

CONNECTING TO SPIRITUAL THAILAND

A GUIDE TO 60 POWERSPOTS





NORTHEAST

- 23 Sai Ngam
- 24 Phanom Rung
- 25 Wat Tham Heo Sin Chai
- 26 Wat Thung Setthi
- 27 Kham Chanot
- 28 Wat Tham Erawan
- 29 Wat Thai Phon Phisai
- 30 Sadeu Mae Nam Khong
- 31 Wat Phu Tok
- 32 Phra Ajaan Man Museum
- 33 Wat Phra That Phanom
- 34 Phaya Anantanakharat Shrine

NORTH

- 35 Sawan Park
- 36 Chao Mae Thup Tim Shrine
- 37 Wat Pha Son Kaew
- 38 Wat Ratchakhiri Hiranyaram
- 39 Naresuan shrine, Wang Chan
- 40 Phra Mae Ya Shrine
- 41 Wat Ban Pang
- 42 Naphamaythanidon Chedi and Naphaphonphumsiri Chedi
- 43 Three Kings Monument
- 44 Wat Doi Kham
- 45 Wat Phra That Doi Suthep
- 46 Wat Pa Daet
- 47 Wat Nam Hu
- 48 Wat Tilok Aram
- 49 Chiang Rai Lak Muang

CENTRAL

- 7 Wat Chedi Hoi
- 8 Phra Phutthabat
- 9 Wat Niwet Thammaprawat
- 10 San Phra Kan
- 11 Thewalai Phra Phrom
- 12 Pumpuang Duangjan Shrine
- 13 Wat Chulamani
- 14 Wat Pa Phuttharam
- 15 Wat Ban Tham
- 16 Wat Thap Sila
- 17 Tham Phraya Nakhon

SOUTH

- 50 Prince of Chumphon Shrine
- 51 Ranong Governor's Cemetery
- 52 Khao Na Nai Luang Dharma Park
- 53 Wat Tham Sua
- 54 Phuket Big Buddha
- 55 Wat Chedi Ai Khai
- 56 Luang Pu Thuat Koh Nui Nok
- 57 Wat Phra Mahathat
- 58 Ho Phra Isuan and Ho Phra Narai
- 59 Wat Khao Or
- 60 Songkhla Lak Muang

EAST

- 18 Three Ganesh Statues, Chachoengsao
- 19 Na Ja Sa Thai Jeu Shrine
- 20 Chao Pho Khao Yai Shrine
- 21 The Sanctuary of Truth
- 22 Khao Khitchakut

BANGKOK

- 1 Bangkok Lak Muang
- 2 Kuan Im Shrine, Thian Fa Foundation
- 3 Sri Maha Mariamman Temple
- 4 Erawan Shrine
- 5 7 Hindu shrines, Ratchaprasong
- 6 Mae Nak Shrine



CONNECTING TO SPIRITUAL THAILAND

A GUIDE TO
60 POWERSPOTS

THIS PUBLICATION WOULD NOT HAVE BEEN POSSIBLE
WITHOUT THE KIND SUPPORT OF OUR SPONSOR:



tourismthailand.org



CONTENTS



INTRODUCTION	8		
BANGKOK	12		
• Lak Muang Shrine	14		
• Kuan Im Shrine at the Thian Fah Foundation	15		
• Sri Maha Mariamman Temple	16		
• The Erawan Shrine	17		
FULL MOON HOLIDAYS	18		
• 7 Hindu Shrines at Ratchaprasong	20		
• Mae Nak Phrakhanong Shrine	21		
CENTRAL	22		
• Wat Chedi Hoi, Pathum Thani	24		
• Wat Phra Phutthabat, Saraburi	25		
• Wat Niwet Thammaprawat, Ayutthaya	26		
• Thewalai Phra Phrom, Singburi	27		
• San Phra Kan, Lopburi	28		
SACRED OFFERINGS AND WISHES	30		
• Pumpuang Duangjan Shrine, Suphanburi	32		
• Wat Chulamani, Samut Songkhram	33		
• Wat Pa Phuttharam, Ratchaburi	34		
		• Wat Ban Tham, Kanchanaburi	35
		• Wat Thap Sila, Kanchanaburi	36
		• Tham Phraya Nakhon, Prachuap Khiri Khan	37
		EAST	38
		• Three Ganesh Statues, Chachoengsao	40
		• Na Ja Sa Thai Jeu Shrine, Chonburi	41
		• Chao Pho Khao Yai Shrine, Chonburi	43
		• The Sanctuary of Truth, Chonburi	44
		• Khao Khitchakut, Chanthaburi	45
		NORTHEAST	46
		• Sai Ngam, Nakhon Ratchasima	48
		• Prasat Phanom Rung, Buriram	49
		• Wat Tham Heo Sin Chai, Ubon Ratchathani	50
		• Wat Thung Setthi, Khon Kaen	51
		• Kham Chanot, Udon Thani	52
		• Tham Erawan, Nong Bua Lamphu	53
		THE FOREST MONK TRADITION	54
		• Wat Thai Phon Phisai, Nong Khai	56
		• Sadeu Mae Nam Khong, Beung Kan	57



- Wat Phu Tok, Beung Kan 58
- Ajaan Man Museum, Sakon Nakhon 59
- Wat Phra That Phanom, Nakhon Phanom 60
- Phaya Anantanakharat Shrine, Mukdahan 61

- Wat Pa Daet, Chiang Mai 78
- Wat Nam Hu, Mae Hong Son 79
- Wat Tilok Aram, Phayao 80
- Lak Muang, Chiang Rai 81

NORTH 62

- Sawan Park, Nakhon Sawan 64
- Chao Mae Thap Thim Shrine, Phichit 65
- Wat Pha Son Kaew, Phetchabun 66
- Wat Ratchakhiri Hiranyaram, Phitsanulok 67
- Naresuan Shrine, Phitsanulok 68
- Phra Mae Ya Shrine, Sukhothai 69

A SPIRITED DEFENSE: ON CHANTS, TALISMANS AND TATTOOS 70

- Wat Ban Pang, Lamphun 72
- Naphamaythanidon Chedi and Naphaphonphumsiri Chedi, Chiang Mai 73
- Three Kings Monument, Chiang Mai 74
- Wat Doi Kham, Chiang Mai 75
- Wat Phra That Doi Suthep, Chiang Mai 76

SOUTH 82

- Prince of Chumphon Shrine, Chumphon 84
- Governor's Cemetery, Ranong 85
- Khao Na Nai Luang Dharma Park, Surat Thani 86
- Wat Tham Sua, Krabi 87

HINDU GODS AND RITUALS 88

- Big Buddha, Phuket 90
- Wat Chedi Ai Khai, Nakhon Si Thammarat 91
- Luang Pu Thuat Koh Nui Nok, Nakhon Si Thammarat 92
- Wat Phra Mahathat, Nakhon Si Thammarat 94
- Ho Phra Isuan and Ho Phra Narai, Nakhon Si Thammarat 95
- Wat Khao Or, Phatthalung 96
- Lak Muang, Songkhla 97



//
This monument to Western consumerism is also an uber-powerspot of Hindu shrines.
//



Spirits are everywhere in Thailand. You may not see them, but you will encounter their domains at every corner: altars inside homes, spirit houses outside office buildings, and innumerable shrines with images of beloved monks, revered royals or even the “destroyer of worlds”. On the highest hilltops, enormous statues venerating the Buddha may emerge through mist, or a roadside tangle of twisting roots may reveal winning lottery numbers to those who nourish the sacred tree.

