

Thailand.... Land of smiles....

Thailand is a wondrous kingdom, featuring Buddhist temples, exotic wildlife, and spectacular islands. Along with a fascinating history and a unique culture that includes delectable Thai food and massage, Thailand features a modern capital city, and friendly people who epitomize Thailand's "land of smiles" reputation.

Country

Thailand, the only Southeast Asian nation never to have been colonized by European powers, is a constitutional monarchy whose current head of state is HM Bhumibol Adulyadej. A unified Thai kingdom has existed since the mid-14th century, and Thailand was known as Siam until 1939 when it officially became the Kingdom of Thailand.

Geography

Thailand is the 50th largest country in the world; most nearly equal in size to Spain.

Located just 15 degrees north of the equator, Thailand has a tropical climate and temperatures typically range from 19 to 38 degrees C (66-100 F).

Thailand's largest peak, Doi Inthanon, is 2,565 meters (8,415 ft) tall.

Thailand covers 510,890 sq km of land and 2,230 sq km of water.

The coastline of Thailand is 3,219 km long.

Thailand's longest shared border is with Myanmar (Burma), stretching 1,800 km.

Weather

The weather in Thailand is generally hot and humid: typical of its location within the tropics. Generally speaking, Thailand can be divided into three seasons: "hot" season, rainy season, and "cool" season, though Thailand's geography allows visitors to find suitable weather somewhere in the country throughout the year.

Population

The population of Thailand comprises of roughly 65 million citizens, the majority of whom are ethnically Thai, though peoples of Chinese, Indian, Malay, Mon, Khmer, Burmese, and Lao origin are also represented to varying degrees. Approximately 7 million citizens live in the capital city, Bangkok, though this number varies seasonally and is otherwise difficult to accurately count.

Area

Thailand has a rough geographical area of 514, 000 sq km (200,000 sq miles). This makes Thailand roughly equivalent in size to France or Texas.

People

The vast majority (roughly 80%) of Thailand's nearly 65 million citizens are ethnically Thai. The remainder consists primarily of peoples of Chinese, Indian, Malay, Mon, Khmer, Burmese, and Lao decent. Of the 7 million citizens who live in the capital city, Bangkok, there is a greater diversity of ethnicities, including a large number of expatriate residents from across the globe. Other geographic distinctions of the population include a Muslim majority in the south near the Malaysian border, and hill tribe ethnic groups, such as the Hmong and Karen, who live in the northern mountains.

Language

More than 92% of the population speaks Thai or one of its regional dialects. While the Thai language is the official language of Thailand, as a result of its cosmopolitan capital city and established tourism infrastructure, English is spoken and understood throughout much of Thailand.

Religion

94.6% of Thais are Buddhist,

4.6% of Thais are Muslim

0.7% of Thais are Christian

Government

Thailand is a constitutional monarchy, not dissimilar to England's, whereby an elected Prime Minister is authorized to be the head of government and a hereditary Thai King is head of state. The constitution of Thailand allows for the people of Thailand to democratically elect their leaders in the form of a parliament, with a bicameral legislature consisting of a Senate and House of Representatives, and executive authority in the hands of the Prime Minister. A Judiciary, overseen by the Supreme Court, was designed to act independently of the executive and the legislature.

Temperature

Located just 15 degrees north of the equator, Thailand has a tropical climate and temperatures typically range from 19 to 38 degrees C (66-100 F)

Economics

The economy of Thailand is reliant on exports, which account for 60% of Thailand's approximately US\$ 200 billion GDP. The economy of Thailand is the 2nd largest in Southeast Asia. Thailand's exports consist primarily of agricultural products including fish and rice, of which it is the largest exporter in the world, as well as textiles, rubber, automobiles, computers and other electronic appliances, and jewelry. While one of the premier tourist destinations in the world, Thailand relies on tourism to provide only 7 % of its GDP.

Banking

Thai bank hours are generally Monday through Friday, 9:30 am to 3:30 pm, though certain banks have shorter Saturday hours and currency exchange booths are open considerably longer hours in Bangkok and other tourist destinations.

Currency

The currency of Thailand is the Thai Baht. Baht come in both coin and banknote form. The size of Thai currency, both coins and bills increases with value and varies in color....

Post Office

The Thailand postal service is efficient and reliable with branches in most major towns throughout the Kingdom. Thailand post offices are open M-F 8am-4:30pm and Sa-Su

9am-1pm. However, The Central GPO in Bangkok, located on New Road, is open until 6pm M-F and Sa-Su 9am-1pm.

All Thai post offices are closed on public holidays, though most major hotels can arrange to mail letters and parcels on your behalf.

In addition to domestic and international mail services, both land and air, standard and registered, the Thailand postal service also provide telegram service.

Time

Thailand Standard time is GMT +7. Thailand does not observe daylight savings.

Weights & Measures

Thailand uses the metric system for all weights and measurements, with the exception for area, which Thais divide into wa and rai.

Electricity

Electrical outlets in Thailand are charged to 220v at 50 cycles per second, which is compatible with appliances from the U.K. but not those from the US and many other nations. While most computer cables have adaptors for voltage, visitors from the U.S. and those not on the 220/50 v. will have to bring adapters to run most other appliances. Outlets in Thailand generally feature flat, two pronged plugs, though some feature holes for round plug ends. Few outlets feature three holes (grounded outlets) so it is often necessary to have a three to two prong adapter for using notebook computers in Thailand.

