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THAILAND

18 HOLES
72 PARS
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The Rising East

When it comes to a diversity of travel experiences and value for money, Thailand remains the sparkling jewel in Southeast Asia's tourism crown.

Asia has been neglected for far too long as a cruise destination. Despite the continual growth of cruise tourism in Europe and especially North America over the past few decades, it could be said that Asia has "missed the boat" on a major opportunity.

In fact, not only is it not too late to start catching up, the region is in a prime position to do so. Three decades of economic growth that has brought regional economic might and individual spending power much closer to that of Europe and America, has also generated a new market of potential cruise passengers eager to follow in the wake of Western travellers. The relaxation of barriers to trade and movement of labour along with freer borders that will come with the advent of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) beginning in 2015, will serve to further accelerate this growth.

Thailand, one of the world's favourite holiday

destinations, beloved for its spectacular beaches, delicious world-famous cuisine and a myriad of other top dining options, shopping, friendliness and excellent service, offers a huge range of facilities to suit any budget. Its tourism growth since the late 80s has been nothing short of spectacular, and more and more new and returning tourists discover and rediscover its wonders every year.

To name just a few activities at a visitor's fingertips are golf (with more than 250 world-class courses to choose from), white sandy beaches, ecotourism, rock climbing, spa and massage, diving and snorkelling, water sports, cultural shows, fantastic shopping experiences and exciting nightlife. All this can be had for a cost that represents excellent value – whatever the chosen level of luxury.

Hundreds of kilometres of sandy seafont beside coastal waters mean there are countless

Krabi, Andaman Sea (left and right)



tourism facilities near the sea ready to receive cruise passengers as the country upgrades its facilities to accommodate larger cruise liners and a vastly increased passenger volume.

THAILAND: CONTINUALLY POISED FOR GROWTH

Thailand has been something of a tourism miracle, quadrupling its tourism numbers in just over 20 years, from about 6 million visitors in 1992 to more than 25 million projected for 2015. In 2011 alone, arrivals surged 27 percent from the previous year. Few nations have come close to its growth as a tourist destination, and Thailand, bolstered by a vibrant entrepreneurial spirit and the guiding hand of a proactive government, has taken the massive expansion in its stride.

While its initial appeal to the world's holidaymakers has always been its natural beauty and relaxed atmosphere, its success has been due to countless tourism products, strong infrastructure and a broad range of hospitality services. Thailand is an easy place to be, and unsurpassed in enabling tourists to relax and enjoy themselves.

The Ministry of Tourism and Sports, formed over a decade ago to handle the swift growth, conceives and implements the national tourism policy, while the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) handles the marketing both domestically and internationally. Both are dedicated to developing local areas in terms of employment and economic growth, enhancing the quality of life of communities, while seeing to the many and varied needs of the country's visitors.

Originally a bit more 'rough and ready', with many of its visitors being young adventure travellers (who spent frugally but helped promote the country to their wealthier compatriots as they grew older), Thailand increased and broadened its international appeal by promoting itself as a world-class destination – very much in line with its growth as an industrialising nation.

This meant ensuring that environmental protections were continually put in place and enforced, while building new infrastructure, developing new tourism products and services, and involving and coordinating with stakeholders, from small 'mom and pop' operations to large Thai-foreign joint ventures; such as, top-end hotels and resorts.

The country's appeal as a tourist destina-

tion has proven to be very broad, as visitors flock to the Thailand from all corners of the globe.

The two most popular destinations now are the islands of Phuket and Ko Samui in the South, with the former on the Andaman sea-coast and the latter in the Gulf of Thailand.

Closer to Bangkok, the beach resort city of Pattaya also receives millions of visitors annually and has grown from a small fishing village in the 1970s to one of Thailand's largest cities with a population of 300,000-500,000 – almost entirely built on tourism.

All three of these popular destinations attract diverse tourist types as their infrastructure, services and facilities have quickly responded and developed to meet demand.

The Ministry of Tourism and Sports and the

TAT are now dedicated to developing the potential for welcoming cruise ships of all sizes to Thailand's white-sanded shores, which offer numerous wonders to delight cruise passengers wherever they come from.

TAKING ON CRUISES

While North America has long dominated the cruise market and still retains about 55 percent of the market share, with Europe a distant second at about 25 percent, growth in both regions has slowed in recent years as the industry matures, so fresh market potential is ripe for development, particularly in booming Asia.

Though cruise ships have been stopping in Thailand for a couple of decades, the country is now beginning to address the massive potential of the growing cruise market. Coastal destinations are already well developed and currently receive numerous ships at its major ports every month, so accommodating a larger influx of passengers is mainly a matter of upgrading and customising port facilities.

The Thai government announced in early March 2015 its plans to build dedicated facilities in Surat Thani on the Gulf coast and Krabi on the Andaman coast, giving easy access to Ko Samui, Phuket, and numerous other nearby islands and coastal beaches. The new facilities can also serve as home ports, to compete with other countries in the region.

DIVERSE DEMOGRAPHICS

To grow successfully, it is of course crucial to match the customer with the right product. Tastes in cruises vary enormously from one region to the next, regarding price, amenities and service. Both the cruise lines and the cruise destinations must respond to this variation in tastes.





PASSENGERS FROM ASIA

Currently, the majority of cruise passengers visiting Krabi and Phuket are from Asia, including China and other emerging markets in the region. Travelling within the region has been a strong trend for Asians in recent years. Whereas cruises were once perceived in Asia as the province of the elite and wealthy, like flying in airliners, they are now seen as an affordable yet novel way to take a holiday. Due to the economy of scale of mega-sized cruise ships that have entered the industry over the past decade or so, far more Asians are now signing up for cruises, looking for a new experience.

The majority of passengers booking the cruises are middle-aged and cruise for leisure with their families in groups of five to 10. While their Western counterparts tend to see the ship

as a destination in itself, in Asia, it is seen more as a form of transport to get from one tourist destination to the next. The cruise is only one part of the experience, and they mainly look forward to the ports of call. Cruises catering to this market tend to travel at night, stopping at port during the daytime, with little wakeful time at sea.

These cruises mostly utilise fleets of large and mega-sized ships to keep the prices low – price still being a major factor in attracting passengers.

PASSENGERS FROM THE USA

Although American travellers take more cruises than the rest of the world combined, the distance means they are not the primary target group in Asia. Americans who do cruise in





Mu Pi Ang Thong National Park



Asia are usually aboard smaller ships cruising around the world over the course of three to four months.

Americans are seasoned passengers – the majority have been on multiple cruises before – and as such, they have markedly different preferences to the average Asian cruiser. Due to the persistent notion in the Western mind-set that sailing carries an air of romance, Americans prefer to spend longer stretches at sea, and enjoy their time travelling between the ports of call.

Most of those who come to Asia tend to be elderly and retired, usually travelling with their partner. Mostly, they prefer cruises that focus on top service and products over bargain prices, and usually travel on small to mid-sized liners. They also enjoy exotic ports, plenty of onshore activities and highly attentive service – all areas at which Thailand excels.

PASSENGERS FROM AUSTRALIA

Australian passengers are primarily elderly and retired couples with an upper middle-class income, but are more diverse in their choices than the Americans. Experienced cruisers travel aboard small and mid-sized ships and are interested mostly in combining relaxation with self-enrichment – taking an active interest in learning about the places they visit.

The first timers are more likely to sign up for an air-sea package, flying to the home port to begin their cruise aboard large and mega-sized ships, again, for attractive prices.

PASSENGERS FROM EUROPE

European passengers tend to be elderly, and travel aboard smaller ships on long cruises, often around the world. They have relatively high incomes, and like the Australians, enjoy educating themselves while also relaxing. As they

are mostly experienced cruisers, they expect to visit truly exotic locales – places that are markedly different from their home countries.

THAILAND FOR YOUNG AND OLD

Although the majority of cruise passengers, particularly on the smaller ships, are of a more advanced age, those who choose to visit Thailand as a port of call are 31-70 years of age, the younger ones mostly arriving on large and mega-sized liners, where the average age is 31-50.

WHO GOES WHERE

As mentioned above, passengers from different parts of the world have drastically different expectations. While the majority of cruise passengers to Phuket and Krabi are from Asia, the second largest group is from Europe, since the cruise season in Southeast Asia runs from November to April, when the weather in Europe is at its coldest. Most cruise lines of course build their itineraries around warm weather.

Interestingly, cruise passengers stopping over on the Gulf coast, including Ko Samui, Laem Chabang Port (near the beach resort town of Pattaya and Bangkok), are from Europe, Australia and the USA. However, Asian passenger arrivals to these destinations are rising on a steep curve and are expected to overtake other regional groups before long.

