

The abiding appeal of Thailand

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As a tropical destination, there are few countries in the world that can rival Thailand for the diversity of its tourist offerings. With a long, rich heritage and abundant natural resources, this proud Buddhist nation is at once both energetic and tranquil, dazzling and subtle, and hugely compelling for the foreign visitor. It is easy to see why holiday-makers now exceed 32 million a year, making tourism the country's top industry.

At its heart is one of the most vibrant capitals in South-East Asia – Bangkok, through which cuts the mighty Chao Phraya river, the lifeblood of the city. In the late 18th century King Rama I created a canal between two river bends, slicing off a piece of land into an artificial island called Rattanakosin. This is the royal district and should be the starting point for any first-time tourist to the city. As the religious and ceremonial nucleus of the nation, the area brims with architectural grandeur – glistening golden chedi, glass mosaic-studded pillars, towering mythological gods and fabulously ornate temple and palace edifices. Within the Grand Palace complex is glittering Wat Phra Kaew, home to Thailand's most revered religious image – the Emerald Buddha.

Beyond the Rattanakosin, Bangkok has numerous other sights of interest: Wat Pho, the city's oldest surviving temple where visitors can pay homage to the monumental, golden reclining Buddha; the traditional Thai house-turned-museum which belonged to Jim Thompson, the American silk entrepreneur credited with reviving the country's silk industry; Chatuchak weekend market, which is reputed to be the world's largest flea market; and Patpong, the notorious street-cum-night market defined by its sleazy clubs and proliferation of stalls selling counterfeit designer goods. For a glimpse of the city at its rarefied best, however, there's nowhere more glorious for afternoon tea than the Author's Lounge at the famous Mandarin Oriental hotel and nowhere more spectacular for an evening drink than at one of Bangkok's sky bars – either the Vertigo and Moon Bar at the Banyan Tree Hotel or the Sky Bar at Lebua State Tower.

It is for its beaches, however, that Thailand is best known, boasting miles of sandy coastline and dozens of tiny islands. To the east, in the Gulf of Thailand, Koh Samui, Koh Samet, Koh Chang and Koh Phangan are perhaps the most famous – each offering perfect white-sand beaches and a wide variety of accommodation options, from chic, sophisticated five-star properties to

cheap and cheerful backpacker outposts. On the western seaboard and the Andaman Coast, is Phuket, Thailand's largest island resort which, in recent decades, has become the country's most popular beach destination. While the beaches on the island's west coast are the most picturesque, many visitors use Phuket Town on the east coast as a jumping-off point to explore the islands of Ao Phang Nga, Thailand's most striking jungle-clad limestone rock formations and monoliths which are scattered in a 155 square-mile area between Phuket and the mainland province of Krabi.

Beaches aside, Thailand is also blessed with stunning inland scenery, not least in the mountainous north of the country. Chiang Mai, the largest city in the north, is an alluring alternative to Bangkok with long, leafy boulevards and a cooler climate. The old town, inside its moat, is an extraordinary vision where, amid the 30-odd temple spires, barefoot monks in flame-coloured robes collect alms in the morning and street vendors sell their wares by night. Ancient traditions sit side by side with a more contemporary ambience of galleries, coffee shops and myriad restaurants and hotels. Enjoy the plethora of street-food bazaars, learn the art of Thai massage or how to improve your culinary skills; pick up silver jewellery or handicrafts at one of the markets, see the best of the city's temples, or join a trek into the surrounding countryside where dense jungle conceals rivers, waterfalls and the remote, colourful hill tribes.

Wherever you venture in Thailand there is one unifying factor – the cuisine, which is built on a vibrant balance of five flavours, sour, sweet, salty, bitter and spicy, and encompasses dishes from the country's four distinct regions. From central Thailand comes the sweetest cuisine, often rich in coconut milk; from the north come curries based on an array of vegetables and indigenous herbs; food from Isan, in the northeast, is fiery and tends more towards intensely flavoured salads than curries; while the food of the south is strongly influenced by its Muslim heritage and is thus rich, fragrant and particularly spicy.

Food, perhaps, is the best metaphor for the country as a whole. Here is a destination where the ingredients of a perfect vacation come naturally together – an enticing tropical climate, a fascinating cultural heritage, a landscape that is as varied as it is beautiful, and a globally recognised cuisine. No wonder a holiday in Thailand packs such a punch. **F**