Accommodation

Thailand hotels are some of the finest in the world, whether they are five star luxury spa retreats or quaint family-run beachfront bungalows. There is a hotel in Thailand for every type of traveler on every budget. That said, the best prices are during Thailand's off-peak season (May – Aug), while the most expensive prices are typically during the cool season (Dec – Feb).

Whether your accommodation choice is a homestay with local villagers, a guesthouse in a backpacker district, a beach bungalow, or a five star hotel in Thailand, unless you have booked ahead, settle for nothing less than the warmest "land of smiles" hospitality.

Telephone

The Thai phone system is both modern and widespread, with comprehensive coverage for cell phones and reliable pay phones found throughout the kingdom. Purchasing a second-hand Thai phone is inexpensive and convenient, and calling from Thailand on a public phone is easy with a phone card available at most convenience stores.

Emergency numbers are often three or four digit numbers, including Tourist Police, which is 1155.

Geography

Located in the center of Southeast Asia, Thailand is truly at the heart of the region. Looking over a map of Thailand will reveal a country whose borders form the rough shape of an elephant's head: the head and ears forming the mostly landlocked northern

and eastern provinces and the trunk extending down the Malaysian peninsula between the Andaman Sea and the Gulf of Thailand.

The geography of Thailand features many natural borders with neighboring countries: a mountainous border with Myanmar (Burma) to the north and west; a long stretch of the Mekong River separating Thailand from Laos to the north and east; and the Mekong River and the Dongrak Mountains delineating the border of Cambodia to the east.

Covering an area of approximately 514,000 square kilometers (200,000 sq miles), Thailand is the 50th largest country in the world, most nearly equal in size to Spain.

Located just 15 degrees north of the equator, Thailand has a tropical climate and temperatures typically range from 19 to 38 degrees C (66-100 F); monsoon rains fall predominately from May to July and cooler, drier weather occurs around November and December. Despite the geographical boundaries of Thailand all falling within the tropics, Thailand's four primary regions are each geographically distinct from each other.

Along Thailand's western border with Myanmar, the forested mountains of Thailand rise higher as they stretch north, peaking at the 2,565 meter (8,415 ft) Doi Inthanon. Thailand's northern peaks are replete with wildlife and feature Thailand's coolest winters.

Northeastern Thailand's geography, where the kingdom borders Laos at the Mekong River, features the Khorat Plateau, which extends south towards the Thai border with Cambodia. The Isan region of Northeastern Thailand is the most populous region of Thailand (with the exception of Bangkok) and features a number of bustling provincial capital cities.

The geography of Thailand's interior is dominated by the Central Plains, the "Rice Bowl of Asia," through which the Chao Phraya River feeds expansive rice fields and then enters the bustling capital of Bangkok before spilling into the Gulf of Thailand.

Stretching down the Malaysian peninsula, the slender trunk of the figurative elephant separates the Andaman Sea from the Gulf of Thailand, providing Thailand with beaches and islands along opposing shores. Once, the sheltered coves of the narrow Isthmus of Kra were important ports along an ancient, strategic trading route; today the islands of Phuket and Koh Samui are equally important as tourist destinations, though both coasts also contain numerous historical attractions as well as national parks, wildlife sanctuaries, and spectacular forests, waterfalls, and beaches.

In addition to these natural, geographical regions, Thailand is divided into 76 political provinces, with Bangkok serving as the political, commercial, industrial, educational, and entertainment capital of the country.

History

Dating back to the Neolithic civilization situated at the modern-day UNESCO World Heritage Site in Ban Chiang, the history of Thailand is long, proud, and fairly well documented. Over the early centuries of the Common Era, tribes of Mon, Khmer, and Tai peoples established realms within the borders of modern Thailand; the Mon speaking Buddhist civilization of Dvaravati in the first millennium giving way to the Khmer empire of Angkor by the turn of the second millennium.

However, the history of Thailand as we know it began when the kingdoms of Lan Na (Chiang Rai/Chiang Mai) and Sukhothai, the first truly independent Thai Kingdoms, established highly developed societies in the North and Central regions of Thailand in the 13th and 14th centuries. The Kingdom of Ayutthaya, which was heavily influenced by the Khmer's of Angkor, eventually conquered neighboring Sukhothai and dominated the region for the next several hundred years of Thai history. Unfortunately, first Chaing Mai

and then Ayutthaya were overrun by Burmese invaders, who occupied the Lan Na capital for several centuries and sacked Ayutthaya, forcing the central Thai kingdom to relocate farther south, establishing a new capital in Thon Buri near Bangkok. After the short lived Thon Buri Period (1767-1772), the capital was moved across the Chao Phraya River, and the first of the current line of Kings, Rama I of the Chakri Dynasty, established the modern capital of Bangkok to commence the Ratanakosin Period of Thai history. The adroit diplomatic leadership of Kings Mongkut (Rama IV, 1851-1868) and Chulalongkorn (Rama V, 1868-1910) were responsible for maintaining a remarkable 700 year Thai history during which the kingdom was never officially colonized by foreign powers; a turbulent 20th century witnessed the transition to a system of constitutional monarchy, currently overseen by Head of State, King Bumibol Adulyadej (1946-present), is King Rama IX of the Chakri Dynasty and a tenuous but functional democracy has existed under the regency of this much beloved king.