hilltribes. The centre is open, Monday through Friday, from 8.30 a.m. until noon, and from 1.00 to 4.30 p.m.

Chiang Mai Arboretum This is next to Chiang Mai University. The attractively landscaped garden contains many kinds of tropical trees and lovely flowers.

Chiang Mai Zoo Next to the Chiang Mai Arboretum, this artfully landscaped complex occupies the lower forested slopes of Doi Suthep mountain, and contains a fascinating collection of Asian and African mammals and birds.

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Huai Kaeo Falls Located near the Chiang Mai Zoo, the cascade provides a delightful ambiance for relaxation and picnics.

Kruba Sriwichai Monument This is situated at the foot of Doi Suthep Mountain. The monument honours the man whose followers built the first motor road to Wat Phra That Doi Suthep in 1935

Wat Phra That Doi Suthep This temple is Chiang Mai's most important and visible landmark, and overlooks the city from its forested mountain backdrop. It is 15 kilometres from town, 3,520 feet above sea level, and dates from 1383. The temple is approached on foot by climbing a steep staircase comprising 290 steps. The less energetic may ascend by funicular railcars. The temple's golden pagoda contains holy Buddha relics, and attracts Buddhist pilgrims from all over the world throughout the year.

Phu Phing Palace This is located on the same road, beyond Wat Phra That Doi Suthep, 22 kilometres from town. The royal winter palace was built in 1962. The lavishly landscaped gardens and grounds are open to the general public on Friday, Saturdays and Sundays and official holidays, when the Thai royal family is not in residence.

Doi Pui Tribal Village This Meo tribal village is some 4 kilometres from the Phu Phing Palace, and offers vignettes of modern tribal life.

Pha Dam (Black Cliff) This area near Wat Phra That Doi Suthep comprises a scenic spot ideal for picnics.

Western Route (Highway No. 1009)

Old Chaing Mai Cultural Centre Located on the road to Chom Thong, the centre stages Lanna Thai cultural performances with a Khan Tok Dinner. Objects d'art are displayed.

Earthenware & Lacquerware Shops These are clustered together, some 4 kilometres from town, on the Chiang Mai-Hang Dong Road.

Wat Phra That Si Chom Thong This temple is 58 kilometres from Chiang Mai and dates from the mid-1400s. The temple houses a collection of bronze Buddha images, and the secondary chapel contains a holy Buddha relic.

Doi Inthanon National Park Doi Inthanon is Thailand's highest mountain and towers 2,565 metres above sea level. Travel 58 kilometres west of Chiang Mai via Highway 107, by regular coach to Amphoe Chom Thong and thence by minibus to the the peak for a further distance of 48 kilometres.

Complex mountain ranges and a mild climate characterise an area with moist and dense summit forest which is the source of important tributaries of the Mae Ping River, one of northern Thailand's major waterways. Various streams descend, forming beautiful waterfalls throughout the park. These include the Siriphum, Vajirathan, Mae Pan, Mae Klang, and, the largest of all, Mae Ya waterfalls. Meo and Karen hilltribes inhabit the park.

Visiting the Doi Inthanon National Park is possible throughout the year. The best period for viewing waterfalls is May through November. The best period for viewing wild flowers is December through February. The best period for ornithologists is November through March.

Ban Rai Phai Ngam This is a village where famous cotton cloth woven in the old style has been long produced. At present the weavers' central gathering is the home of the late National Artist, Pa (Aunt) Sang Da Bansit, who had transferred her knowledge on the weaving process to other villagers. The village is located on the left of Chiang Mai-Hot between Km. 68-69, about 4 kilometres off the main road.

Op Luang Gorge This picturesque gorge is 105 kilometres from Chiang Mai provincial capital, and is framed by teak forests and mountains.

Northern Route (Road No. 1096 off Highway No. 107)

Orchid & Butterfly Farms Major nurseries is located along Mae Rim-Samoeng route (Road No.1096). These farms include Sai Nam Phung, Mountain Orchid, and Mae Ram Orchid. Each provide opportunities for visitors admire these exotic year-round blooms. Certain orchid farms also have special butterfly enclosures where in exotic species can be seen in their natural environment.

Mae Sa Waterfall This 8-tiered waterfall is 26 kilometers from town and occupies a natural setting among gigantic towering trees.