Spirits are everywhere in Thailand because faith and spirituality here are truly syncretic, mixing animism – the belief that spirits inhabit natural elements and objects – Hinduism – with its enormous pantheon

of deities – and Buddhism. Add in Brahman, Chinese, and Khmer traditions and what this amalgamation yields can be as original as it is mystifying. Take, for example, the throbbing commercial heart of the entire nation, Ratchaprasong Intersection in Bangkok. This monument to Western consumerism is also an uber-powerspot of Hindu shrines. Amongst the office towers and malls lies a **spiritual boardroom** at which Brahma, Indra, Vishnu, Lakshmi, Ganesh, Trimurti, Umathevi and Jatulokbal preside, settling urgent matters of prosperity, love and protection for supplicants, all within a quick “skywalk” of each other.

Because spirituality is everywhere, Thais are in constant motion to display their devotion. Even while

driving on a motorway, a Thai may clasp her hands together in a flitting *wai* towards a passing shrine or temple. The most devout may rise before dawn to prepare a delicious curry for a Buddhist monk on his early morning alms round – perhaps the one they know is his favourite. Temple-hopping is a popular holiday among Thais. Packed into vans and buses, they may visit no less than 10 in a single weekend, **making offerings** at each. Or they may suffer searing heat to ascend a peak where a sacred relic – a tooth, fragment of bone or footprint of the Buddha – awaits.

Much of the devotional behaviour in Thailand – prostration, prayer, pilgrimages and constant merit-making – is indeed inspired by the Buddha and his teachings (known as the Dharma). These rituals connect lay people to the faith and give them merit (or positive karma) and spiritual nourishment.

In their purest Buddhist form, these actions should have no selfish, material motivation, but rather embody the virtue, compassion, humility, generosity, and gratitude preached by the Buddha himself thousands of years ago, a moral perfectionism that, if strived for, will deliver not only a better life but a more harmonious world. Arguably the **communal serenity** that strikes so many visitors to Thailand has come down through the generations who have followed his wisdom.

Yet the spiritual forces that pervade Thailand have multiplied far beyond the Buddha. From the West and North, Chinese, Burmese and Indian traders made their fortunes in Thailand, while from the East, the rival Khmer sent their **Hindu-infused traditions** and language. The modern-day Thai spiritual landscape harbours influences from them all. As the 60 sites described in this book reveal, sacred

//
Because spirituality is everywhere, Thais are in constant motion to display their devotion.
 //





power emanates not only from images of the Buddha but from Thailand's most **dynamic monks**, who have become idols themselves. Figures from the kingdom's current dynasty, whose claim on divinity is made credible through the endorsement of Brahman priests, are also worshipped at incense-filled shrines or honoured with **towering monuments**, as are many famous kings, queens, princes and princesses who came centuries before them. The images of mere mortals may also grant wishes, such as a

statue in a leopard-print outfit of a **transcendent country singer** who died too young.

Many powerspots draw extra oomph from their stunning natural locations. High on a northern ridge, **five white Buddha images** stacked like Russian dolls offer views locals compare to Switzerland; in the Northeast, a single **spirit-possessed banyan tree** covers an area half the size of a football pitch; in the South, **the Tiger Cave Temple** unveils





awesome panoramas of jungle-clad karst outcrops and the tropical islands beyond; and at the deepest point of the beautiful Mekong River, mythical serpents are said to be responsible for perhaps the most mysterious of all phenomena in Thailand – “**naga fireballs**” that emerge from the water and float into the night sky towards Heaven.

All of this mystical energy is channelled not only through merit-making, shrines and temples but also through **sacred objects** such as amulets, and the interactions between people, places and objects generate yet greater energy. Amulets are boosted with an extra charge if they are sanctified by a famous monk. And in such a hierarchical society as Thailand, if a royal pays sincere respect to a holy image he or she magnifies its power; and so the people will further revere it. Thus sacred power is self-reinforcing and reciprocating and constantly amplified across all levels of society.

Indeed, it is of paramount concern to both rich and poor. For the sake of all, this energy must be respected and kept in balance. A city erects a pillar known as a **lak muang** to house its guardian spirit – a community without one would surely descend into chaos. When the construction of a luxurious new hotel in Bangkok’s centre became plagued with accidents and faltered,

“
All of this mystical energy is channelled not only through merit-making, shrines and temples but also through sacred objects.
 ”



the workers refused to continue until the owners installed **a golden statue of Brahma** to appease the local spirits.