FAVOURABLE ACTIVITIES

About 80 percent of land-based tours are purchased on board the ship – especially the mega-sized ships, just before stopping at the port. Purchase rates are not consistent though as the decision to purchase a tour is dependent on many factors. Nationality, age group, group size, experience, the port's offerings, convenience of transport, etc. all play a part. As a rule



of thumb, 30-50 percent of passengers will buy a tour package for a given port. Others prefer to strike out on their own, while still more prefer to remain aboard if the port is of little interest or inconvenient.

The first on the list of preferred activities is dining, while city tours and sightseeing are in second and third places. Spa and massage also rank high on the list, alongside shopping and entertainment. All of Thailand's ports and in particular Phuket and Bangkok offer a huge range of activity options covering the above and more.

Natural attractions like national reserves are popular in most of Thailand's ports, and attract a wide range of age and income groups. Of course, trekking, diving, rock climbing and mountain biking – all of which are readily available in Thailand – are not suitable for most elderly cruise passengers.

Historical and cultural attractions are a big draw for Europeans and Australians, who are equally unimpressed with man-made attractions.

The average passenger spends between US\$65-100 while ashore, while those on the smaller luxury ships spend US\$100-135 per person. The money is spent on tours (though not including those purchased aboard the ship), with entertainment, shopping, food and transport not far behind. Some cruisers opt to purchase their tours once ashore to hunt for bargains.

PORTS OF CALL

Cruise ships have called in at Phuket, Ko Samui and Bangkok for more than 20 years. In the early 90s, smaller cruise ships, mainly on extended cruises, wished to expand on their existing itineraries to include ports that the larger ships didn't visit. The passengers were mostly elderly Americans and Europeans on round-the-world tours and stopped at Phuket, Ko Samui and Bangkok's Khlong Toei Port. At this time only a few stopped by and then exclusively during the high season from November to April. But this opened up a new market that has grown considerably.

The situation is very different now, as Thailand's tourism industry has developed to offer more products. Every month during high season, more than 20 ships stop at Phuket (which has become a must-see destination in recent years), 10 at Ko Samui and four at Krabi, covering most of the world's major cruise operators. During the monsoon season, about four or so call in at Phuket and Krabi with a few stopping in at Bangkok and Ko Samui.

KO SAMUI

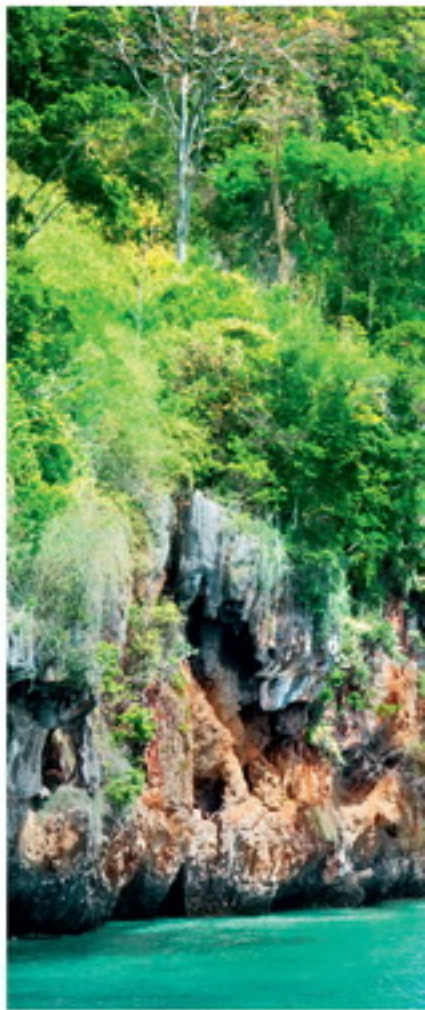
As Ko Samui's reputation spread worldwide as a top-class destination, more cruise ships started to stop by for relatively short stays, particularly during the high season. While the number of stopovers have grown, the destinations began to strain under the load, as in Phuket, since facilities in both locations are still under development.

Currently, all cruise ships of any size must anchor offshore and transfer passengers by tender. The port itself is still relatively small, primarily designed for ferries; hence, the government's recently announced plans to build proper dedicated cruise ship ports on both the Andaman and Gulf coasts. However, even before those facilities are completed, the facilities locally can be improved enormously in terms of convenience and safety for passengers.

BANGKOK

Laem Chabang and Bangkok Ports are well-known to the cruise lines. They have employed them as hybrid ports, as they are located near airports and highly developed tourism products – in both Bangkok and Pattaya. Laem Chabang has the largest capacity in the country and can handle large cruise ships, while the Bangkok or Khlong Toei Port can presently handle only small to mid-sized liners.

A former homeport, Laem Chabang can be





developed into a fully-fledged cruise liner port with a fairly minimal investment of time and cost.

PHUKET AND KRABI

Long a popular and well-known destination much demanded on cruise itineraries and conveniently located for sea navigation, Phuket has played a vital role as a stopover for cruise ships in the region. The island started providing a port for small luxury cruise ships with high-end passengers, which were dedicated to visiting exotic ports. At this time, the port could easily handle the needs of the smaller groups of passengers aboard these small ships. Demand significantly increased when cruise lines began to market to middle income passengers and families aboard larger ships.

In response to the resulting overload at Phuket's main port, two more were constructed

at Patong Beach – the island's most popular beach – and Kalim Beach for use during the six-month-long high season. Further expansion is on the horizon.

THE IDEAL CRUISE DESTINATION

Asia is becoming more affluent and its people are increasingly indulging the desire for new experiences that comes with increased wealth. At the same time, Asia's popularity as a still-exotic destination for curious travellers outside of Asia is growing in tandem with the region's developing infrastructure and sophistication. It is inevitable that the cruise industry will see explosive expansion in this part of the world.

Thailand intends to play a major role in this growth, offering unique and exciting experiences to all who wisely choose to weigh anchor on her shores. ●



Testament to *Excellence*

From the founder of a logistics company that specialises in land arrangements for cruise passengers to a representative of one of Thailand's leading tour operators and a UK couple who – despite a medical emergency – went on to have a memorable experience in the Kingdom, the consensus is clear: Thailand is the shining star of Southeast Asia's fast-growing cruise sector.



Tailor-Made Experiences

Chataphat Boonyawon is the in-bound sales and marketing manager of SEA Tours, one of Thailand's most longstanding tour operators. For almost 40 years, the company has been in charge of providing cruise passengers an authentic and intimate experience once they leave the ship. SEA Tours handles more than 70 percent of the cruise lines that visit Thailand, and provides them with everything from transfers to shore excursions, hotel accommodation, and sight-seeing tours.

HOW DID YOU GET INTO THE BUSINESS OF SPECIALISING IN CRUISE TOURISM?

I started working in the industry in 1997 after studying hotel management. I got a trainee position on a cruise ship, and ended up liking it so much I moved into the Tour Department and worked on board for 13 years. I've probably sailed more than 1,000 cruises, taking care of passengers and providing short excursions. Cruise ships are really just an amazing way to see and experience all the world has to offer.

WHY IS THAILAND A DESTINATION BEST ENJOYED BY CRUISE SHIPS?

Coming in on a ship is just so hassle-free. It's

definitely more flexible and peaceful than a long-haul flight, and it's especially a great way for senior citizens to have amazing travel experiences, too. But above all, there's honestly just a different perspective when it comes to taking a cruise ship. The feeling of approaching the shore is just so much more intense.

WE KNOW ALL ABOUT PHUKET AND KO SAMUI – CAN YOU RECOMMEND ONE OF THAILAND'S NEW UP-AND-COMING DESTINATIONS?

That is definitely emerging as a prime destination. Bordering the Gulf of Thailand to the south and Cambodia to the east, there are beautiful beaches and undeveloped, breathtaking islands just a speedboat ride away. There's a beach on Ko Kut that we are taking people to right now that is quite amazing. It's very secluded and private, almost untouched. Krabi, in Southern Thailand, is also very nice. It's really perfect for people who love to be at sea, and Than Bokkhorani National Park is a must-see ecotourism destination.

WHAT ARE THE MUST-SEE ATTRACTIONS IN BANGKOK?

Tourists love to visit the Grand Palace and Temple of the Emerald Buddha, but if it's not their first time to Thailand we like to take them to something different. That's why I love Pak Khlong Talat, or the Bangkok Flower Market.

It's Thailand's biggest fresh flower market, it's 24 hours and the vendors also sell other goods like fruits and vegetables. The Ananta Samakhom Throne Hall is also a stunning museum that is great for allowing tourists to discover modern Thai history. It's the former reception hall of the Dusit Palace, commissioned in 1906 by King Chulalongkorn (Rama V The Great). We offer a variety of tour packages for cruise line passengers, so everybody gets to see exactly what they are interested in. Our itineraries are tailor-made to how long the cruise is docking for and to what sorts of passengers are on board. We can cater to any wish, including private vehicles and vans.

