

ABOUT THAILAND

Known as the “Land of Smiles”, Thailand has become South East Asia’s primary holiday destination. Despite a vast influx of visitors, the country’s unique cultural heritage remains intact and the kingdom has managed to absorb Western influences without losing its own rich character.

Bordered by Myanmar to the north-west, Laos to the north-east, Cambodia to the south-east, and Malaysia to the south, Thailand is truly at the heart of South East Asia and offers something for everyone, be it exploring ancient temples, shopping at gleaming modern malls, lounging on tropical island beaches, or trekking the rugged mountains of the northern provinces.

FAST FACTS

AIRPORTS

Most international tourists travelling from Australia, Europe, North America and Japan will arrive at the main Suvarnabhumi Airport. Those travelling on budget carriers will most likely arrive at Don Muang Airport. For passengers arriving at Suvarnabhumi airport who have domestic flight connections from Don Muang, or vice versa from Don Muang to Suvarnabhumi, a shuttle bus links the two airports that are 50km apart (travel time – allow one hour). Four transfer bus departures operate hourly from 6-am to 10-pm. Passengers should board buses on the first floor of Don Muang Airport’s Terminal One and debark on the second floor of Suvarnabhumi’s Terminal Building (Gate 3). Asian Trails has a “meet and greet” airport representative service to help customers who use the airport shuttle link. The greeting service is offered free of charge to clients but please notify us if you want to use this service at the time of booking.

Thailand has seen an increased amount of international flight connections with secondary international airports such as Phuket, Krabi, Koh Samui and Chiang Mai where Asian Trails offers meet-and-greet and transfer services from. Fast track services at various airports in Thailand are available at supplementary charges.

ARRIVAL / DEPARTURE INFORMATION

All visitors to Thailand must carry a valid passport with proof of onward passage (a return or through ticket). Visa applications are not required if staying less than 30 days and the traveler is a national of one of 41 designated countries including Australia, most European Economic Community countries, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, and the United States. To check the latest information from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs access: <http://www.mfa.go.th/main/en/home>. Airport taxes are included in all international and domestic flight tickets so there are no additional airport fees. Upon arrival in Thailand, all visitors must complete an entry/exit form. It is important that these forms are kept safe in the passport and presented to immigration officials on departure.

All the above information may change without prior notice. It remains the traveler’s responsibility to check visa requirements before traveling.

BUSINESS HOURS

Businesses are generally open 9-am to 5-pm; government offices are open Monday to Friday 8.30-am to 4.30-pm, with a lunch break between noon and 1-pm. Shops in large department stores and large shopping malls often open from 10-am until 10-pm or later, seven days a week.

BANKS

Banks are open Monday to Friday; generally from 9-am to 3.30-pm and these give the best exchange rates. Some banks in the business areas or in department stores extend their business hours until 6-pm. The banks in both of the two Bangkok airport arrival areas offer the same currency rate as the banks in the city center. The two international airports in Bangkok and provincial international airports have an abundance of ATMs that accept foreign cards. ATMs are also available in shopping malls, convenience stores, hotels and banks. A maximum withdrawal of 20,000 baht per transaction usually applies. Credit cards are widely accepted nationwide.

CLOTHING

Comfortable lightweight fabric such as cotton is the most suitable clothing for traveling in tropical Thailand. The dress code is fairly casual but it is advisable to cover arms and legs in the evenings to protect against mosquito bites when outside. A lightweight raincoat is a good idea if visiting during the rainy season as the deluge can be very heavy. During the winter months (November to February), warm clothing is needed when visiting northern Thailand as the temperature drops considerably in the higher elevation areas. Visitors should not wear shorts, short skirts or similar clothing when visiting religious sites. It is customary to remove shoes when entering a temple. Beach wear, shorts and singlets are deemed unsuitable in Bangkok’s shopping malls, restaurants and hotels.

CURRENCY

The Thai unit of currency is the baht and this is divided into 100 satang (tiny copper coins that represent 25 and 50 satang). Silver coins are one baht, two baht, and five baht. The larger 10 baht coin is silver with a copper inset. Bank notes come in denominations of 20 baht (green), 50 baht (blue), 100 baht (red), 500 baht (purple), and 1,000 baht (brownish color on a white background). Foreign currency is rarely used for everyday transactions, but hotels and large department stores will usually accept them with a designated house rate.

