



1 Essential Thailand

From its remarkable culture to its breathtaking beaches, Thailand is a vacation paradise.



Bangkok resident
Joel Gershon
 reveals 10 crucial
 things to see and do in
 Thailand



In recent years, Thailand has become a popular destination for travelers from all around the world. An unprecedented 26 million people visited the "Land of Smiles" last year, more than double the number of visitors who came just 10 years ago. People visit for the stunning scenery, fascinating culture, endless activities and its tropical climate. And, of course, there's the delicious Thai food.

Thailand is a fairly large country, about 1.2 times the size of California, with a population close to 70 million. It lies in Southeast Asia at the center of the Indochina peninsula, which is also home to Vietnam, Myanmar, Cambodia and parts of Malaysia. Travel and sightseeing opportunities abound across the country, which includes forested mountains, expansive rice fields, and miles and miles of beautiful beaches. To experience Thailand's magic, here are 10 essential things to see and do.



1

Visit Buddhist Temples

Thailand boasts many magnificent temples, with some of the most striking ones residing in the capital city, Bangkok. Wat Phra Kaew, the country's most sacred, can be found at the Grand Palace and houses the famed Emerald Buddha. At nearby Wat Po, you'll find the giant Reclining Buddha. In beautiful Chiang Mai, Thailand's second-biggest city, located in the northern part of the country, go to Doi Suthep if you can manage to climb 306 steps to the top. For a bit of an adventure, visit the old temple ruins in Sukkhothai or Ayutthaya in central Thailand.

Go to the Beach

There are many incredible beaches along the coasts of Gulf of Thailand and the Andaman Sea, featuring gentle waves of sparkling azure warm waters. Different beach destinations offer distinctive experiences. Phuket and Ko Samui are popular choices, with some beach areas offering a party atmosphere, while others offer serene options for those who crave solitude. From Phuket, you can take a boat to Ko Phi Phi and swim or splash around where Leonardo DiCaprio filmed *The Beach*.

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3. Scuba or Snorkel

Don't miss out on the gorgeous marine life that exists beneath the crystal clear waters, with underwater visibility up to an astonishing 100 feet in some areas. For those who are afraid of the water, many tour groups provide safety equipment and experienced guides who will help you feel secure when viewing the coral and colorful fish. For a real adventure, liveaboard boats take divers to swim among turtles, manta rays, small sharks and shipwrecks.

Ride Down the River

Historically, rivers and canals have played an important role in commerce and transport in Thailand—Bangkok used to be known as “The Venice of the East.” Today, modern Bangkok has mass transit options, but a jaunt on the river can still be a charming, memorable experience. During the day, hire a longtail boat to explore the maze of canals to a floating market, featuring hawkers wearing big sun hats in crowded boats. At night, catch a nice breeze on a fun and romantic river dinner cruise.

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Visit a National Park

Thailand is home to 127 national parks featuring stunning landscapes. Erawan National Park in Kanchanaburi is close to Bangkok and has an amazing waterfall, as well as historical significance—the story from *Bridge on the River Kwai* occurred there. Khao Yai National Park, also close to Bangkok, is where you can see great wildlife, including wild elephants, beautiful exotic birds and plenty of monkeys. A tiger sighting is rare.



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CLIMATE

Thailand is hot year-round, so leave cold-weather gear at home. Rainy season lasts from May to October, although it usually only gets really wet in the final few months.



ETIQUETTE

Thailand's military has taken control of the government, but things are generally peaceful for tourists. Be careful to avoid making any negative remark about the monarchy, however, as Thais are quite sensitive about the topic, and there are strict laws in place against doing so.

Ride an Elephant

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While finding wild elephants may require some effort, there are many elephant camps featuring rides and elephant shows, though some of them may not treat their animals so kindly. The Thai Elephant Conservation Center (thailandelevator.org) near Chiang Mai is a superb choice, where rescued or injured elephants are rehabilitated and treated well.

Eat Street Food

If your taste buds feel adventurous, give Thailand's legendary street food a try. You can eat anything from noodle soup to deep-fried insects. Be aware: Thai food in Thailand is much spicier than you may be used to. So tell the wait staff "mai pet" if you can't handle the heat. In Bangkok, Sukhumvit Soi 38 is a street market that stays open late and is foreigner-friendly. Make sure to save room for delicious mango and sticky rice for dessert.

Get a Thai Massage

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A Thai massage is heaven for some. You will be twisted, contorted, elbowed, kneed and possibly even walked on.

But when it's over, you'll be loose and limber. If that sounds like too much for you, an oil massage or foot massage are more gentle options. In Bangkok, the Healthland chain (healthlandspa.com) offers great pricing in a clean, safe setting, and is a favorite among Thais.

Enjoy the Nightlife

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Bangkok is a 24-hour city and has a legendary reputation as a place to have fun and let loose. For the more refined, luxurious rooftop restaurants offer spectacular views of the sparkling city skyline. For younger travelers, Khao San Road in the old part of town is always hopping. There are bars or clubs available in most tourist-

friendly areas around the country, too, drawing international crowds and Thais.

Shop

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From streetside stalls to luxury malls, Thailand is a shopper's paradise. Clothes, housewares, gemstones and unusual gifts have lower prices than you would typically pay at home. Custom-made suits and clothes for men and women are available almost everywhere; just leave enough time for a couple of fittings. Bargaining can usually get you a lower price on goods, although some vendors may not budge. Bangkok's giant Chatuchuk weekend market spans 27 acres and can be hot and dizzying, but overall, it's a memorable experience.



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