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# LAND OF *smiles*

**Simon N. Ostheimer** discovers the secrets behind  
Thailand's best-loved destinations

PHOTO: STOCKPHOTO MANIA





## BEST FOR... ROMANCE Koh Samui

Approaching the small, jewel-shaped isle of Samui, lush green mountains loom up out of the mist, as you fly close over colourful fishing boats bobbing in the emerald sea and the small wooden homes that line the sandy shore. It's no wonder it's been nicknamed 'fantasy island' by those lucky enough to visit. Most arrive via Bangkok – it's just a one-hour flight direct south from the busy capital, a pleasant jaunt over the Gulf of Thailand – before disembarking at one of the world's prettiest airports, an assemblage of open-air tropical-themed halls, navigated by trolley car, which sets the tone for the rest of the stay.

**SEE:** The weekly Sunday walking street market in the **Bophut Fisherman's Village** is a great place to pick up unique souvenirs and – when you need a break – people watch. Not far from here you'll also find the famous **Big Buddha**, and amazing coastal views.

**EAT:** You can find pretty much anything your heart desires in Samui, but for top-notch and inventive cuisine look no further than the warm wooden confines of **The Larder**. A close runner-up is the Mediterranean cuisine at **Link**, which also offers fine views of the beach.

**DRINK:** Depending on your mood, we offer up two of our favourite places for a tipple. **Coco Tam's** on Bophut Beach allows you to sit on the beach and enjoy cocktails by candlelight, but to really get away from it all, head up into the mountains and find the **Jungle Club**.

**STAY:** Koh Samui is awash with luxury lodgings. From **The Tong sai Bay** with its private beach and pool villas and cottages, to the **InterContinental** on the island's west coast, which boasts romantic sunset views. We also love the **Four Seasons** for its solitude, style and sophistication – not to mention fantastic service.



“It's no wonder the small, jewel-shaped isle of Samui has been nicknamed ‘fantasy island’ by those lucky enough to visit”



(Top) Indulge in a couples massage as the sun goes down at the InterContinental. (Above) The Tong sai Bay's luxurious villas boast a private pool overlooking the water. (Right) Link restaurant's Mediterranean meals are served with a side of relaxing beach views.





## BEST FOR... CITY LIFE Bangkok

It's so vastly different to the rest of the country, that in many ways Bangkok is not really Thailand. Krung Thep Maha Nakhon (meaning 'City of Angels'), to give it its Thai name, is a futuristic metropolis of 10 million people, full of skyscrapers, skytrains and sky-high prices (in the luxe shopping malls, at least). The ever-expanding city sprawls for miles, and seemingly never sleeps. However, alongside the world-acclaimed dining, buzzing nightlife scene and modernity, you can still find treasures of the past, such as the historic **Grand Palace** and **Temple of the Emerald Buddha**. In sum, the country's vibrant capital is a captivating blend of old and new.

**SEE:** The best way to see as much as possible in one day is to catch the **Chao Phraya Express Boat**, which runs up and down the city's river, stopping at all the major tourist attractions. Distinguished by a blue flag, it begins at the Saphan Taksin BTS stop.

**EAT:** With so many top tables in the city, the choice is endless, but you can't miss only the third street-food eatery in the world to win a Michelin star: **Jay Fai**, where the eponymous grandma serves up superb curry crab omelettes.

**DRINK:** From Cuban speakeasies to Shanghai-style nightclubs, Bangkok has it all covered, but to get your bearings before you dive right in, head to one of the city's dozens of rooftop bars – the best being **Moon Bar**, located in the lofty position of the 61st floor of the **Banyan Tree** hotel.

**STAY:** Bangkok is such a large city, that it's best to first decide what you want to see and do before choosing a hotel that will best suit your itinerary. That said, for vintage glamour, stunning riverside views and magical memories, we recommend staying at the **Mandarin Oriental**, which first opened way back in 1876. →



(Top) Head to the water for a stunning view of the Grand Palace and Temple of the Emerald Buddha. (Above) The Mandarin Oriental's romantic riverside restaurant showcases Bangkok's blend of old and new. (Below) You'll feel on top of the world at Moon Bar, one of the city's best rooftop cocktail bars.







## BEST FOR... BEACHES Phuket

Thailand's largest island – and gateway to the country's south – was once pockmarked by tin mines, giving it a desolate moonscape appearance. Thankfully, tourism has long since supplanted tin, and it has become one of the world's most famous tropical destinations. Most come for the sun and sand, with more than 30 beaches to choose from dotted along the shore. The most famous of these, with enticing names including Karon, Kata and Kamala, are down the west coast, where you'll also find the party town of Patong. Offshore there are many more islands to be discovered, meaning Phuket has a beach to suit everyone.