CUSTOM ALLOWANCES

The following goods may be imported into Thailand without incurring a customs duty:

- One litre of spirits;
- 200 cigarettes (or 250 grams of cigars, or tobacco);

There is no official limit on perfume. Customs no longer deem personal computers or cameras as restricted items as long as they are taken out of the country on departure.

There is also an official minimum currency limit in place when entering Thailand:

- Holders of a transit visa or those who enter Thailand without a visa are required to possess not less than the equivalent amount of 5,000 Baht per person or 10,000 Baht per family.
- Holders of a Tourist Visa -- not less than the equivalent amount of 10,000 Baht per person or 20,000 Baht per family.
- Holders of a Non-immigrant Visa -- not less than the equivalent amount of 10,000 Baht per person or 20,000 Baht per family.

The above requirements do not apply to minors under 12 years old.

THAILAND (Do's and Don'ts)

Thai people are very friendly and generally forgiving to tourists who may not be aware about cultural/societal norms. The following gives a guideline to acceptable and unacceptable behaviour.

Dos in Thailand

- The wai is the traditional gesture of greeting and thanking. It is done by joining hands in front of the chest and bending the head. Foreigners are not expected to wai, but someone who reciprocates the wai will be considered favourably.
- A sense of humour and a sense of fun are two of the most important things to pack when visiting Thailand. Thai people will try and inject a sense of enjoyment into their daily life, whether at work or at play, and as a visitor if you do likewise, you will fit in very well.
- Don't be offended by questions about age, salary or marital status. Foreigners will often be asked these questions, as they are common questions Thais often ask each other without a second thought. If you prefer to keep information personal, you don't have to answer, just smile and just say: "it's a secret" or mai bok ("not telling").
- Be patient when you don't get the service or order you expect. Remember that English is not the first language in Thailand.
- Always respect elders. If someone is older than you, address them as Pee.
- Do exercise tolerance, especially when it comes to ordering food, paying a bill, or waiting for change.

Don'ts in Thailand

- Thai people have a true and deep feeling of love and respect for the royal family, especially the former king His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama IX). Discussions about the royal family or Thai politics are usually not very welcomed by Thai people, unless in a private and confidential environment. For this reason, never tear a banknote or step on a rolling coin as Thai money features pictures of the revered monarch. Always stand when the national anthem is played in the morning and early evening on the sky train platform, in public parks, on the streets of provincial towns, and at the start of movies in theatres.
- Do not touch a Thai person's head. Thais are predominantly Buddhist and the head is regarded as the most sacred part of the body.
- The feet are regarded as the dirtiest part of the body so you should never put your feet near someone's head. Also, never use your foot to point at anything and most importantly never show the soles of your feet to an image of the Lord Buddha.
- When entering a religious site, dress respectfully (no bare shoulders, exposed legs or backless shoes) and take off shoes before entering a temple.
- Ladies should never touch or sit next to a Buddhist monk.

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- Thais have a philosophy of keeping their cool and not losing their temper. To raise one's voice and lose one's temper is considered bad form and confrontation is to be avoided. Even if you experience some form of minor trouble, it is better to smile and not worry about it.
- Do not accept offers from strangers or from taxi drivers to go shopping. They will get commission from the shops they take you to and often you will end up paying over the odds for the goods you buy.
- Do not sunbathe nude and females should wear suitable swimwear, including a covered top. This is particularly important on some of the southern islands and beaches where local Muslim populations are more prevalent. The fact that it's highly unlikely that any Thai person will actually reprimand a foreign woman for sunbathing topless doesn't make it right.
- Do not smoke indoors in designated properties as it is illegal. Do not throw cigarettes away in the street – you will face fines of up to 2,000 baht.
- Do not smoke on Thai beaches. New regulations prohibit cigarettes and e-cigarettes being lit up on major Thai beaches and cities. Hefty fines may be the result when caught by local enforcement agencies.

ELECTRICITY

Thailand uses 220V with the majority of sockets having two pins. It is therefore advisable to bring a universal plug adaptor.

ENTERTAINMENT AND NIGHTLIFE

Thailand is one of the most exciting places on earth for entertainment and nightlife. From the sophisticated nightclubs and pubs of Bangkok; to the laid back charm of beach bars in the island resorts – Thailand has something for everyone. Nearly every country on earth is represented in the capital with American sports-themed bars, Australian steak houses, British pubs, German beer houses, and Japanese karaoke bars. Movie theatres are first class and situated in nearly every shopping mall. Live music is also available in many establishments, so opportunities for fun-filled nights are in abundance.