Spirits are not only honoured and indulged but must return the favour, by providing the requested change of fortune in love, health, wealth or work. In recent years, perhaps due to the hardships wrought by COVID-19, such faith-based activities, referred to as *sai mu* in Thai, have become ever more popular. Chiang Mai’s **Wat Doi Kham**, for example, is now one of Thailand’s most popular pilgrimage sites. In 2023, a businesswoman gave half a million jasmine garlands in thanks to a Buddha image, known as Phra Jao Tun Jai, who granted her wish.

Since spirits are everywhere in Thailand, it is not hard to engage with them. While there are a **few rules**, they are only gently enforced or can be explained to the newcomer. You must only have some courage – to join in the ceremonies – and some belief that what may sound so unreal is very much alive and in constant action all around you.





BANGKOK

Bangkok's spiritual powerspots are as kaleidoscopic and diverse as the city itself. Set in dense concrete jungle, its shrines host everything from a world-famous four-headed Brahma to Thai folklore's most notorious pregnant ghost.



LAK MUANG SHRINE

Bangkok's guardian spirit brings powerful benefits

In the dawn twilight of 21 April 1782 – at 6.54am, the astrologically favourable time for the founding of Bangkok – a wooden pillar containing the new capital's horoscope was ceremonially driven into the ground next to the building site of the royal palace. This gilt, lotus-topped pillar, the **Lak Muang**, is the home of the city's guardian spirit and still attracts hundreds of worshippers every day.






The original pillar has since been joined by another, shorter *lak muang*, which King Mongkut commissioned in 1852 – with an updated city horoscope – to reaffirm his kingship. In a niche on the shrine's north wall, five golden angels in their turn protect Bangkok's guardian spirit.


As this is a royal shrine, the atmosphere is decorous. The auspicious offerings are three incense sticks, a candle, gold leaf, two lotus flowers, two garlands and, most importantly, three lengths of satin: pink for the planet Mars, whose aspects are diligence and struggle; green for Mercury, for benefits in trade; and blue for Venus, who brings wealth from patronage. If visitors are particularly grateful for a wish that has been granted, some will return and sponsor a performance of classical dancers at the shrine.



istock.com/Arayabandit.jpg

CONNECT

-  Lak Muang Rd, southeast corner of Sanam Luang, Bangkok
-  bangkokcitypillarshrine.com  On Bangkok's history
-  Daily 6.30am–6pm  On Thai city pillars

 *Dressing smartly here means covering the knees and shoulders; women are asked to wear skirts, not trousers.*






KUAN IM SHRINE AT THE THIAN FAH FOUNDATION

Pray to the bodhisattva of compassion at one of Bangkok's most popular Chinese shrines

Set in a 120-year-old hospital that provides free medical care to the poor, the lavish **Kuan Im Shrine** is dedicated to the Goddess of Mercy, "The One who Perceives the Cries of the World". Widely beloved in Thailand, she is the East Asian representation of the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara, an enlightened being who postponed her entry to Nirvana to ease the suffering of others. The golden image of Kuan Im here was carved from sandalwood in the Tang Dynasty style and stands on a lotus in a posture of blessing. In the painting behind her, a flying bird carries a rosary, its beads representing the living beings whom she is leading towards enlightenment.

