A person with dark hair, seen from the back, is walking through a dense field of tall green grass. They are carrying a large, rectangular, woven basket on their back, which is filled with white fabric. The basket is made of light-colored wood or bamboo with a crisscross pattern. The person is wearing a dark-colored shirt. The background is a lush green field with various types of grass and some taller plants.

Wanderlust
TOP 5
GUIDE

Hilltribe trekking Thailand

In the second in our new series of handy highlights guides, Alex Robinson plunges into the jungle to meet the locals on the most colourful tribal treks

My mouth wasn't watering over the blackened, shrivelled and still smoking tarantula on the tin plate in front of me. The French couple, who'd somehow forced their piece of spider down, told me it tasted like a mix of burned hair and earwax. I stiffened my lip, closed my eyes and grasped a wizened leg. It twisted off with a crackle.

Why, I thought, does the search for authentic tribal experiences always include eating some foul local delicacy? Snot-like manioc beer fermented with spit in the Amazon; witchetty grub, like a tepid boneless finger, in Australia; and now, in northern Thailand, a giant singed arachnid.

After a nauseating chew and a reluctant swallow I opened my eyes. The Karen villagers squatting around the hearth were not simply smiling at me: the elders and the 20-year-old chief

were restraining a laugh while the toddlers and their mums were clearly loving every minute of my suffering.

No guidebook or tour operator on the planet can include being laughed at, albeit discreetly, by half a village in a travel itinerary. I felt a hand stretch across the cultural divide – and offer me a shot of rice whiskey. Then someone patted me on the back, still chortling.

We all moved outside to the bamboo terrace to smoke earthy tobacco, plucked from the local fields, under a vast dome of twinkling stars. Pigs grunted from the pen next to the house and the sound of distant Thai pop music floated over the chorus of cicadas and tree frogs from the surrounding forest. For a brief few hours – frozen and suspended as a precious memory from a long journey round Thailand – I felt like a guest rather than a customer, a visitor rather than a traveller, privileged enough to share an evening of local, tribal life. ➤

Previous spread: Lisu women dress in vivid costumes for new year celebrations; trek through the fields with Black Lahu villagers
Below: A Karen weaver at work

Master craftswomen

The Karen are famed for their skilled weaving, handcrafted silverware and tobacco pipes





Where to trek in Thailand

1 Chiang Mai Busy hub with easy hikes, many involving elephants and rafting
2 Mae Hong Son Remoter trails, tougher walking and spectacular scenery
3 Pai Rafting, caving and canyoning with a garnish of tribal village visits
4 Um Phang Few tourists, remote Karen villages, elephant trails and spectacular waterfalls
5 Nan Hilltribe and wildlife treks in the remote and vast Doi Phu Kha NP
6 Doi Inthanon NP Light walks off the paved road up to Thailand's highest mountain (2,565m) or longer organised treks
7 Khao Yai NP Sweaty jungle treks in Thailand's oldest reserve, and the best location for seeing wild elephants and tigers

8 Khao Sok NP Mountain trails through rainforest dripping with waterfalls and many tourists
9 Khao Luang NP Steep treks in orchid-filled forests, home to tiger and wild elephant
10 Ko Tarutao Light trekking in the forested interior to remote beaches and waterfalls
11 Thap Lan NP Treks through lowland rainforest rich with a variety of wildlife species in Thailand's second-largest national park
12 Chiang Rai Chiang Mai's more laidback sister, smaller Chiang Rai is quieter and cleaner, and offers faster access to key trekking areas. There are also more homestay options.

Thailand's hilltribes: a quick guide



LISU
Estimated population in Thailand: 30,000
Origin: China,

near the Salween River, and Tibet
Where: In the mountainous region north-west of Chiang Mai
Who: Subsistence farmers and poppy planters, famous for their vibrantly coloured clothing: both men and women dress brightly.



LAHU
Estimated population in Thailand: 60,000
Origin: Yunnan,

in south-west China, and Tibet
Where: Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai provinces, mostly at high altitude
Who: Farmers with hunter-warrior heritage, one-third Christianised. Some women wear distinctive black cloaks with diagonal cream stripes.



KAREN
Estimated population in Thailand: 330,000-plus
Origin: Burma (Myanmar)

Where: Along the border with Burma, and elsewhere in the north, including in the valleys
Who: Easily the largest hilltribe in Thailand, many are refugees fleeing a low-intensity war against the Burmese government. Four Karen subgroups have similar customs but distinct dress; all are prolific weavers; unmarried women across all four wear white dresses.