CAN YOU GIVE AN EXAMPLE OF A TOUR PACKAGE THAT IS PARTICULARLY POPULAR?

Lately, many guests have been interested in experiencing the rural areas outside of Bangkok. So we take them to a floating market called Damnoen Saduak, around 110 km west of the city. They can learn about the village way of life right from the source, and guests are free to roam around and try local activities like traditional weaving, rice farming and traditional dancing.

WHAT'S ONE WAY YOU GO ABOVE AND BEYOND FOR YOUR CLIENTS?

We like to organise special events for the cruise

"We offer a variety of tour packages for cruise line passengers to see exactly what they are interested in"

ship passengers, so they can really experience and get to know Thai culture. For example, we have thrown our own Loi Krathong celebration, a special festival where decorated baskets are floated on water to bring good fortune. It traditionally takes place in November, but we've done it also around the year just so passengers can have that experience. It's a lot of fun, and quite a big party, sometimes between 600 to 1,000 people. The guests get to try first-hand doing arts and crafts like making the krathongs (floating baskets) wood-carving, umbrella painting, and more. They can also try Thai delicacies like pomelo salad and fish cakes.

www.seatourtha.com



A Matter of Logistics

Wattana Choksuvanich is the founder and managing director of EAS Maritime Agencies, a company that manages logistics for cruise lines on the ground in Thailand. For over 20 years, EAS has been one of the leading choices in the Land of Smiles for ensuring a smooth and safe experience for passengers – from docking to departure.

WHAT EXACTLY DOES CRUISE LINE LOGISTICS ENCOMPASS?

Every cruise ship that comes into Thailand needs to have two agents: a tour agent and a port agent. We are the port agent, and basically act as a representative to the cruise line. Often that can mean working with local authorities and helping passengers who get into troublesome situations. We're in the business of working with people, and that involves a lot more complications than when working with a cargo ship for example. We are always there to receive the ship when it arrives, and we look after everything – from the moment the ship drops its anchor until it leaves.

WHAT SORTS OF PROBLEMS DO YOU HELP PASSENGERS WITH?

Sometimes, passengers lose their property on tour buses, so we talk to the Tourist Police and have them retrieve the property. I'd say our Bangkok Port is one of the most secure because so far we've always seemed to find everything. We also deal with visa and immi-

gration issues. ASEAN countries have different visa allowances, and there are some nationalities that are allowed to enter Thailand but not a neighbouring country without a visa. There are normally cruise ships that go from the Laem Chabang Port in Thailand to China, for example. Every passenger needs to have a double Chinese visa, but sometimes they don't have it. So we need to call the port in Hong Kong to assist with visa applications in order to keep everything according to schedule.

CAN YOU RECALL A RECENT PROBLEM WHERE YOUR HELP WAS REQUIRED?

Emergencies occur from time to time. For example, we recently had a ship leave from Laem Chabang Port, and after one hour we got a call saying a passenger had a heart attack. I had already left the port but needed to go back and communicated with the ship by radio, organising for them to drop anchor south of Pattaya. We sent a boat to pick up the passenger and sent him directly to the hospital, where he was in CCU for a few nights. It's our job to represent the cruise line and stay to help the family, because the ship must continue on its journey. We made check-in visits and also supported the patient's wife by helping her get accommodation.

WHY ELSE IS THIS ROLE IMPORTANT?

Let's just say we keep the system running smoothly. In one port, we sometimes have to receive four or five cruise ships per day – that usually means 5,400 passengers in 24 hours.

Saving the Day

Michael Spong and his wife Sue enjoyed their first cruise ship excursion to Thailand in February 2015. On the way from Singapore to Hong Kong, the UK couple booked a two-day tour for Bangkok. They bargained for the trip of a lifetime in the ancient yet modern Thai capital, having taken many splendid cruises to exotic destinations around the world before. However, this one would certainly be a very different experience from what they were expecting.

Spong remembers coming off the boat on February 5 and being immediately "blown away by the beauty and grandeur" of Bangkok, from the intensity of the sights and sounds, to the larger-than-life flavours of Thai cuisine. "On our first day, our favourite attraction was Wat Pho and of course, the Reclining Buddha," reminisces the retiree, who lives in London. "The sheer size of this site overwhelmed us and we sensed so keenly the religious atmosphere of the place."

Unfortunately, misfortune hit as Spong and his wife were leaving their romantic evening dinner cruise on the Chao Phraya River. While descending down to the jetty, his wife lost her balance and fell, bruising the side of her face and sustaining serious injuries to her elbow. She was immediately taken into hospital and underwent surgery, and was discharged a few days later. She was required for a check-up on 13 February, and because of high season in Thailand, the first available airplane tickets back to the UK were not available until 19 February afterwards. Spong said the stress was at times unbearable, particularly dealing with the travel insurance company.

"They informed me that we were in a private hospital, as opposed to a state one and accordingly they would not authorise the hospital to bill their charges to the insurance company," he said. "We would have to pay and then make a claim for reimbursement later. This

put us in a very difficult position, as we had not budgeted for such expenditure. It was a traumatic period trying to arrange for the necessary monies to be available."

Thank goodness for the help of SEA Tours, the cruise ship's chosen tour operator. A representative from the company came to visit Spong and his wife everyday in the hospital with flowers and food. They went to the cruise ship and retrieved the couple's luggage and belongings – free of charge.

"Their assistance and support went way beyond anything they were obliged to do," he said. "I have never come across such a caring and committed group of people."

Upon discharge from the hospital, they arranged accommodation for Spong and his wife at a Bangkok luxury hotel. SEA Tours picked up the couple's two-day tour of Bangkok right where they left off, of course making modifications to take care of Spong's wife's condition.

"We would have loved to take a boat trip on the river, but my wife was not physically able to get on or off a boat," he said. "But it was still wonderful anyway. A highlight was a visit to Suan Pakkad Palace Museum and seeing the wonderful theatrical masks and the traditional musical instruments."

The day ended with a delicious meal in the hotel's sophisticated Thai restaurant, Basil. The Spongs loved their first impressions of real and authentic Thai cuisine, but especially the mango sticky rice for dessert.

The next day, SEA Tours provided the couple with transfer from the hotel to the airport, again only out of kindness. This trip was unfortunately not the experience the couple was hoping for in Thailand, but the caring nature and quality service of Thai people was definitely invaluable in such hardship.

"In our view, Thailand is a must-see travel destination not only for the marvelous beaches



but most of all, for the chance to meet such charming people and experience their culture," explained Spong. "A cruise is the best way to see Thailand... in the sense of giving you sufficient experiences to whet your appetite to come back for a longer and more adventure-some stay."

Spong's wife is still undergoing treatment in the United Kingdom for the injuries she sustained on the journey. At the moment, there are no immediate plans to travel because of this, but the couple is indeed eager to get back to Thailand.

"In Bangkok we want to have some time on the river but we would like also to explore a lot more of the rest of the country," he said.

A journey to the Land of Smiles is indeed likely at some point in the future – if only to see the team from SEA Tours and thank them personally once again. Chattaphat Boonyawon, the company's In-bound Marketing and Sales Manager, stays in regular contact with the couple and is looking forward to their return.

"This is what Thailand is all about," said Chattaphat. "We want to make sure our guests have the best travel experience as possible. I really think that – no matter where you travel in this country – tourists will find quality service. Hospitality is one of our most important cultural values." ●

"We look after everything – from the moment the ship drops its anchor until it leaves"

then 20,000 pieces of luggage, another 50 containers and a few hundred more people in the crew change. By 2017, we're expecting to have ships coming to Thailand with 4,000 passengers and another 2,000 crew members per ship. Our business isn't easy; it takes time and experience to train our staff, probably at least four to five years to understand the different rules and requirements for different ships. But we're doing a good job.

WHAT SORTS OF PREPARATIONS ARE YOU MAKING FOR THE FUTURE?

We are training more staff and building more facilities. Thailand's port infrastructure is still developing. For around 6,700 miles of coastline we only have three main ports – compare that to Malaysia, which has 1,000 miles of coastline and six main ports. For example, many of the ports in Thailand still don't have wheelchair ramps, so we've built our own to accommodate those passengers and make sure they can have a pleasant stay. We may not have the infrastructure of Singapore, but the Thai culture is known for being friendly, caring and warm.

www.seatimeagencies.com



Uniquely Thai

Whether your travels are motivated by a pursuit of leisure or pleasure, few destinations in the world offer such an exotic concoction of unique attractions and activities. Indeed, Thailand is a one-of-a-kind destination that stimulates all the senses. Here's a round-up of some of the enduring things that have given the Kingdom such enormous appeal for visitors from all corners of the globe.