Elephant Training Centres Each morning, at Km. 10 on Mae Rim-Samoeng route, some 30 kilometres from town, trained elephants demonstrate their formidable and highly-valued forestry skills from 9.30 until 11.00 am, at the Mae Sa Elephant Training Centre. A jungle tour on elephant back, lasting more than two hours through adjacent forests, is offered after the show. Elephants at work can also be seen at the Pong Yaeng Elephant Centre at Km. 19 on the same route, and the Elephant Nature Park at Mae Taman on the Chiang Mai-Fang Road, some 57 kilometres from Chiang Mai.

Queen Sirikit Botanic Garden This national botanic garden is located at Km. 12 of Mae Rim-Samoeng route and covers an area of 560 acres. It was established in April 1992 in order to gather, to conserve, as well as to strengthen studies and reserch on Thai plants. More than 700 species of plants with the emphasis on Thai Flora have been collected.

Taeng Dao Elephant Camp This riverside enclave, at km. 56 on Highway No. 107, features daily shows of elephants at work, from 9.00 a.m. and offers elephant rides, and opportunities for bucolic river-rafting through largely pristine and tranquil forests, or jungle treks to neighbouring hilltribe settlements.

Chiang Dao Caves Sacred Buddha images occupy the caves of Wat Tham Chiang Dao at KM. 72 on Highway 107. Caves are illuminated by electric lights. Deepest recesses can be explored with local guides.

Doi Ang Khang This royal agricultural station situated among beautiful mountainous scenery, provincial capital, 163 kilometres north of Chiang Mai, is a demonstration site for planting and researching flowering plants, temperate fruit trees, vegetables and other crops under the patronage of His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej.

Fang Hot Springs Located at Ban Pin, also 163 kilometres north of Chiang Mai provincial capital, 50 hot springs occupy a 10-acre forest setting. Three boil continuously with a strong smell of sulphur. Water temperatures at the springs range from 90 to 100 degrees Celsius.

Eastern Route (Road No.101)

Bo Sang Umbrella/Parasol Village The world-famous village is 9 kilometres from town, along a road lined with handicraft-producing factories. In genuine cottage industries, young women manufacture silk and cotton umbrellas and paper parasols which are subsequently hand painted in various animal and floral designs. Generations of Bo Sang families have been engaged in umbrella and parasol making for more than 200 years.

San Kamphaeng Cotton & Silk Weaving Village This equally famous village is located 13 kilometres from town. The village is the major source of all Thai silk and cotton produced in Chiang Mai. The fabrics are woven by local folk on traditional wooden looms, and are sold in a wide variety of plain lengths, plaids, brocades, stripes, prints and checks.

San Kamphaeng Hot Springs This is located 36 kilometres from town amid natural surroundings of trees and verdant hills. The water has a high sulphur content and possesses curative and restorative properties. Accommodation, a swimming pool, dining facilities and segregated mineral water bathing rooms are available.

Trekking Tour

Meo, Lisu, Yao, Akha, Lawa and Karen hilltribes live throughout northern Thailand's mountains. They share animist beliefs and honour numerous forest and guardian spirits. Each tribe has distinctive ceremonial attire, courtship rituals, games, dances, agricultural customs, puberty rites, languages or dialects, aesthetic values and hygienic habits.

Popular 'Jungle Treks', lasting from 2 to 7 days, take visitors through forested mountains and high valleys and meadows, and include visits to remoter high-altitude hilltribe settlements for overnight stays. The best guides are hilltribe youths who customarily speak English, Thai and at least three tribal dialects.

Treks commonly feature travel by foot, sometimes by boat, elephant-back, horse-back or jeep, frequently a combination of two or three modes of transportation.

Prospective trekkers are advised to shop around companies offering such tours for the best conditions. All treks must be registered with the Tourist Police. This is done for trekkers' protection. Avoid companies that do not abide by this law. Visitors are welcome to enquire from the Tourist Police to confirm which tour companies have negative or bad reputations, or visit the TAT Chiang Mai office to obtain a list of registered travel agents.

Also, avoid narcotics, essentially everything from soft drugs such as marijuana to hard drugs such as opium and heroin both during travel and at hilltribe villages. There are severe penalties for such usage.

Wear sensible clothing to protect your limbs and sleep under a mosquito net at night. Malaria is a real threat, and sensible precautions should be taken to avoid it.

