

TREASURES OF

Thailand



Exotic destinations may seem out of reach during the credit crunch, but in Thailand's Chiang Mai, five-star luxury holiday comes at two-star prices, says Kara Byers

You might be pining for a foray on faraway shores, after a year of penny pinching and holidaying in the UK – so why not try Thailand? Flights may cost a little more, but as almost everything is a fraction of what it is here and you'll be saving on heating, eating and other costs at home, it all adds up to the same price as a week caravanning in Cockermonth.

The only south-east Asian country that has never been colonised by a European power, Thailand is a blend of ancient and modern. Nowhere is this more evident than the capital Bangkok, where saffron-robed monks walk barefoot past glistening skyscrapers, and elaborate temples stand beside eight-lane highways.

But wiser travellers escape the capital for the cooler-climate charm of Chiang Mai. Thailand's second

most-visited city and the gateway to the country's north, its striking mountain backdrop, glittering temples, excellent restaurants and thriving, expansive night market – all of which are easily taken in on foot – make it an ideal destination for anyone after a more relaxed break in the Land of Smiles.

Founded in 1296 and once the country's capital, Chiang Mai is split into old and new towns. The former is surrounded by a pretty moat and historic ramparts, which protect the hundreds of temples, or 'wats' as they're known locally.

The best way to explore Chiang Mai is to walk or cycle among these lanes, visiting the plethora of unique wats and Buddhist sanctuaries (all free entry), and admiring traditional stilted wooden houses and curious shops doubling as noodle bars,

as you stumble across them. If going it alone isn't your style, you can hire a personal guide for the day.

If you're interested in Thai temples, then a visit to the hilltop Wat Phrathat Doi Suthep is a must. Overlooking the city from its location halfway up Doi Suthep mountain and offering views of Chiang Mai in its entirety, you can easily see the shimmering gold of the temple from almost anywhere in the city. The winding road up to the temple is best conquered in a sawngthaew, one of the city's ubiquitous red pick-up truck taxis and, if the 300 steps leading to the temple itself are too much, a funicular offers a short cut.

One of the cheapest places in Thailand, Chiang Mai is a shopping paradise with the Night Bazaar at its centre. Taking up several blocks every evening along Chang Klan

From the glittering temples and opulent golden buddhas, a trip to the city of Chiang Mai is a real feast for the eyes, providing a unique insight into another world

road in the heart of the city, you can pick up anything from fake Rolex watches to beautiful Northern Thai handicrafts, be measured up for a suit for the following evening, stock up on cheap DVDs or browse silver Asian jewellery. All you need to take is an eye for a bargain and sharp, yet friendly, bartering skills.

A few hours at the bazaar leaves enough time to explore the city's cosmopolitan entertainment and culinary scene. One recent addition to Chiang Mai is a slew of five-star hotels where you can enjoy true luxury at affordable rates, such as



TRAVEL TIPS

The wai: A gesture of greeting or respect, you'll see this almost everywhere you go and it's polite to reciprocate. To do so, simply place your palms together in front of the upper chest; the custom is that younger people 'wai' elders first.

Temple etiquette: Always take your shoes off before you enter a temple. Men should wear long trousers and women either a knee-length or longer skirt. Women are not allowed to touch monks or make prolonged eye contact with them.



an exquisite lunch at the Shangri-La or dinner at the Four Seasons.

Enjoy an evening of live music as you tuck into an abundant spread of Thai curries and snacks at popular riverside restaurants, where a meal for two with drinks costs around £20, or catch a quiet bite from a smaller, cheaper eatery in the Old Town. There's a host of restaurants from all corners of the globe too, including Indian, French, Italian, Spanish and American, which will easily sate Western palates.

After dinner, a saunter along the lively bars of Moon Muang, located just around the corner from the Night Bazaar, is good for those who love the odd tipple and with drink deals in the region of Bht400

(approx £2) for two cocktails, who wouldn't? One unique way to absorb classic northern Thai culture is to attend a Khantoke dinner. Exclusive to Chiang Mai, they are enchanting evenings of Thai cultural dance, music and food, all within a traditional giant teak pavilion.

After a day of sightseeing or an evening shopping, the best way to unwind is with a Thai massage, which incorporates yoga to bend and twist the torso and 'reset' the muscular-skeletal position. Having your muscles kneaded, pulled and relaxed gets rid of all your aches from the long journey and walking around. Plus, the hour-long experience costs less than a bottle of wine in England. Chiang



Mai may be Thailand's second city, but with its picturesque surrounds, friendly locals and cosmopolitan atmosphere, it's second to none for those looking for a budget city break with a difference. ■

Don't leave without...

Taking a cookery class

There's a plethora of cooking schools that offer day-long classes, which include a market tour, a cookbook, eating the meal you prepare and a certificate.



Feeding an elephant

The Elephant Nature Park serves as a sanctuary for abused animals. You can't ride the elephants, but you can spend time bathing and feeding them.



Visiting a hill-tribe

The jungle is home to six broad hill-tribe groups: Karen, Lahu, Hmong, Lisu, Akha and Yao. Each has their own customs, language, dress and spiritual belief. Research an authentic trip.



Fact file

Currency: Thai baht

Time difference:

+8hours GMT

Climate: Cool season

(up to 21°C) Oct-Feb, hot

season (30°C) March-May,

monsoon/rainy season

June-Oct

VISA: Not required for stays of less than three months, but you'll need a valid passport and return ticket

Getting there: Thai Airways, bmi and British Airways all fly to Chiang Mai, with a change in Bangkok, for around £600

For more information: Visit

www.tourismthailand.org