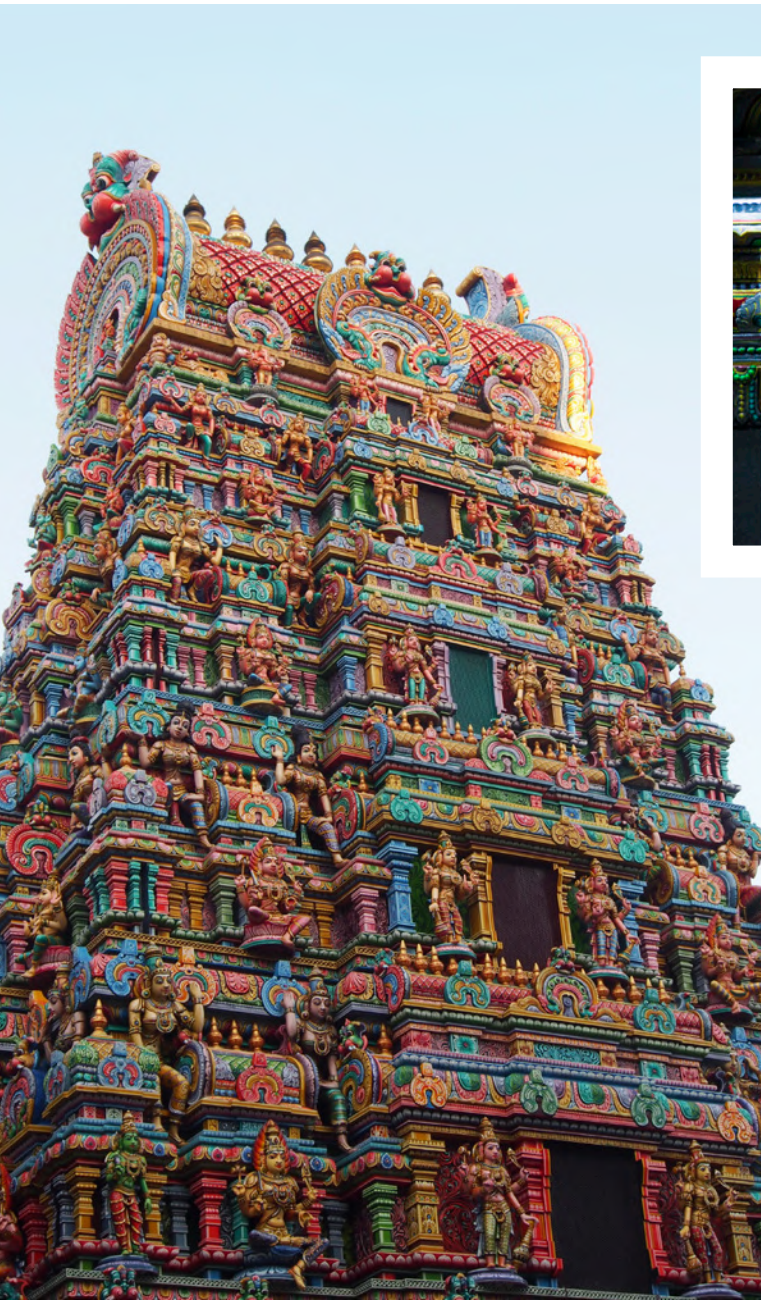
Visitors light incense and candles and make offerings to the goddess, who is often compared to a mother who loves her children. They pray for help in solving problems and especially for health, while teenagers come to ask for success in their university entrance exams. It is also recommended that you pray for blessings according to the element of your birthday: for the fire element, for example, request strength and stability; for the earth element, the ability to learn; for the water element, successful patronage.

CONNECT

-  Yaowarat Rd, Chinatown, Bangkok
-  thianfah.org
-  24hr
-  On zodiac sign elements
-  On the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara

If you look carefully, on Kuan Im's crown you can see her teacher, Amitabha, the Buddha of Infinite Light.





SRI MAHA MARIAMMAN TEMPLE

Hindus and Buddhists worship the energy of the “Rain Mother”

Steeply tiered, multi-coloured and swarming with gods and goddesses, the façade of **Sri Maha Mariamman Temple** is instantly recognizable. The temple was founded by south Indian immigrants in the 1870s and it’s still the main Tamil place of worship in Thailand. Nowadays, however, most of its worshippers are Thai Buddhists, who are happy to make offerings to the Hindu pantheon in their prayers for wealth and fertility.