**SEE:** For a bird's eye view of Phuket, head up to the **Big Buddha** statue, which sits atop the island's highest mountain. Surrounded by a Buddhist temple complex, it's both a place of pilgrimage and sightseeing, with spectacular 360-degree vistas of the entire province.



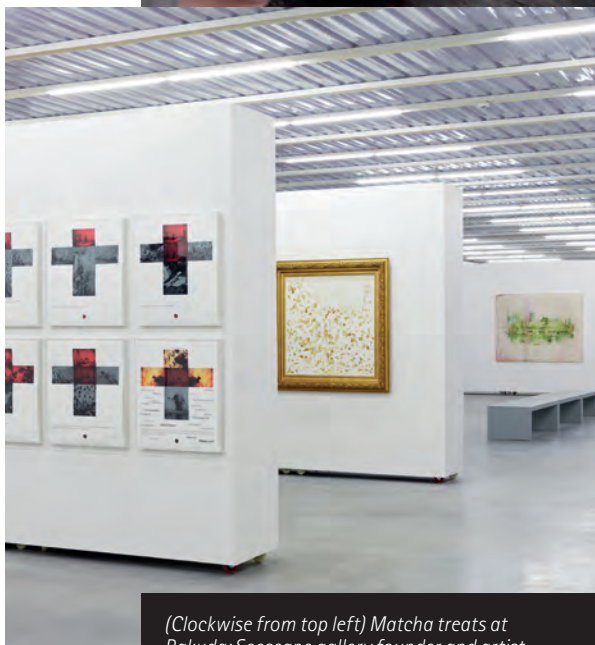
*(Top) Kamala Beach, with its well-enclosed bay and fishing village surrounded by forested hills, is just one of many delightful beaches on the island – your mission is to find a favourite. (Above) Perched above an infinity pool with views of the Andaman Sea, you'll feel like you're floating at the glorious Baba Nest cocktail bar. Our tip? Arrive in time for sunset and head straight to the rooftop. (Left) Paradise is the Rosewood's elegant – and private – resort setting, including the glamorous infinity pool.*

**EAT:** With a wonderful melting pot of local cuisines that reflects the Thai, Chinese, Malay and Indian migrants that call Phuket home, you're spoiled for choice when it comes to dining out, but if we had to pick just one place it would be the **Blue Elephant** for its Old Town charm.

**DRINK:** There's no shortage of places to enjoy a drink on Phuket, but for a truly amazing setting, look no further than **Baba Nest** at Sri Panwa on the south coast. With a wooden deck seemingly floating on an infinity pool, the Andaman Sea stretches out before you.

**STAY:** Phuket has many lovely resorts perfect for honeymooners or couples looking for a luxury escape. The glamorous **Rosewood** – tucked away in Emerald Bay along a 600-metre long beachfront – is this writer's go-to for both privacy and romance. →





(Clockwise from top left) Matcha treats at Rakuda; Seescape gallery founder and artist Torlarp 'Hern' Larpjaroensook at work; Explore photography at Rakuda then settle in for an Insta-worthy brew; Woo combines floristry and coffee; Don't miss the MAIIAM museum.



## BEST FOR... CULTURE Chiang Mai

Home to more than 300 temples – more than anywhere else in the country – it's perhaps no surprise that Chiang Mai is considered Thailand's most cultured city. Founded in 1296 as capital of the independent Lanna Kingdom, today it's famed for heritage architecture – including a moat that still surrounds the city – a thriving scene of artists and galleries, the imposing Doi Suthep mountain, distinctive northern cuisine such as *khao soi*, surrounding green national parks still home to native hill tribes, and the beautiful annual festival of Yi Peng, when thousands of candlelit paper 'sky lanterns' are sent upwards to the heavens.

**SEE:** While you should definitely spend time exploring the city's temples, including the awe-inspiring Wat Chedi Luang, hilltop Wat Phra That Doi Suthep and iconic Wat Phra Singh, do make sure to visit the thought-provoking **MAIIAM Contemporary Art Museum**.

**EAT:** Given its love of the arts, it stands to reason that many of Chiang Mai's best places to dine combine culture and cuisine, such as gallery and restaurant **Seescape**; dual cafe and photography studio **Rakuda**; or flower shop, lifestyle store and eatery **Woo**.

**DRINK:** It may not be indigenous to Thailand, but jazz has been embraced by the locals – the late King Bhumibol Adulyadej was a keen jazz saxophonist who once shared a stage with Benny Goodman. For local beats and bebop, head to the **North Gate Jazz Co-Op**.