FOOD

Thai food is recognized as one of the world's great cuisines and it brings together elements of several South East Asian traditions. Emphasis is placed on lightly prepared dishes that offer strong aromatic elements. Although it has a reputation for being spicy, harmony is the guiding principle behind Thai cuisine. The essential characteristic is a balance of four fundamental taste senses in the overall meal, or single dish of: sour; sweet; salty and bitter; and spicy. Thai food is eaten with a spoon and fork, with the spoon used to place food in the mouth and the fork used to push food onto the spoon. In a typical Thai meal, several dishes are shared and a plate of rice is given to each diner.

HEALTH

No inoculations or vaccinations are required unless traveling from, or passing through, areas infected with yellow fever. Yellow fever certificates are required for those coming from African and South American countries. Malaria is present and it is advisable to take precautions especially if traveling off the beaten track. The standard of medical facilities at private hospitals is world class and Thailand has a growing medical tourism industry.

HOTELS

The standards of accommodation are excellent with categories to fit all budgets. Bangkok and the large beach resort destinations have an abundance of luxury properties. The larger hotels offer a wide variety of restaurants, bars, swimming pools and other recreational facilities. Most of the staff at key positions (front office, reception, restaurants etc.,) speak excellent English but please be patient and show patience if you do not get what you want right away. During check-in you will be asked to complete a registration card. The hotel will also ask for an imprint of your credit card as a guarantee for extra services such as meals, drinks, etc. Ask the cashier to return this slip upon checkout. Please check that you receive meal coupons (where applicable) when given the room key. General check-in is from 2-pm and check out time is 12-noon. If you require a late check-out (extra costs may apply) check with reception beforehand.

INSURANCE

It is advisable to take out a medical insurance policy before traveling as treatment will not be administered without proof of payment, or evidence of a comprehensive travel insurance policy. Do be careful if you hire a car or a motorbike and make sure the rental is covered by the appropriate motor insurance. Be wary of renting jet-skis as scams for non-existent damage are prevalent and it is very unlikely insurance policies will cover this activity.

INTERNET

Internet cafes are widespread in major towns and cities. Besides computer use that is timed by the minute, users can also purchase pre-paid international phone cards to make international calls. Wi-Fi hotspots are widespread in hotels, shopping malls and fast food outlets and cafes. Many hotels have business centres with PCs connected to the Internet or in-room broadband access. Convenience stores such as 7-11 and Family Mart sell local pre-paid and top-up SIM cards and these offer cheaper rates and international calls, as well as Internet access. These are far cheaper than using your home-based service provider's roaming service.

LANGUAGE

The main spoken language in Thailand is Thai. This is a complicated tonal language with a unique alphabet. Beside the numerous hill tribe dialects, other languages spoken include Lao, Khmer, and Chinese. Most Thai people in the major cities and towns speak English and tourists should never have problems with basic communication.

PEOPLE

One of the first things you will notice when you visit Thailand is the Thai people's inherent sense of friendliness and good humor. Sanuk is the Thai word for fun, and in Thailand anything worth doing, even work, should have some element of sanuk. This doesn't mean Thai people don't want to work or strive. It is just that they live more in the moment, and do their best to enjoy it. The famous Thai smile stems partly from this desire to practice the concept of Sanuk. The population of Thailand was 69 million (according to the World Bank in 2011) of which an estimated 10 million were resident in Bangkok.

PUBLIC HOLIDAYS

Closure of tourist sites can occur at short notice on public holidays and our Asian Trails guides will give guests advice about this situation. The dates of national holidays change every year so please refer to the information provided by your travel agency or check the website of the Tourism Authority of Thailand.

PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION

The three-wheeled Tuk-Tuks can be taken for short journeys, while metered taxis offer a very cheap air-conditioned ride. In the capital Bangkok, public transportation includes river boats, the elevated BTS Sky train network and the underground subway which are both easy to use, reasonably priced and link most of the major tourist areas. In provincial areas, taxis may not be metered so it is essential to agree the fare beforehand. Suvarnabhumi Airport has a fast, inexpensive elevated rail link that connects with the BTS network at Phaya Thai Station. Whereas (metered) taxis in Bangkok are very reasonably priced, the taxi prices may vary tremendously throughout the country, most notably in the beach and island destinations in the South where a taxi ride may cost a tenfold of its Bangkok equivalent.