Mariamman, the “Rain Mother”, belongs to the Shakti denomination of Hinduism, which reveres the energy of goddesses. She is believed to bring rain and thus prosperity, and to cure diseases. Stalls outside the temple sell garlands (especially marigolds), coconuts and incense as offerings to the temple’s images, which include more than a dozen Hindu deities, Kuan Im and the Buddha. Inside, white-robed Brahmans say blessings and daub red bindis on donors’ foreheads.

October brings the “Festival of Nine Days”, Navaratri, in which devotees and priests become possessed by spirits and purify themselves by skewering their flesh and other acts of self-mortification. On the last night, the temple’s sacred images are paraded through the streets on golden floats.

CONNECT

-  Silom Rd, Bangkok
-  Mon–Thu 6am–8pm,
Fri 6am–9pm,
Sat & Sun 6am–8.30pm
-  On Navaratri



Before approaching Mariamman, it’s usual to pray first to the remover of obstacles, elephant-headed Ganesh, then to his brother, Kartik, the god of war.





THE ERAWAN SHRINE

Dancers entertain the god of creation in the heart of the city

Hemmed in by skyscrapers and overhead Skytrain lines, and deafened by downtown's busiest intersection, **the Erawan Shrine** is by far the most popular spiritual site in Bangkok. Crowds of Thais and tourists make wishes of any and every kind here, promising to return, if their wish is granted, to make an offering – which might include hiring a performance by traditional dancers and their accompanying orchestra. Further sensory overload creates a heady atmosphere: gleaming with multicoloured glass tiles, the precinct is almost buried under scented garlands, joss sticks and candles. So great is the shrine's spiritual power that lottery tickets bought from pavement vendors here are thought to be Bangkok's luckiest.

The Grand Hyatt Erawan Hotel that towers over the shrine is the reason for its existence and its name. When a string of calamities held up the building of the original hotel in the 1950s, including the loss of a shipload of Italian marble, shamans were called in, who instructed the owners to build a new home for the offended local spirits. This was to take the form of a four-faced golden statue of Brahma, the Hindu god of creation (who had created the many-headed elephant, Erawan, as a vehicle for the god Indra); the hotel was then finished without further mishap.




CONNECT

 Ratchaprasong Intersection, corner of Ratchadamri and Ploenchit roads, Bangkok

 Daily 6am–10pm

 On spirit houses

 *Shrine authorities now ask visitors not to light candles or incense sticks, to reduce air pollution.*

FULL MOON HOLIDAYS



istock.com/Rathem



The moon looms large in the story of the Buddha, Buddhist symbolism and the Buddhist calendar, which Thais follow to this day. Representing enlightenment, a full moon is frequently an occasion for special observances, especially to commemorate events in the Buddha's life – if you have the opportunity to join such a festival, do not miss it. In a serene communal ambience, these holidays prompt traditional rituals and acts of merit-making, recreating the magic and rhythm of Thailand's spiritually infused past.

Makha Bucha

Celebrated on the full moon day of the third lunar month (usually in February or March), Makha Bucha commemorates the day when 1,250 arahants (enlightened monks) spontaneously gathered to listen to a sermon by the Buddha. To honour the monkhood's devotion and to make merit, worshippers offer alms and visit



istock.com/501room



temples to participate in candlelit processions and Dharma talks.

Visakha Bucha

The holiest day in the calendar, Visakha Bucha commemorates the birth, enlightenment, and passing away of the Buddha. These three events are said to have occurred in different years, but all on the full moon day of the sixth lunar month (usually in May or June). The evening of Visakha Bucha is an opportunity to participate in the devotional act known as *wian thian*, in which Buddhists walk around a temple pagoda three times while holding lighted candles in a state of mindfulness.