**STAY:** Hugging the shore of the sleepy Mae Ping River, in the city's historic east quarter, the **Anantara Chiang Mai Resort** is a luxurious property that combines colonial and Thai influences with tranquil surrounds, comforting spa and a superb location in the Old City.





“Kanchanaburi has a dark history that contrasts with a vibrant present”



(Above and below right) Visitors flock to Library Cafe for its excellent food. (Above right) Head to the River Kwai Bridge early to cross on foot. (Below left) A local temple. (Bottom) Chungkai War Cemetery is a sobering experience.



## BEST FOR... ADVENTURE Kanchanaburi

A two-hour drive west of Bangkok, in the foothills of the mountains that separate Thailand from Myanmar, Kanchanaburi has a dual identity. It has a dark history as the site of Allied POW camps during World War II, and the infamous ‘Death Railway’ the prisoners laboured to build from here to Burma through impenetrable jungle. That contrasts with a vibrant present, with visitors flocking to lush national parks filled with flowing waterfalls and atmospheric caves; spending time rafting, jet-skiing, and cruising on the River Kwai, and exploring the charming Old Town. It’s this split personality that makes it an ideal destination.

**SEE:** The town’s most famous attraction, the bridge across the River Kwai, was immortalised in the 1957 film of the same name. Arrive early to walk across before the train from Bangkok arrives, and then pay a visit to the **Thailand-Burma Railway Centre** for a detailed explanation of its construction.

**EAT:** Given its laidback atmosphere, don’t expect to find fine dining in Kanchanaburi, but there are still a range of great options, from the stylish decor and desserts at **Library Cafe**, popular with day trippers from Bangkok, to the quality homestyle meals on offer at **Mangosteen**.

**DRINK:** For cold beers in an equally chilled setting, head to the bars that line Mae Nam Kwai Road, just southeast of the bridge. For something a little different, try craft beer bar **The Balcony** on Pakprak Road – a charming strip of century-old shophouses and mansions.

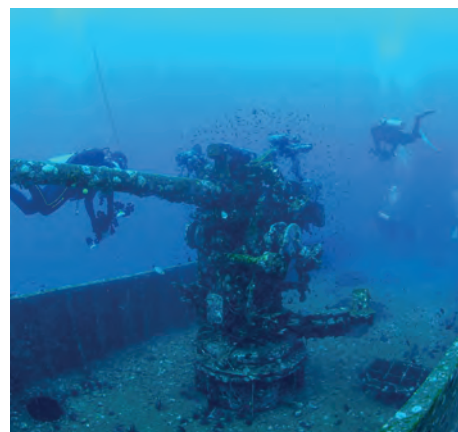
**STAY:** It’s a little ways from town, but the quiet location of the **X2 River Kwai Resort** means you can appreciate the incredible natural beauty of Kanchanaburi away from the crowds. We highly recommend the floating cabins with their private rooftops and industrial-chic design. →



## BEST FOR... ISLAND-HOPPING Koh Chang

Located in Thailand's most easterly coastal province, Koh Chang is part of a national park that includes more than 50 islands. The name means 'elephant island', but – although many camps dot the landscape – the gentle giants are not actually indigenous, with the name instead referring to the isle's distinctive shape. In 1941 it was the scene of a major naval battle between the Royal Thai Navy and French forces based in neighbouring Cambodia, but has otherwise been a sleepy home to fisherman and farmers. In recent years more upscale luxury resorts have opened, adding to the charms of this picturesque destination.

**SEE:** Given that you're on Thailand's third largest island (after Phuket and Samui), a visit to Koh Chang means embracing the ocean. Explore the fish-filled waters on a snorkelling or scuba trip, with the latter allowing you to explore the wrecked Thai ship *HTMS Chang*.



**EAT:** There are many fantastic places to eat along Koh Chang's sandy beaches, but for a taste of something different, try **The Buddha View**. Located at the end of the Bang Bao Pier in the island's southwest, you dine on superb seafood in a stilt house built upon the water.

**DRINK:** You don't come to the island for sophisticated cocktail lounges, so mellow out like the locals do and pull up a beanbag at a beach bar. White Sand Beach on the west coast is full of great venues offering this vibe, including **15 Palms, Sabay Bar** and **Sun & Soul**.

**STAY:** There are places for all budgets and tastes on Koh Chang, but for a true escape from it all, catch a boat south from the island to nearby Koh Kood and discover the remarkable **Soneva Kiri** resort, with its inspiring natural setting, top-notch service and sublime spa. **H**

(Above and below right) Soneva Kiri Resort is an environmentally friendly luxury enclave on the secluded island of Koh Kood. (Above right) The wrecked Thai vessel *HTMS Chang* is a fascinating drawcard for adventurous scuba divers. (Below) A visit to this island means embracing the ocean – explore the pristine region via boat.