SHAN
Estimated population in Thailand: 30,000
Origin: Yunnan,

south-west China
Where: North-west Thailand

Who: Not always regarded as a hill tribe as such, the Shan – of Tai origin (like Thai and Lao people, migrants from China) – are the dominant group in Mae Hong Son province; and also live in Burma's Shan state. They practise Buddhism, farm commercially, and have a thriving community in Chiang Mai.



AKHA
Estimated population in Thailand: 50,000
Origin: Tibet and

Yunnan, China
Where: At high altitudes, principally in Chiang Rai province
Who: Rice farmers with a highly ritualised lifestyle. Known for their distinctive black clothing, bead necklaces, jewel-bedecked headdresses, ceremonial village gateways and annual village festivals involving a giant swing.



MIEN (YAO)
Estimated population in Thailand: 34,000
Origin: Southern

China
Where: Chiang Rai and Nan districts
Who: Identifiably Chinese, using Chinese script and practising Taoism. Recognisable by their black turbans and red-collared tunics.



HMONG
Estimated population in Thailand: 100,000
Origin: Far northern China

or beyond
Where: In the north, at high altitude
Who: Persecuted for poppy-growing; known for their intricate embroidery; wear silver for ceremonial occasions – they dress in black or indigo day to day.

Thai treks Top 5...

Must-do experiences

- 1 **Meeting the locals** The best treks give a window on day-to-day life in a traditional village. A good homestay will make you feel like a temporary member of the community.
- 2 **Hiking the hills** Choose your walk well and you'll be far from any roads, out in remote countryside, walking ancient mountain trails and enjoying stunning views at every other turn.
- 3 **Watching wildlife** Not all treks are tribal. Thailand's 100-plus national parks protect some of the wildest spots in South-East Asia, home to elusive wildlife such as hornbills, gibbons, clouded leopard and tiger.
- 4 **Adventure activities** The mountains of the north-west are cut by fast-rushing rivers and pocked with deep, winding caves. Break a trek with a spot of whitewater rafting, caving, canyoning or a range of other light adventures.
- 5 **Riding an elephant** It may be a Thai trekking cliché, but it's hard not to get excited by the idea of plodding forest trails and wading rivers perched on an elephant's neck.



Classic treks

- 1 The trademark two- to four-day Chiang Mai trek loops through the hilly **Mae Tang Valley**, 40km north of the city. Gentle walking is broken by dips beneath waterfalls, an hour exploring the forest on elephant-back and a float downriver on a bamboo raft. Somewhat jaded tribal villagers receive visitors for lunch and overnight stays. The trek can be booked through Asia Discovery (www.asia-discovery.com).
- 2 **Doi Inthanon National Park**, which rises to 2,565m, Thailand's highest point, through rain and cloud forest, is another classic Chiang Mai destination. Popular two-day treks with companies such as The Wild Planet (www.thewildplanet.com) visit Karen villages, a high-altitude Buddhist temple and a string of pretty waterfalls.
- 3 **Free day walks** are organised by the Chiang Mai Hiking group (<http://chiangmaihiking.wordpress.com>) in the hills around the city, including a hike to the bizarrely eroded Buddha's Footprint rocks on the 1,550m Doi Pa Kha ridge. Walks pass through hilltribe villages and, unlike on the city's standard packages, you'll seldom encounter other tourists.
- 4 Wayfarers Travel (www.wayfarersthailand.com) offers a toe-dip into the Chiang Mai hilltribe hiking experience for those pressed for time. **Walks, elephant-tramps and rafting** are compressed into a busy but undemanding day.

Fool's gold

The opium poppy has been a favourite cash crop of some of the hilltribes, but smoking as well as growing opium is illegal in Thailand

- 5 If you don't have time to head north, day treks from Bangkok offer a **city-accessible sampler** of the country's hill-trekking. Highlight (www.thailandhighlight.com) offers walking in the hills around Kanchanaburi, coupled with a visit to the Bridge over the River Kwai, the multi-tiered Sai Yok Noi waterfall, elephant rides and bamboo rafting.



On the menu later...
Examining an eight-legged local delicacy



Size matters

Some hilltribes, such as the Mien, live in extended family groups of up to 20; others, like the Lahu, live in households of about six

Community-based treks

1 Chiang Mai operator **Pooh Eco-Trekking** (www.pooh-ecotrekking.com) leads fairly strenuous hikes through Karen and Shan villages on the

fabulous and little-visited frontiers of Chiang Mai and Mae Hong Son, with views from forest-swathed ridges over deep mountain valleys terraced with rice fields. Pooh makes a real effort to give

back to the communities it visits.