A myriad of marine-based activities and a whole host of unique experiences on land showcase Thailand as a leisure destination like no other. A tropical climate with sunshine all year round, stunning cruising grounds, and world-class marinas have made the country a favourite haunt for yacht enthusiasts. On shore, unique cultural experiences await, together with great shopping, legendary food, entertainment and world-class facilities to enjoy all sorts of activities for young and old.

It's not just one aspect of the Kingdom, but rather an inextricable combination of assets that make the allure of Thailand impossible to shake. Everyone will have their own to-do lists to cross off while visiting the Land of Smiles, and visitors do not even have to dig particularly deep to find incredible experiences. Here are some of Thailand's finest attractions and experiences to get you started on curating that bucket list.

Golden Mount Temple, Bangkok

CRUISING IN THAILAND

CULTURE

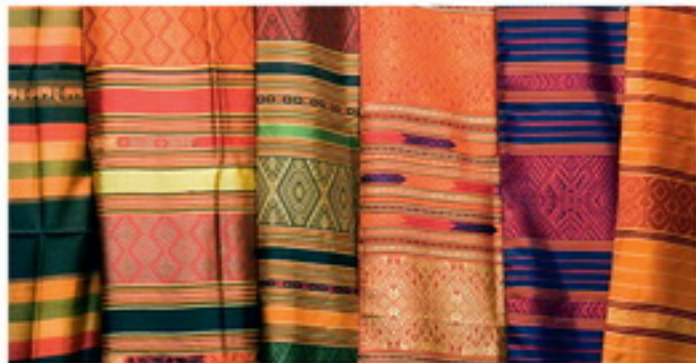
Bangkok might be a global metropolis, but Thai cities and towns – including the Thai capital and its citizens – are still inherently and undeniably Thai. The local culture is intertwined with everyday lives, existing alongside contemporary advancements that offer a best-of-both-worlds itinerary – a morning long-tail boat tour of ancient temples, a champagne brunch at a luxury hotel, an evening Muay Thai kickboxing match, followed by nightcaps at a classy watering hole to toast a day well spent. You can enjoy a week exploring the country's marine treasures aboard a superyacht – then, on disembarking, visit a local eatery where fishermen just dropped off the catch of the day for a seafood feast as scrumptious as it is fresh.

The essence of Thai culture is reflected in all aspects of daily life – from gleaming temples, unusual sights like spirit houses and shrines, remnants of days gone past, architecture and

local markets to beautiful crafts, delicate cuisine and traditional dancing. Cultural shows like Siam Niramit in Bangkok and Phuket (www.siamniramit.com) offer the ideal opportunity to sample many of these things in world-class productions specially put together for tourists.

Thailand lies between Cambodia, Myanmar, and Lao PDR, with the Gulf of Thailand to the south. Its culture is a mix of Indian influences, Chinese traditions, and of course elements that are uniquely Thai. With its diverse geography, friendly people, and stunning scenery, the "Land of a Thousand Smiles" is certainly the must-see destination in Southeast Asia, with each of its four main regions having its own unique cultural and geographic features.

Northern Thailand shares its border with Myanmar and Lao PDR – a mountainous region filled with thick forests and river valleys. The culture is heavily influenced by Burmese culture, as well as from the historical Lanna



Kingdom. Northeastern Thailand, also known as Isan, has a strong Lao influence and is primarily an agricultural society. The South, located on the Malay Peninsula, is home to many of Thailand's pristine islands, beaches and resorts. With a more tropical climate, this narrow land mass is home to many fishing communities where it almost seems as if time has stood still.

It is the region of Central Thailand that is predominant, though – the seat of Thailand's modern-day capital, Bangkok. With its fertile plains, it has also long been the economic centre of the country, producing the majority of Thailand's rice. The area also has the greatest population density, and the greatest concentration of the ethnic Thai majority. It is the political, economic, and cultural centre of Thailand.

THAI CUISINE

One of the most tangible and well-known aspects of Thai culture is the one that is edible, and indeed delectable. Easily among the most beloved cuisines in the world, Thai food has rightfully earned its spot in gourmards' hearts with a winning blend of fresh ingredients and aromatic spices. As anyone who has experienced Thailand's flavours can attest, street food Kingdom-wide gives Michelin star-worthy establishments a run for their money. Well-stocked wine cellars at fine dining restaurants elevate gastronomic creations to another level altogether.

A complexity of flavours – both unique and perfectly balanced – has given Thai cuisine legendary status the world over. It's a cuisine that's deeply rooted in culture, ingenuity and values. Each of Thailand's four regions boasts a cuisine that is unique and distinctive to that area, and it is this diversity of flavours that add even more dimensions to Thai food.

The food of the North is governed by some of the most pronounced temperature changes and diverse terrain in Thailand. The climate ranges from dry and cool during the winter season to wet and warm during the monsoon season, making the region well-suited for growing a wide range of vegetables, fruits and plants, including many that are only found in temperate climes. Food in Northern Thailand is influenced by various ethnic diversities; such as, the Karen and the Hmong as well as neighbouring countries Lao PDR and Myanmar.

The use of coconut milk, spices and sugar is less prevalent than in the rest of the country, and dishes are commonly accompanied by a plate of fresh, steamed or pickled vegetables, making the food light and easily digestible. Dishes to try include: Ahao soi (soup with a mix of boiled and deep fried egg noodles and braised chicken, beef or pork, served with shal-



Photo: sox from Northern Thailand



Temp. Roasted and Grilled Chicken



lots, lime and pickled cabbage), nam prik (chili dip), khao niao (sticky rice), khaep mu (crispy fried pork skin), kaeng hang-le mu (an aromatic curry with silky pork belly, pickled garlic and fresh ginger), sai ua (piquant pork sausage spiced with lemongrass, galangal, chili, turmeric, garlic and kaffir lime leaves) and Khanom chin nam ngiao (fermented rice noodles topped with a mild tomato-based soup with pieces of pork and blood cakes and served with green beans, bean sprouts, fried shallots and fresh coriander).

Nowhere in Thailand are the seasons as pronounced as in the Northeast, commonly referred to as Isan. The climate varies from dry during the winter and hot seasons when the fields lie barren and droughtstricken to wet during the monsoon when heavy rainfall and flooding render the fields equally difficult to cultivate. As a result, agricultural output in

Northeastern Thailand is lower than elsewhere in the country and the people of Isan have become experts in making good use of whatever produce they do cultivate.

The staple best suited for these extreme conditions is glutinous rice, or sticky rice as it is called for its glue-like texture. Rolled into bite-sized morsels, it is used to scoop up the liquid from spicy salads or soups, as an accompaniment to grilled meats or as a ladle for pungent nam prik (dips). Bold flavours dominate and many of the famous salads from this region use a tangy combination of garlic, lime, chili, sugar and fish sauce. Herbs also play a vital role in flavouring and as a condiment. Dishes to try: Som tam (green papaya salad), lap (grinned pork, chicken, beef or duck seasoned with fresh herbs, shallots, chili, lime juice, palm sugar and toasted rice powder), kaeng het (a fragrant soup with mushrooms, fresh herbs

and cubes of pumpkin) and *kai yang* (grilled chicken).

Bordering Cambodia and the northern Gulf of Thailand, Eastern Thailand is famous for its abundance of fresh seafood and a significant proportion of the population in provinces; such as, Rayong, Trat and Chanthaburi work in the seafood industry. Dotted along the coast of the Gulf of Thailand are countless ports where fishing boats unload the bounty of the sea: crabs, oysters, prawns, squids, mussels, fish, lobsters and clams. Dishes to try: *sen chan phat pu* (a local version of the famous phat Thai), *pla muek haeng* (dried squid), *kapi* (fermented shrimp paste) and *nam pla* (fish sauce), which is to Thai food what salt is to Western food.

The Central Plains of Thailand are perfectly suited for growing a wide range of agricultural produce. Void of the mountains of the North and experiencing neither extreme drought nor excessive flooding, the region is well irrigated and drained, and benefits from easy access to the Gulf of Thailand and its wealth of aquatic produce. As the economic centre of the country, the Central Region attracts people from all corners of Thailand, and the food scene is all the more varied and vibrant for it. On the streets of Bangkok, female vendors wearing hijabs can be seen selling *roti* (pancake, with banana, egg and condensed milk) right next to vendors selling *bami mu daeng* (egg noodles with marinated barbecued pork) or *khao kha mu* (pork shank stewed in a fragrant, Chinese-inspired five spice broth and served with steamed rice, Chinese broccoli, hard boiled egg and pickled mustard greens). Other dishes to try: *phat Thai* (stir fried noodles with egg, tofu and bean sprouts), *kaeng khiao wan* (green curry), *tom yam kung* (sour and spicy soup with prawns), and *kuatiao ruea* (boat noodles).

The Southern Region is the hottest, wettest and sunniest part of Thailand and its food has a



superlative of its own; it is the spiciest of all the regional cuisines. With the sea never far away, aquatic life; such as, fish, crab, lobster, prawn, squid, mussels and scallops are widely used and the tropical climate renders the region perfect for cultivating a wide range of fruits and vegetables.