RELIGION

Theravada Buddhism is practiced by about 95 per cent of the population and every Thai male is expected to become a monk for a short period in his life. There is also a large Muslim minority in Thailand's four southernmost provinces of Yala, Narathiwat, Pattani and Satun.

SAFETY

Never leave your belongings unattended and always maintain a firm grip on cameras and shoulder bags as motorcyclist snatch groups can be a problem. Be wary of taxi drivers waiting outside of hotels who may refuse to use the meter as required by law. Avoid offers to buy gems at widely discounted prices and other touts who approach you in the street. Always agree fares with tuk-tuk drivers beforehand to avoid confrontation when you arrive at the destination.

SHOPPING

Bangkok is a shopper's paradise, with huge, glitzy shopping malls, department stores, and an abundance of street markets. The capital Bangkok and the northern city of Chiang Mai have excellent night markets. Good souvenirs include Thai silk, pottery with celadine green glaze, painted umbrellas, lacquer ware, pewter ware, bamboo and wood artifacts and bronze ware. Tailor-made clothes are also good value and can be made in a matter of days. Duty free shops are located throughout the country and items can be purchased and picked up from the airport when departing the country. Value Added Tax can be refunded on goods bought in shops labeled "VAT Refund for Tourists", when there is a minimum transaction of 2,000 baht including VAT. The shopper must fill in a refund application form and provide their passport number in the store. Cash refunds can be collected in international airport terminal departure halls.

STREET STALLS

Stalls on the streets of Bangkok and the main tourist destinations sell everything from food, jewellery, T-shirts, watches and DVDs. The largest concentration of street stalls is at Patpong Night Market which is packed with tourists from about 7pm until late. Bartering is not only expected, it is a way of life! This ensures that you get the best deals and should be utilized whenever you buy anything on the street or from a market stall. Start at a third of the asking price and work your way up. The weekend market at Chatuchak in northern Bangkok is one of the largest markets in the world, with hundreds of stalls stocking items ranging from antiques to clothes, furniture and even animals. Shipping agents are on hand so purchases can be sent back to the purchaser's home country. The expansive riverside Asiatique has an abundance of stalls and more upmarket glitzy shops.

TELEPHONE

Hotels offer international calls but be warned that these calls are expensive in Thailand. The best way to stay in touch is to buy a local SIM Card for your mobile phone at a convenience store and use this instead of expensive roaming rates.

TIME ZONE

Thailand is GMT + 7 and does not operate a daylight-saving system.

TIPPING

Tipping for good service is not expected but is always appreciated in Thailand. It is customary, though not compulsory, to tip tour guides and drivers at the end of a tour. Hotel and station porters should also be tipped a small amount for carrying bags to rooms. In other cases, it is totally up to the individual when and how much to tip. Hotels and higher-end restaurants include a service charge and government tax on the bill.

WATER

It is not advisable to drink tap water but bottled mineral water is safe and available everywhere. All hotels provide a complimentary bottle of local mineral water per person in the room. Ice cubes are generally okay in hotels and restaurants but it is best to avoid them on street stalls. Twenty four hour convenience stores are everywhere in major cities and provincial towns and these sell an abundance of water and soft drink items.

WEATHER

The best time to visit is from November to February when the weather is dry and the mercury drops a little. During these winter months, the temperatures in the far north can drop down considerably. From March to June temperatures soar to over 35 degrees-plus Celsius (95F). Thailand's rainy season begins toward the end of June and continues until October and November. During this time the humidity can be stifling as it rains on a daily basis, usually late in the afternoon. The Southern Thai beaches are faced with two weather systems which bring tropical rains at different times of the year so it is possible to enjoy Thailand's beaches all-year around. From January to September you can choose a beach on the east coast such as Koh Samui and Ko Chang where you will have the best chance of sunny and dry weather; while from October to April, destinations including Phuket, Krabi, Koh Phi Phi and Koh Lanta offer the best chance of good monsoon-free weather.

EMERGENCY CONTACT NUMBERS

Police dial 191; Tourist Police dial; 1155; Fire service dial 199; Ambulance service dial 1554; Suvarnabhumi International Airport: 02 132-1888.

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