2 Lisu Lodge, bookable through Asian Oasis (www.asian-oasis.com) and most Chiang Mai street operators, offers soft, comfortable treks with stays in a **Lisu community hotel** and a **Lahu guesthouse**, which is perched on a mountain ridge north of Chiang Mai.

3 Rushed village visits can feel like a people safari. **Tribal homestays** go beyond the brief encounter, offering guests a chance to engage in local life. Tell Tale Travel (www.telltaletravel.com) offers stays in a lovely teak-wood family home in a tiny, tourist-free village near Chiang Mai and in Lahu and Shan homes near Mae Hong Son.

4 For a taste of timeless village life in Isan, the rural north-east, opt for a **Chiang Khan homestay** with Thailand Treks (www.thailandtreks.com), including walks through paddy fields and patchy tropical forests.

5 Go Differently (www.godifferently.com) offers **homestays with fishermen** in Andaman Coast villages, with the chance to walk in the countryside and visit local beaches, mangrove wetlands and reefs by fishing boat or traditional canoe.

Offbeat treks

1 Active Thailand (www.activethailand.com) offers two- and three-day variations on Chiang Mai's classic Mae Tang trek in remoter, but still fairly well-walked regions such as the **Chiang Dao Valley**, 1.5 hours from Chiang Mai.

2 The beautiful high mountain forests around Mae Hong Son are pocked with dozens of **Lisu, Lahu, Shan and Karen villages**. Agencies in the city or Chiang Mai offer trips. It is also possible to reserve ahead with Tell Tale Travel (www.telltaletravel.com).

3 Chiang Rai, the capital of Thailand's most northerly province, is a good base for walks in the heart of the infamous **Golden Triangle** – rolling mountain country cutting across northern Thailand, Laos and Burma, which has long been associated with the poppy trade. Hundreds of hilltribe villages lie here. Trips are available with Trekking Thailand (www.trekkingtourchiangrai.com).

4 Doi Phu Kha National Park, near Nan city, preserves 1,680 sq km of forested mountains, with wild rivers and deep valleys, plunging waterfalls and dozens of Hmong and Mien villages. Treks can be combined with kayaking or rafting excursions on the fast Wa River. Book through Nan Travel (<http://jsgroups.com/nantravel/treks.html>).

5 **Um Phang**, way out west near the Burmese border, is five hours from the nearest medium-sized town (Mae Sot). Treks here are **some of the remotest and most spectacular** in Thailand, but involve hard walking in humid rainforest, interspersed with rafting on the Mae Khlong River, swimming at one of Thailand's largest and most beautiful waterfalls, Tee Lo Su, and stays in Karen villages. Book with Active Thailand (www.activethailand.com). >

Man at work: Lahu dress is mainly black or blue, with colourful border designs. Lahu men share in the care of children and livestock and collect water and wood



'For a few brief hours I felt like a guest rather than a customer, a visitor rather than a traveller'

Hilltribe adventures

- 1 Thailand's headiest **whitewater rafting** is on the Pai River in the mountains between Chiang Mai and Mae Hong Son. Thai Rafting (www.thairafting.com) offers one- to four-day trips of varying difficulty, with rapids of up to class IV strength and Lahu and Shan villages en route.
- 2 Northern Green Tours (www.thailandpai.net) offers combination **climbing and trekking** in the north, around Pai. If you don't make it north, try the limestone cliffs towering above Tonsai Beach in Krabi for spectacular sports climbing – with stunning views over beaches and islands; Rock Climbing Thailand (www.rockclimbingthailand.com) offers trips.
- 3 To visit hilltribes by bike try **Mountain Biking Chiang Mai** (www.mountainbikingchiangmai.com), which has a range of trips, some of which are exclusively downhill.
- 4 Soppong, in Mae Hong Son province, offers the best caving in Thailand. The tiny village is set in a plunging **valley riddled with vast caves** and cut with canyons in an area dotted with Lisu, Lahu and Shan villages. Soppong River Inn (www.soppong.com) can organise excursions.
- 5 Those in search of the ultimate adrenalin rush should consider **canyoning** – rappelling off cliffs into gorges and over waterfalls. Siam River (www.siamrivers.com) offers trips around Chiang Mai, which can be combined with treks, whitewater rafting or kayaking on mountain rivers.