Coconut in all its forms features heavily; its milk or cream is used as a liquid in soups and curries, the oil used for frying, the dried, grated meat is used for desserts and decoration, the shoots and hearts of the palm are used as a vegetables in curries, soups and stir-fries, and the water in the young coconut makes for a healthy refreshment. Dishes to try: *kaeng som* (sour fish/shrimp soup with pineapple or coconut shoots), and *kaeng tai pla* (fermented curry with fish stomach).





SHOPPING

The range of retail pursuits in the Kingdom has undoubtedly bolstered Thailand's reputation as a world-class leisure destination. Swanky malls – and there are a lot of them, with ever-increasing launches – shimmer with the window displays by world-renowned luxury brands. When the sun goes down, vendors across the nation set up their stalls in night markets – the ultimate blind date shopping experience that offers a range of hand-made goods and unique curios to entice the passing pedestrians.

Spellbindingly chaotic flea markets offer shoppers the thrill of a treasure hunt, where players have to battle the tropical warmth and

countless distractions to find the holy grail of souvenirs, whatever that may be. For a true cultural shopping experience, floating markets blossom from the country's countless waterways at the crack of dawn as they have for generations, with vendors vying to attract the attention of quayside browsers.

A shopping highlight in Bangkok is Chatuchak Weekend Market (or called "JJ" locally), which is officially the largest market in the world, with literally thousands of stalls upon stalls selling anything from clothing and crafts to pets, furniture, plants, art and everything else you can imagine. The Market is open every weekend (Saturdays and Sundays) – get there

early to escape the heat and the crowd.

The confluence of culture, natural resources and inherited wisdom are what makes the Kingdom's crafts uniquely Thai. As the country develops and modernises, and machines and mass production become the norm, the bespoke, artisanal nature of Thailand's treasures are becoming ever more valuable. Thailand is of course famous for its high-quality silk, while other exceptional crafts include celadon pottery, woodcarvings, southern stoneware, and silver jewellery with semi-precious stones.

With skills that have been passed down for generations, crafts have long been a reflection of Thai people's innate creativity and ingenuity. Moreover, the abundance of natural materials; such as, wicker, palm leaves, rattan and coconuts making it possible for Thais to produce beautiful and inexpensive handicrafts.

ENTERTAINMENT

Thailand's main cities and resort destinations offer varied entertainment options for visitors. The cities and main resort destinations come





alive with vibrant nightlife which pulsates with the beats of international and local guest DJs. Sophisticated urban dwellers head to glamorous rooftop bars for a bird's eye view of the capital; the energetic gather at nightclubs, celebrating their youth. In coastal destinations; such as, Phuket and Samui, the jet-set and yachting crowd congregate at beach clubs, indulging in the vibrant social life against a stunning ocean backdrop.

Families are also well-catered to with a

number of child-friendly facilities across the country, including water parks, amusement parks, zoos, and high production stage shows. The country's natural playgrounds lend themselves to a whole new set of activities for the whole family, including ziplining, rock climbing and river rafting.

Cultural centres like Nong Nooch Botanical Gardens (www.nongnoochtropicalgarden.com) in Pattaya and Mini Siam (www.minisiam.com) outside Bangkok make for an excellent day trip

for the whole family, with lots to see and do, including elephant rides, traditional dancing and shopping for crafts.

WELLNESS AND GOLF

Whether visitors have it down as a daily activity or a holiday wrap-up indulgence, a massage and/or spa treatment should be on everyone's Thailand bucket list. Options range from a curb-side foot massage at a night market to a beachside knead under the palm trees of a high-end spa hideaway. Luxurious holistic health and yoga retreats offer multi-day experiences to detox and refocus without sacrificing on the luxe factor.

With hundreds of perfectly manicured courses nationwide, it's no wonder Thailand is a golfer's dream. Gorgeous seaside links and championship courses draped over wooded undulating terrain provide the ideal canvas for a day out on the greens, complemented with warm tropical weather and extremely competitive green fees.

The Kingdom remains one of the world's most alluring golfing destinations for several excellent reasons. The first, prosaically enough, is that the golf here is both high in quality and value. Unlike some of its neighbouring countries, where the sport is almost exclusively the reserve of foreigners and the rich, Thailand has a thriving local golf scene, which is testament to its generous number of clubs and their competitive pricing policies. From the mist-shrouded mountains of the North to the paradise beach resorts of the South, high calibre golf can be played in any number of enticing environments.

Bangkok is a true international metropolis and its status is reflected in the wealth of golf courses to be found around its periphery. For the Tiger Woods stamp of approval, head to Thai Country Club (www.thaicountryclub.com).



Golf courses in Thailand court along the coast in the night.



The course, a favourite of the aforementioned golf legend, is a private members club but visitors can arrange a game in advance. Cunningly designed, picturesque and beautifully maintained, it's well worth making the effort to play. Even closer to the thick of the city action is Muang Kaew (www.muangkaewgolf.com), which is just a 20-minute drive from downtown Bangkok.

The rest of the country is also well blessed with first-class golf courses. In Phuket, one of the best layouts is at the Red Mountain Club (www.rmbgolf.com) where holes wind their way through a former tin mine site in the heart of the island. Indeed, so high is the all-round quality it's hard to pick out one course, although the Nicklaus course at Laem Chabang International (www.laemchabanggolf.com) is particularly praised.

YACHTING AND WATERSPORTS

Thailand's beach and island destinations offer a whole set of marine leisure activities that take full advantage of some of Mother Nature's finest characteristics. Longtail boats and speedboats ferry visitors out on day trips to pristine offshore islands, while private yacht charters offer personalised marine excursions with the ultimate exclusivity. The warm waters in the Gulf of Thailand to the east are increasingly popular, as are those in the Andaman Sea off the western coast. In either locale, snorkellers and divers in search of brightly coloured tropical fish, coral reefs and large marine mammals will not be disappointed.

A number of offshore islands are within easy reach of the country's main beach destinations and day trips to these locations are a popular option for those a little less inclined to dive into the big blue. For visitors with more





Andaman Sea

time and a sense of adventure, liveaboard and longer yacht charters allow the guests to explore more of the region's multiple marine attractions, whether close to the coast or out in the open sea.

Those wishing to stay next to the shore can opt for water sports including kiteboarding, for which the main season runs from October to May. Kayaking is another popular activity for different age groups, whether exploring uninhabited islands or manoeuvring through coastal mangrove forests. Though the Thai islands do not witness massive swells in the water, around the months of June to September, surfers can be seen riding the waves off the west coast of Phuket. Paddle boarding has

also taken off in recent times – for beginners, the relatively simple sport is best attempted on days with calmer seas.

For visitors to the coastal regions of the country, the temptation to take to the water is indeed irresistible. With its clear, tropical waters, pristine coral reefs and incredible marine life, the Kingdom offers some of the best diving on the planet. It is no wonder then that divers from around the world gravitate to the underwater wonderlands of the Gulf of Thailand and the Andaman Sea.

Enticing options for diving can be found on both of Thailand's southern coastlines. On the Andaman side, in Phang-nga province, one of the best places to scuba dive is the Mu Ko



Phang Nga Bay

Similan National Park, which consists of nine uninhabited granite-boulder islands. The marine park, located 50 km west from Khao Lak, is home to elusive, endangered green sea turtles and a myriad of other species among pristine coral reefs.

Fifty nautical miles north of the Mu Ko Similan towards the border with Myanmar is Richelieu Rock, part of the Mu Ko Surin National Park. It is regarded as one of Thailand's best dive sites and is famed for sightings of the awesome giant whale shark. Regular visitors to the dive site include spectacular eagle rays and manta rays.

Further south, Hin Daeng, translated to red rock or red mountain in English, is one of Southern Thailand's best dive sites and is accessible from Ko Lanta, near Krabi. Dive sites at Hin Daeng and Hin Muang (purple rock) are the deepest drop-offs in Thailand and opportunities for sighting manta rays or whale sharks are rife. Giant schools of bassfish and barracuda

are also regularly seen at the rocks, which drop down to a depth of 70 metres.

On the east side of the Southern Peninsula in the Gulf of Thailand, Ko Tao remains the Kingdom's most visited dive hub. On the island, 50 dive shops or more are certified to teach diving to beginner divers and more people learn to dive here than at any other island in Southeast Asia. While diving at any level requires some skill, anyone can strap on a snorkel to catch a glimpse of an underwater wonderland. And with warm crystalline seas washing onto gently sloping beaches at countless points across the country, Thailand is the perfect place to get a first-hand view of the region's colourful marine life.