Visitors should remember to

- a) Respect hilltribe beliefs and religious symbols and structures.
- b) Dress modestly. Hilltribe people are generally modest. Inappropriate attire may offend them.
- c) Ask permission before photographing someone. Some villages do not permit photography.
- d) Avoid trading western medicines and articles of clothing. Contributions to their welfare, items such as pens, paper, needles, thread, cloth and material used for embroidery are perfectly acceptable.

Trek prices are determined by the duration of the trip, transportation modes, meals available and the size of the trekking party. Check directly with the Chiang Mai TAT office for current information.

Shopping

Chiang Mai is, quite simply, Thailand's major centre for quality handicrafts. The visitor need merely visit the nearest city emporium or night market to purchase handicrafts. A major advantage of shopping in Chiang Mai is that the visitor may watch artisans working within the city and in several outlying villages, particularly along the Bo Sang-San Kamphaeng road where, in genuine cottage industries, parasols, silk and cotton weaving, jewellery, woodcarving, silverware, celadon, and lacquerware are manufactured, and number among popular purchases.

Major Chiang Mai products include:

Cottons & Silks - First-class Chiang Mai cottons and silks are of incomparable quality. Cottons and silkshave innumerable fashion and furnishing applications. The largest possible selection is available in San Kamphang.

Umbrellas-Parasols - These are inextricably associated with Bo Sang where villagers have been engaged in their manufacture for at least 200 years. All materials, silks, cottons, sa paper(manufactured from the bark of the mulberry tree) and bamboo are produced or found locally. Visitors to Bo Sang will see literally hundreds of designs and sizes ranging from the miniature to the gigantic.

Silverware - The finest Thai silverware is exquisite, and is made in Chiang Mai, where certain families have pretised their art for several generations. Traditional skills and a guaranteed content of at least 92.5% pure silver invest bowls, receptacles and decorative items with authentic value. Silver shops are concentrated on Wua lai Road, where silverware artisans and their families live.

Lacquerware - Striking black and gold designs give lacquerware its visual appeal and sheen. This decorative are enhances items made of wood, bamboo, metal, paper and baked clay, in the form of receptacles, ornaments and various souvenirs.

Furniture/Woodcarving - Chiang Mai is a major centre of furniture making. Major woods and materials include teak, rosewood and rattan. Items may be unadorned or, especially with teak and rosewood, artfully carved in traditional or modern designs. Woodcarving is a traditional northern Thai art featured in numerous temples. In recent years, wood carving has increasingly embellished furniture, gracing screens, chairs, tables, beds, indeed anything bearing a wooden surface large enough to be carved. Carved elephants,figurines and tableware number among other popular purchases.

Hilltribe Products - These include silver ornaments, such as bracelets, necklace, pendants and pipes of intricate design, and embroidered items including tunics, jackets, bags, purses, caps and dress lengths.

Gold Plated Orchids & Butterflies - Orchids and butterflies are preserved and plated with 24-carat gold to creat unusual gift items such as necklace pendants, hairpins and earrings.

Pottery - Chiang Mai is the major centre of Thailand's pottery industry. Prized items include high-fired celadon which is produced in many forms, including dinner sets, lamp bases and decorative items.

How to get there

By Bus - The 10-hour journey from Bangkok can be made on airconditioned coaches and non-airconditioned buses originating from the Northern Bus Terminal on Bangkok's Kamphaeng Phet 2 Road (Tel: 936-3660, 937-8055) for further details.

By Air - Thai Airways operates daily flights from Bangkok and other northern Thai cities. [Pls click here to preview flight timetable or to book a flight](#)

By Rail - The State Railways of Thailand operates daily services from Bangkok's Hualamphong Railway Station, including a popular overnight sleeper. Call 223-7010 or 223-7020 for further information.

Festivals

Chiang Mai celebrates many annual festivals. Three are particularly lively and lovely. They are the Flower Festival, the first Friday and weekend of every February, Songkran, 13-15 April each year, and Loi Krathong on the full-moon night of the twelfth lunar month, generally in November.

Flower Festival - The 3-day event occurs during the period when Chiang Mai's temperate and tropical flowers are in full bloom and at their colourful best. Festivities include colourful floral floats, parades, music and dancing, and beauty pageants.

Songkran - This festival celebrates the traditional Thai New Year with religious merit-making, pilgrimages, beauty parades, dancing, merriment and uninhibited, good-natured water-throwing.

Loi Krathong - People float away under the full moon, onto rivers, canals and lakes, banana-leaf boats bearing a lighted candle, incense, flower and small coin to honour the water spirits and wash away the previous year's misfortunes.

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