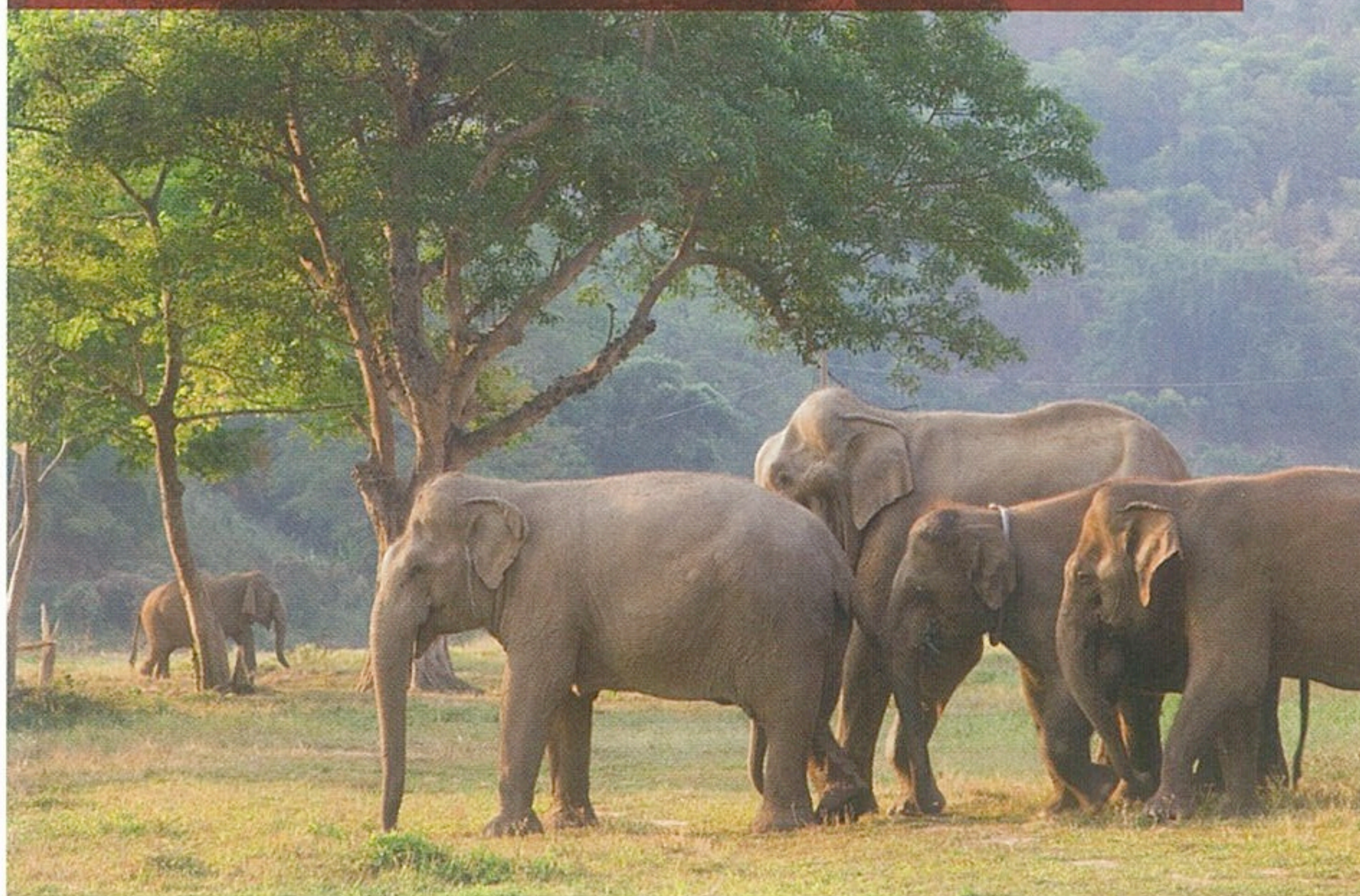
Take a hike: Join a trek with a responsible operator to get a feel for traditional culture – and benefit the local communities
Below right: Elephant rides are popular around Chiang Mai