For those who like to get active above water rather than underneath it, Thailand is also increasingly blessed with fine yachting options. Indeed, the Kingdom's regattas are among the best in Asia with excellent winds, champion competitors and glittering parties. The top four



sailing regatta events on the country's calendar – Phuket King's Cup, Phuket Race Week, Top of the Gulf and Samui Regattas – now include sail enthusiasts of all ages with youth race days woven into the annual action-packed ocean racing events.

ADVENTURE

Thailand's rich and diverse landscapes provide a perfect palette for those looking to get active. Whether it is adrenaline activities; such as, night safaris into the wild and zipping through the tree canopies in the jungles of Chiang Mai and Ko Chang or more relaxing pursuits like golf or sailing, the Kingdom covers every possible base.

For visitors looking to push themselves that extra mile, Thailand has established itself as a world-leader in adventure tourism in recent times. Options range from hiking and diving to white water rafting in beautiful jungle-clad valleys. What's more, since these adventures can be done in a timeframe ranging from half a day to a whole week, it is easy to combine pulse-quickening exploits with slower paced activities; such as, cultural trips or some beach time. Put simply, the choice is yours.

And with trustworthy operators established throughout the nation, the country offers a whole raft of once-in-a-lifetime rushes that will remain lodged in the memory bank forever. ●



BANGKOK

Bangkok known by any name – including City of Angels or Venice of the East – would be just as magnetic. The Thai capital is a multi-faceted gem of a destination, boasting big city allure intertwined with a deeply traditional way of life and a richly ingrained culture, which offers an urban tapestry that has won the city multiple “World’s Best City” recognitions.

Tales of the city’s shopping experiences, ranging from floating markets to swanky malls glistening with pure luxury, have earned the metropolis a reputation as a shoppers’ heaven. The capital’s diverse culinary scene also runs the full gamut of offerings, which ranges from tempting street food to refined gastronomy presented by world-renowned chefs.

For visitors who wish to delve deeper into the city’s multiple attractions, a number of impressive temples stand as a testament to Bangkok’s storied past, while country clubs and spa sanctuaries celebrate a slower pace of life. Numerous activities are available for fami-

lies to enjoy, and a boisterous nightlife scene caters to a young and carefree crowd.

From the cruise port of Laem Chabang, Bangkok is less than a two-hour drive away, making the Thai capital an ideal destination for a big city adventure.

A PLACE TO STAY

The Thai capital is home to some of the region’s – perhaps even the world’s – finest hotels, ranging from urban resorts and heritage properties to boutique boltholes and luxurious outposts. To experience the best of genteel Thai hospitality, head over to the iconic Mandarin Oriental Bangkok (www.mandarinoriental.com/bangkok), a landmark property on the bank of the Chao Phraya River, which has been charming visitors to the city since the colonial grand dame opened as Bangkok’s first hotel in 1876.



OUT AND ABOUT

Palaces and Temples: Not visiting the iconic Grand Palace and Temple of the Emerald Buddha (www.palaces.thai.net) is a bit like going to Beijing and skipping the Forbidden City. Most visitors combine a visit to the palace with one to the adjacent Wat Pho, home to an impressive reclining Buddha statue and one of the country's oldest traditional massage schools.

Sea of Flowers: Pak Khlong Talat, the largest fresh flower market in the city is open 24 hours; get there at the crack of dawn to see blurs of colours in motion during the peak floral trade. To see them presented in their most exquisite form, visit the Museum of Floral Culture (www.floralmuseum.com), founded by the Kingdom's premier floral artist.

Silk Souvenirs: Visit the picturesque Jim Thompson House (www.jimthompsonhouse.com) and see how he helped take Thai silk onto the commercial world stage. To get something made and sent to you abroad, try Almeta's bespoke "silk a la carte" service (www.almeta.com).

Culinary Indulgences: Take a food tour down Charoen Krung Road or Chinatown (Yaowarat) to taste some of the Kingdom's finest flavours – or, for a special evening, try the modern Thai creations at Sra Bua by Kin Kin at Siam Kempinski Hotel (www.kempinskibangkok.com).

Bicycle Tours: Explore the city's lesser-seen back streets and local communities on two wheels; Spice Roads (www.spiceroads.com) offers half-day and day tours in Bangkok, plus longer trips to surrounding provinces.

Rooftop Bars: Bangkok is home to a number of rooftop restaurants and bars, each offering

a bird's eye perspective of the city. The lush park-meets-jagged skyline panorama from Sofftel So Bangkok's rooftop bar and restaurant is postcard-perfect (www.sofftel-so-bangkok.com).

Shopping: Markets, malls, and yet more malls – where does one start? For something different than the parade of expected brands, head over to Central Chidlom or Siam Centre, both of which have dedicated fashion enclaves featuring the country's top designers. Or head over to world-class malls like Siam Paragon, Gaysorn, Central Embassy or EmQuartier for a fix of global retail luxury therapy.

River Cruises: The Chao Phraya River, or River of Kings, is a bustling thoroughfare of water taxis, cargo barges, and river cruises. Manohra Cruises (www.manohracruises.com) offers a spectacular dining experience against a backdrop of some of the city's most iconic temples and palaces. A 3D/2N Itinerary is also available to Ayutthaya with cooking classes and stops at cultural attractions.

Relax and Rejuvenate: With the abundance of massage and spa providers around town, there's absolutely no reason not to indulge. Try any of the three spa sanctuaries by homegrown spa and skincare specialist Thann (www.thann-sanctuary.info), all conveniently located in the city's best shopping centres.

Tee Off: Laem Chabang is home to a Jack Nicklaus-designed golf course (www.laemchabanggolf.com); for greens closer to the Thai capital, the Alpine Golf and Sports Club (www.alpinegolfclub.com) on the outskirts of town is as technically difficult as it is beautiful.





AYUTTHAYA

From Bangkok, visitors with a little more time can make a side trip to see the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Ayutthaya, located just an hour from the capital. The remains of some 900 ancient temples and palaces remain in a state of archaeological ruins, providing a historical snapshot of the city's glory days as the capital of Siam between the 14th and 18th centuries.

Activities in Ayutthaya follow in the same traditional vein as the city's principal archaeological attraction, including keepsake shopping opportunities. The dining scene here may lack the glitz of the high-profile chefs in the capital, but the city boasts dishes – including 'boat noodles' – that have become representative culinary contributions on the national stage. Culture vultures who wish to skip the mo-

dem capital in favour of the ancient capital can make the journey from Laem Chabang Port in two hours.

A PLACE TO STAY

Ayutthaya has its fair share of accommodation choices, albeit with a range that is more boutique than Bangkok. With a duplex suite, pool villa, and rooms that overlook a section of the UNESCO World Heritage park, the 26-key Sala Ayutthaya (www.salaresorts.com/ayut-thaya) provides travellers with a modern but cozy sanctuary to fall asleep and wake up to.

OUT AND ABOUT

Historical Park: Ayutthaya is synonymous with its historical park, and a 289-hectare-





section of the park has been designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site. A night bicycle ride through the ruins allows visitors to see the ancient buildings in a whole new light.

River Prawns: The rivers which dissect the city are home to one of Ayutthaya's culinary gems – giant freshwater prawns. At the local favourite Ruan Thai Kung Pao, the deserving star in the riverside eatery's menu is fresh grilled prawn (kung phao in Thai).

Bang Sai Royal Folk Arts and Crafts Centre: This museum-slash-shop acts as a protector and promoter of the kingdom's artistic heritage. Visitors can enjoy demonstrations in silk weaving, basketry, wood-carving, and other traditional handicrafts (www.bangsaiarts.org).

Floating Markets: Of the two floating markets in Ayutthaya, has a more traditional old-world charm with vendors selling handicrafts, souvenirs, and food. Regular cultural shows also take place throughout the day.





Namtok Dawan, Kanchanaburi

KANCHANABURI

Less than a two-hour drive west from Bangkok, the province and city of Kanchanaburi appeals to both nature lovers and history buffs. The forested region is home to lush national parks and the infamous Bridge over the River Kwai; a war museum and POW cemetery bears poignant remembrances to World War II and those who lost their lives building the Death Railway.

Though easy enough to pick up daily necessities and standard tourist souvenirs, Kanchanaburi is not a retail playground. Leisure pursuits are just that – leisurely – and include enjoying nature (trekking, bird watching, river rafting and canoeing) and taking reflective strolls through a number of war cemeteries and museums. Golfers can also tee off at a handful of golf clubs, including an 18-hole, Jack Nicklaus-designed course.

A PLACE TO STAY

The best hotels in Kanchanaburi take advantage of the town location at the confluence of two rivers. One of the atmospheric ways to soak up the region's natural beauty is from the water's edge – the eco-luxurious FloatHouse (www.thefloathouseriverkwai.com) offers 18 thatch-roofed bungalows perched over the water, each with a private pier and verandas from which to enjoy the gentle riverscape and the sounds of nature.