Wildlife treks

- 1 With its soaring mountains and waterfall-filled forests lying close to Phuket, **Khao Sok** is one of Thailand's most visited national parks, with jungle lodges and scores of guides – though wildlife can be hard to spot. Local operators such as Treetops (www.treetops.co.th) offer trips there.
- 2 **Khao Yai National Park**, in the thickly forested Dangrek Mountains, has the best wildlife-watching close to Bangkok. Tiger, elephants and clouded leopard may flee in panic at busy weekends; come instead during the week with Tell Tale Travel (www.telltaletravel.com), which offers far more comfortable accommodation than the very basic options available within the park.
- 3 Mountainous and heavily forested Loei province, in the little-visited north-eastern agricultural region of Isan, offers some of Thailand's wildest trekking. **Phu Kradung National Park** has abundant wildlife and stunning views out over plains from vertiginous cliffs. Thai Travel Dreams (www.thaitraveldreams.com) offers two- or three-day trips.
- 4 The thick rain and cloud forests of **Khao Luang National Park** shroud the tallest mountain in southern Thailand near Nakhon Si Thammarat. The park sees very few visitors – especially during the week – and is home to tiger, elephants, gibbons and hornbills. Visits can be organised with Tell Tale Travel (www.telltaletravel.com).
- 5 Asia Hiking (www.asia-hiking.com) offers wildlife and botanical trips to beautiful **Erawan National Park** in west Thailand. Set in craggy limestone mountains pocked with caves and cut by clear rivers, it is famous for its seven-tiered waterfalls. But trails are little-tramped and the forest is home to elephants, tigers and white-handed gibbons. ➤

What to take on a trek

- 1 **Insect repellent** – use the citronella spray from Thai brand Sketolene
- 2 **Torch** – you'll need it to find the squat toilet in the dark
- 3 **Leech socks** – handy for wildlife treks in the south
- 4 **Crocs** – these foam clogs are great for walking through rivers and paddy fields
- 5 **Pencils or pens** – far better for children than sweets



Now and Zen: Stop off to admire the remains of the ancient city of Ayuthaya on your way north from Bangkok

Planning your trip

When to go

October to April are the driest months in the north of Thailand. December and January are the coolest and busiest months, with temperatures ranging between 15°C and 28°C. April is hot and very humid, making trekking uncomfortable.

In the south it is wettest between May and November on the Andaman coast, and between September and January on the Gulf of Thailand. April is the hottest month.

Getting there

Thai Airways (08445 610911, www.thaiairways.co.uk) flies from the UK to Bangkok and cities throughout Thailand from around £500 return, leaving from London Heathrow and taking 11 hours.

Getting around

Thai Airways (www.thaiairways.co.uk) runs a good

network of internal flights. The railway running from Bangkok north to Chiang Mai and south to Malaysia via Nakhon Si Thammarat and Surat Thani is run by the State Railway of Thailand (www.railway.co.th); there are English timetables online. Booking can be made in advance at railway stations and through agencies on Khao San Road in Bangkok.

Intercity buses and minivans are easily organised through hotels or tour operators. Long-tail, ferry and fishing boats ply waters between the coast and islands.



Responsible tourism

Thailand's mountain people take offence at what may seem normal behaviour to some foreign tourists. A few commonsense rules apply for visits to their communities and to the national parks:

- Ask before taking pictures –



many villagers do not like to be photographed.

- Dress modestly within villages.
- Do not smoke or ask to smoke opium.
- Don't collect plants or animals from Thai national parks – it is a criminal offence.
- If you would like to offer a gift to communities, give pens or exercise books to parents or the local school; never give sweets or money to children.
- Cover shoulders and bare legs when entering a ceremonial area.
- Do not touch, photograph or sit under ceremonial objects.
- Tip your guides.

Thailand: other highlights

1 Bangkok – Though troubled of late, the capital remains fascinating, with wonderful temples, markets and nightlife

2 The Gulf islands – Beach-fringed Ko Samui, Ko Pha-Ngan and Ko Tao, in the Gulf of Thailand, have been luring tourists for years: Samui is the busiest; Ko Tao best for diving

3 Ayuthaya – The vine-encrusted pagodas and temples of Thailand's imperial capital sprawl over a vast plain north of Bangkok and are easily visited by train or tour bus

4 Krabi – This relaxed little fishing village turned tourist town is surrounded by glorious beaches and sits on a bay of tiny, reef-ringed islands

5 Nakhon Si Thammarat – Despite its lavish temples, great treks and rich culture, few tourists make it to southern Thailand's cultural capital, which further add to its charm

6 Phetchaburi – The striking temples of this royal town cluster on a woody hill crowned with a magnificent palace

7 The Similan Islands This little archipelago in the Andaman Sea offers the best Indian Ocean diving north of Indonesia; visit on a designated cruise



Further reading & information

Thailand Handbook (Footprint, 2009) is the most frequently updated guidebook www.tourismthailand.co.uk Official tourist board website; a good source of information www.dnp.go.th Information on Thai national parks ■

The author travelled courtesy of the Thai Tourism Authority (0870 900 2007, www.tourismthailand.co.uk), Thai Airways (08445 610911, www.thaiairways.co.uk) and Tell Tale Travel (0800 011 2571, www.telltaletravel.com)