OUT AND ABOUT

Hellfire Pass Memorial Museum: A short distance from Kanchanaburi's city centre, the Hellfire Pass and nearby memorial museum with walking trail honours the Allied POWs and





Asian labourers whose lives the Death Railway was built on (www.hellfirepass.com/museum/).

Bridge over the River Kwai: The iconic black iron bridge is one of the most recognisable landmarks in Kanchanaburi. The bridge, part of the historic Death Railway, can be crossed on foot or, if time allows – perhaps more fittingly – in a train from Bangkok or Kanchanaburi to Nam Tok Station.

The River Kwai: Visitors can enjoy the scenic riverscape from an unhurried bamboo raft, while more active guests can opt for a river

kayak tour, which offers wildlife sightings on the banks of the river as well as stops at historical landmarks.

Namtok Erawan: The waterfall of the namesake national park is a seven-tiered cascade – with swimming holes ranging in colour from emerald to a milky blue – carved into the jungle. The attraction is by no means a hidden gem, so if possible come early on weekdays to beat the crowds and the heat.





PHUKET

The Kingdom's premier resort island has in recent years become known as an international jet-set destination – a reputation bolstered by the A-list offerings on the island, including gorgeous resort hideaways, world-class championship golf courses, and chic beach clubs peppered along its tropical shores. The "Pearl of the Andaman Sea", as the island province is lovingly referred to, offers an intoxicating mix of natural beauty and endless leisure pursuits.

Carving a long arc in the centre of the west coast, Patong Beach is the island's touristic focal point and a hotbed of nightlife, shopping, and dining. Meanwhile, the island's heritage old town – lined with Sino-Portuguese shophouses – has seen a gradual regeneration as of late, with a number of the historic homes now housing quaint restaurants and coffee shops.

A vibrant yachting scene on the island offers visitors opportunities for ocean excursions. Smaller offshore islands provide stunning settings for a beach picnic, while nearby national marine parks offer some of the most rewarding snorkelling and diving adventures to be had in the Kingdom. Back on dry land, five-star spa escapes prepare and repair the body, mind, and soul in the most indulgent of ways.

A PLACE TO STAY

There is no shortage of accommodation options on Phuket, which run the entire range from modest guesthouses to five-star resorts and impossibly indulgent private villas. A large number of global chains are represented on the island alongside a number of independent resorts, some of which continue to trump their branded counterparts. Amanpuri (www.amanresorts.com/amanpuri), the flagship property of Amanresorts, stands as a time-tested beacon of architectural elegance and benchmark-setting service standards.

esorts.com/amanpuri), the flagship property of Amanresorts, stands as a time-tested beacon of architectural elegance and benchmark-setting service standards.

OUT AND ABOUT

Phuket Old Town: While the classic Phuket postcard depicts only the tropical scenery, it's worth making a trip to visit the island's old town, where the Thai Hua Museum is a picturesque introduction to the island's Chinese Peranakan heritage.

Seafood by the Seashore: Island destinations call for no-nonsense, succulent seafood. Krivit (www.krivitraft.com) and other rustic raft restaurants just offshore from Laem Hin Pier –



Phuket Old Town



Patong Beach



James Bond Island



Phuket offers prime yachting grounds



Renaissance Resort, Phuket



accessible via a two-minute longtail boat ride – make for a hugely satisfying feast of deliciously fresh seafood.

Sea Canoes: Kayak, paddle-board, swim, or surf – the warm waters surrounding Phuket can be enjoyed in a multitude of ways. Take a day trip with John Gray Sea Canoe (www.johnggray-seacanoe.com) to explore Phang-nga Bay for a nature adventure.

Spa Retreats: The busier beach destinations around the island all have a collection of traditional massage shops. All the high-end resorts on the island also come with equally plush spas, so it's hard to pick just one winner, although the Como (Shambhala Wellness Retreat at Point Yamu by Como (www.comohotels.com/pointyamu) is pretty heavenly.

Temple Tours: There are a total of 29 Buddhist wats (temples) on the island where locals go to pray and make merit. The largest and most significant is Wat Chalong in the island's south, which is also believed to house a bone relic belonging to Lord Buddha.

High Production Shows: As a world-class international destination, Phuket may seem less Thai than other cities around the Kingdom. For a dose of culture, check out Siam Niramit (www.siamniramit.com), a 70-minute high-production cultural extravaganza featuring traditional arts and live performances.

Championship Golf: Golf enthusiasts should not miss out on the chance to play at the legendary Blue Canyon Country Club (www.bluecanyonclub.com), comprising two championship courses and proud three-time host of the Johnnie Walker Classic.

Oceanside Shopping: In addition to beachside boutiques and markets (try the Sunday walking street in Phuket Old Town), a few shopping centres offer an air-conditioned retail experience for a reprieve from the sun. Try the massive Jungceylon (www.jungceylon.com) on Patong Beach.

Yacht Charter: Four world-class marinas offer a base for charter companies to offer personalised marine trips to explore the surrounding waters and offshore islands. The limestone-studded Phang-nga Bay provides the perfect backdrop for a gorgeous sail.

Diving: For arresting underwater adventures, divers and snorkellers should head for the horizon. The Similan and Surin Islands, located northwest of Phuket, are considered among the best underwater destinations in the kingdom.





BEACH CLUBS

Phuket is home to a handful of beach clubs, each serving up a heedy holiday cocktail of fun and fabulousness. If it wasn't for the gradual dance of the sun across the sky, it would be all too easy to lose track of time and wile away the day soaking up the island vibes. Unhurried family brunches turn into lazy afternoons spent by the water's edge, while the beginning of the evening is marked with tipples and tapas.

Bliss: A laid-back spot on a quiet stretch of casuarina-tree-speckled Bangtao Beach. Grab a circular sofa on the sprawling outdoor terrace and fit between the sand, the sea and the inspired DJ soundtracks (www.blissbeachclub.com).

RE KÁ TA: Located on the edge of the Boat-house by Montara resort on the southern end

of Kata Beach, with a swimming pool, spa, café, restaurant, bar, and seasonal surf school presented by Quicksilver (www.rekataphuket.com).

XANA with Attica: Part of the Angsana Laguna Phuket resort and managed by Singapore-based nightlife specialists Attica. Plenty of sun beds and group seating pods line the 35-metre-pool and are also scattered on the wide beach (www.xanabeachclub.com).

Nikki Beach Phuket: The second Nikki Beach in Thailand after Ko Samui and home to a happening Sunday brunch. Plenty of sun beds and cabanas are scattered around the large free-form swimming pool. The place to see and be seen (www.nikkibeach.com).





KO SAMUI

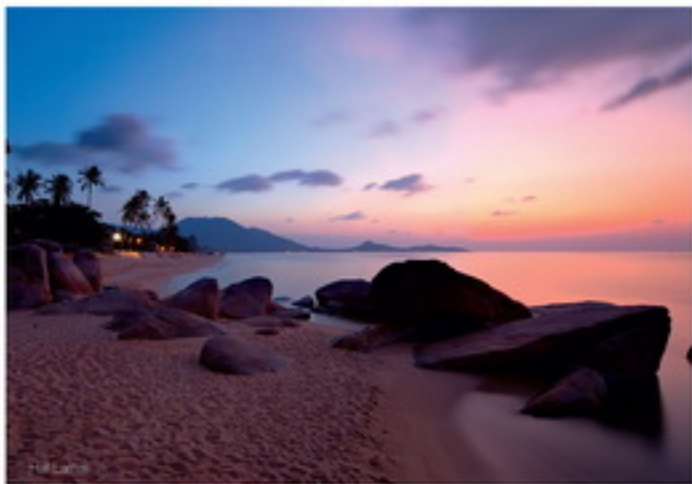
Located in the Gulf of Thailand off the eastern coast of the Kingdom, Ko Samui is a coconut tree-clad island within which are nestled a host of secluded resorts and palatial beachfront and hillside villas. With less than half the land mass of Phuket, Ko Samui has long enjoyed a more exclusive reputation compared to its easily accessible island counterpart.

There are plenty of tranquil nooks and crannies in which to get lost on the island, but when it's time to revel in the fray, the Chaweng strip is where the holidaymakers meet, congregating over a beachside dinner or strolling down the bustling strip of endless market stalls. Nearby islands beckon for a rewarding day trip; divers and snorkelers needn't go far to see a real-life aquarium.

Seafood restaurants are a-plenty on Ko Samui, interspersed with a smattering of fine dining establishments adorning the shorelines. Sweeping sea views add another distractor on the golfing greens – a number of high-end wellness centres, yoga retreats, and spa hideaways complete the holistic approach to holiday rejuvenation.

A PLACE TO STAY

Ko Samui is home to a good number of high-end resorts, which include homegrown luxury as well as global five-star outposts. One of the best is also the island's first five-star retreat – The Tongsal Bay (www.tongsalbay.co.th) – an eco-sensitive resort nestled around a private bay that has been setting standards on Ko





Samui since it opened nearly three decades ago. The island is also home to some of the Kingdom's most stunning villas, either kissing the sea or tucked away in the forested hills with panoramic pool and bedroom views.

OUT AND ABOUT

Mu Ko Ang Thong National Park: One of the top things to do when on Ko Samui is situated offshore and this achingly beautiful archipelago provided inspiration for the novel and film *The Beach* (www.angthongmarinepark.com).

Road Trip: Spontaneous visitors will be pleased to know the island is small enough to circumnavigate in a rental car in approximately two hours. The ring road offers panoramic sea

views (and view points) at a few spots, or simply take a break at the beach of your choice and follow the signs to any attractions that catch your fancy.

Fruits of the Sea: The tropical island charm of Ko Samui definitely lends itself to seafood dining. Bang Po Seafood is well-known amongst locals for fresh and succulent seafood, enjoyed with the sand beneath your toes.

Island Hopping: The dive mecca of Ko Tao and the picturesque Ko Nang Yuang adjacent are well worth a visit, even for non-divers.

Underwater Excursions: Go diving (or get certified) at Chumphon Pinnacle and/or Sail





Rock, two of the Gulf of Thailand's most rewarding underwater hotspots. 100 Degrees East (www.100degreeseast.com) operates small-group dive tours that leave daily.

Retail Quintessence: The narrow strip along Bo Phut Beach – known as Fisherman's Village – is home to cute boutiques, seaside restaurants, and a contemporary open-air shopping arcade. Every Friday, a walking street buzzes to life along the shore.

Forest Day Spa: Five-star hotels on the island

come with five-star spas, but it's hard to beat the stunning setting of the herbal steam cave and rock plunge pools at stand-alone Tamarind Springs (www.tamarindsprings.com) forest day spa.

Secret Garden: Enchanting sculptures depicting scenes and symbols from traditional Thai folklore meld into the forested landscape flanking a stream, making Secret Garden (sometimes referred to as "Ta Nim's Magic Garden") a unique hillside excursion.



KO SAMUI



KRABI

Located along shores looking out over the Phang-nga Bay, Krabi boasts one of the most striking coastal settings in the Thai kingdom. Sheer limestone cliffs make for dramatic coastal adornments and exciting rock climbing opportunities, while emerald waters – punctured with the same jagged limestone outcrops – promise a multitude of marine pursuits.

Most visitors to Krabi head for Ao Nang, the province's busiest stretch of sand and home to a beachfront strip dotted with restaurants and shops. Nestled in a peninsula to the south, hidden by cliffs and sea is Railay, where rock climbers from near and far go to conquer the towering limestone walls.

Krabi is also home to one of the Kingdom's most legacy-laced islands; even before parts

of the movie *The Beach* were filmed there, Ko Phi Phi had long been enchanting visitors with its sandbar-connected islands. A collection of uninhabited islets tempt visitors on day trips, while indulgent spas await on return to the mainland. Krabi is easily accessible from both Phuket and Ko Samui, a drive of two and three hours respectively, the latter also requiring a ferry ride to the mainland.

A PLACE TO STAY

The cluster of accommodation options in the main tourist areas range from backpacker bungalows to international chain hotels, while further afield, a handful of exclusive resorts set examples that redefine tropical luxury. Raya-vadee (www.rayavadee.com), draped across a



PATTAYA & CHON BURI

One of Thailand's most sought after holiday havens and the closest seaside destination from the capital, Chon Buri province offers visitors a winning combination of tropical beaches, cultural attractions, and a choice of delectable local cuisine. Chon Buri's coast is sprinkled with an assortment of seaside towns, however, it is the city of Pattaya – located just half an hour from Laem Chabang – that is the crowning seaside jewel in Chon Buri's crown. Boasting an energetic nightlife scene, family attractions and cultural activities, the bustling resort town has earned a formidable international reputation as one of the Kingdom's most exciting tropical destinations.

Pattaya City has established itself as a hub for water sports enthusiasts, and is home to

a world-class marina and infamous nightlife scene. It might not be the untouched tropical escape of postcards, but Pattaya is a great place to take some time out, with its great selection of family-friendly beaches and top-notch resorts and wellness centres. Pattaya's culinary offerings are also well worth indulging in, and the city's proximity to the ocean makes it a favourite spot for seafood lovers.

A PLACE TO STAY

Pattaya is home to a mix of accommodation options, including a handful of home-grown hospitality brands which have gone international, as well as a number of global brands staking their local presence. Of the latter group is Hilton Pattaya (www.hilton.com), perched on





the top floors of the city's biggest shopping centre, offering a calm oasis – think organic curves, light bleached wood, airy spaces and stunning views over the bay – in a city more known for its vibrancy than tranquility.

OUT & ABOUT

Island Adventures: Island excursions are a hit with many visitors that want to explore a little more of Pattaya Bay. Visitors can charter a yacht from Ocean Marina Yacht Club (www.oceanmarinayachtclub.com) and test their sea legs on a full-day trip to Ko Lan, a nearby island surrounded by some of Pattaya's best dive sites.

Sacred Sites: Despite its reputation for a vibrant nightlife, Pattaya boasts a rich cultural heritage. Close to Buddha Hill is the enigmatic (www.sanctuaryoftruth.com), a fine example of Thai architecture of which every inch is covered with traditional wooden carvings.

A Drop of Vine: For visitors who wish to take a break from sea and sand, a tour of the Silverlake Vineyard (www.silverlakevineyard.com) and winery facilities makes for a pleasant afternoon out in spectacular natural settings.

A Floating Feast: Pattaya's Floating Market is the place to go for a unique Thai shopping and snacking experience. The floating stalls are divided into several sections, each of which represents the major regions of Thailand.

Seafood: Pu Pen Restaurant, on the seafront in Na Jomtien, is a long-standing favourite with locals and Bangkokians looking for reliably excellent seafood. The atmosphere is casual, and the seafood as it should be – juicy, fresh, and prepared in a myriad of ways.





KO SAMET

Ko Samet's proximity to Laem Chabang (under two hours including an hour by car plus 30 minutes by ferry) makes it a prime holiday hotspot for visitors seeking an offshore playground to relax and rejuvenate. As the main attraction in a national park, the island is home to feathery white shores and is popular with Bangkokians on a weekend getaway. Compared to the Kingdom's other better-known island destinations, Ko Samet maintains a low-key tropical allure.

Beaches, beaches and more beaches form the island's main attraction. Boat trips and sunset cruises offer visitors the chance to explore the island's most peaceful bays. The seaside strip is also the go-to-place for a little handicraft shopping, offering the perfect opportunity to pick up a few keepsake souvenirs. Thanks to endless azure seas, Ko Samet is also the ideal

island to try out a few water activities, from energetic pursuits like diving, jet skiing and windsurfing to relaxing pastimes including sunset cruises and beach massages.

A PLACE TO STAY

A quick and easy getaway from the capital, Ko Samet is a tempting spot for Bangkokians in search of a lazy island retreat for a few days. As such, it pays to book your accommodation in advance for any weekend stays. Reflecting the island's independent, low-key appeal, there are no global branded hotels. The all-villa Paradee (www.paradeeresort.com) on Ao Kio Beach combines Balinese and Thai architectural influences in its 40 individual sanctuaries – most with its own private pool.





OUT AND ABOUT

The Bard of Ko Samet: Legendary Thai poet Sunthon Phu set part of his epic work *Phra Aphai Mani* on the island; visitors seeking a little Thai culture should look out for the statues of Prince Aphai Mani, Phu's legendary protagonist, and the mermaid that guided him to Ko Samet on Hat Sai Kaeo Beach and the main port.

Al Fresco Lounges: Ko Samet's chilled out nightlife – tame by comparison to its boisterous counterparts elsewhere around the country – is centred around Hat Sai Kaeo and Ao Phai. The bars here offer a laidback vibe, enlivened at times with fire performances on the beach.

Island Tours: A boat tour of the island offers a full day's worth of activity. A beach-hopping

tour around the island's 10-plus beaches allows visitors to discover Ko Samet's tranquil bays and coves without going offshore.

Thai Therapy: It would be a shame to miss out on Samet's full gamut of relaxing experiences, and a no-nonsense beach massage offers the ultimate way to unwind. For a more formal indulgence of a certain standard, head to the resorts; try Dhivarin Spa at Le Vimarn Cottage Resort (www.levimarncottage.com).

Sunset Cruise: The majority of the island's resorts are nestled along the east coast; for sunset enthusiasts, a cruise before dusk provides front row seats to the daily showing and makes for a romantic way to wrap up a day.





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amazing
THAILAND

IN MUAY THAI,
The **BOXER** always respects the **TEACHER.**