Asanha Bucha

On the full moon day of the eighth lunar month (usually in July), the Buddha gave his first sermon to his first five disciples, explaining to them the Four Noble Truths and Eightfold Path to enlightenment. This day is now known as Asanha Bucha and marks the beginning of the Buddhist Lent period, when monks retreat to their temples for the rainy season for deeper study and meditation. Because Asanha Bucha Day celebrates the introduction of key Buddhist teachings (or Dharma), lay people may renew their own commitment to them by visiting a temple, listening to a sermon, meditating or, in the evening, joining a candle-lit procession.

Loy Krathong

Thought to be descended from a Brahman tradition, Loy Krathong is a festival of lights in which the public gathers on canals, rivers and lakes to release decorated, candle-bearing floats known as *krathong*. This gesture symbolizes letting go of their troubles or negative thoughts, making wishes for a brighter future and paying respects to the water spirits. The festival usually takes place on the full moon in November.



7 HINDU SHRINES AT RATCHAPRASONG

A downtown intersection blessed with magnificent Hindu gods

Since the establishment of the Erawan Shrine, Ratchaprasong Intersection has become a powerspot for Hindu shrines. Near the junction's northwest corner, in front of Central World Mall, the **Trimurti Shrine** is the most notable of the rest (above, centre). Combining the three main gods, Brahma, Shiva and Vishnu, Trimurti is seen by modern Bangkokians as a sort of Cupid figure, and those looking for love bring red offerings. Just to the north, devotees, especially those in the arts and education, pray to elephant-headed **Ganesh** for success.


Across Ratchadamri Road in front of the Big C shopping center, local workers seeking strength in family matters petition **Umathevi**, the wife of Shiva. Gaysorn Village Mall, on the northeast corner of Ratchaprasong, shelters two shrines on its fourth floor: jewel-encrusted **Lakshmi**, consort of Vishnu, for wealth; and **Jatulokbal**, god of the four cardinal points, for protection from evil and danger (above, right).

Further protection from evil is offered, in front of the Intercontinental Hotel: **Narayana**, or Vishnu, whose avatars include the Buddha and Rama, is shown on his vehicle, half-man, half-bird Garuda. Finally, across Ploenchit Road in front of Gaysorn Amarin, sits **Indra**, the God of Thunder and champion of earth, wind and water (above, left).




CONNECT

 Around the Ratchaprasong Intersection, corner of Ratchadamri and Ploenchit roads

 Mostly 24hr; Lakshmi and Jatulokbal can be accessed daily 7am–7pm

 [Guidebook and map](#)

 [On Hindu deities](#)

 *Thursdays at 9.30am and 9.30pm are the most auspicious times for offering red incense sticks, candles and roses to Trimurti.*



Xulanc

MAE NAK PHRAKHANONG SHRINE

A devoted lover becomes a vengeful ghost


Among Thailand's myriad ghosts, pregnant spirits are portrayed as the fiercest. Most famous among these is **Mae Nak Phrakhanong**. She's featured in dozens of TV shows and movies, and her shady canal-side shrine in the eastern suburb of Phrakhanong has a powerful mystique.

According to nineteenth-century folklore, the beautiful Nak was deeply in love with her husband, Mak. But Mak was conscripted into the army and while he was away, Nak and their baby died during childbirth. Their devoted ghosts awaited Mak's return, but once he realized they were spectres, Mak fled. In her grief and rage, Nak's ghost terrorized Phrakhanong, until a powerful monk trapped her spirit in a pot, which he threw into the canal here at Wat Mahabut.

Women pray to Mae Nak for an easy childbirth, men for exemption from military conscription in the annual lottery, and everyone can ask for a lucky lottery number or have their fortune told. Offerings of dresses, guns and toys are made to effigies of Nak, Mak and the baby. In front of the shrine, supplicants tie coloured lengths of cloth around three sacred ironwood trunks – if you want to make a wish to Mae Nak, it's best to write a note and insert it between cloth and trunk.




CONNECT

 Wat Mahabut, Soi 7, On Nut Rd (Soi 77, Sukhumvit Rd)


 watmahabut.com

 24hr

 On the most popular Mae Nak movie, *Nang Nak*

 On Thai ghosts

 The government lottery

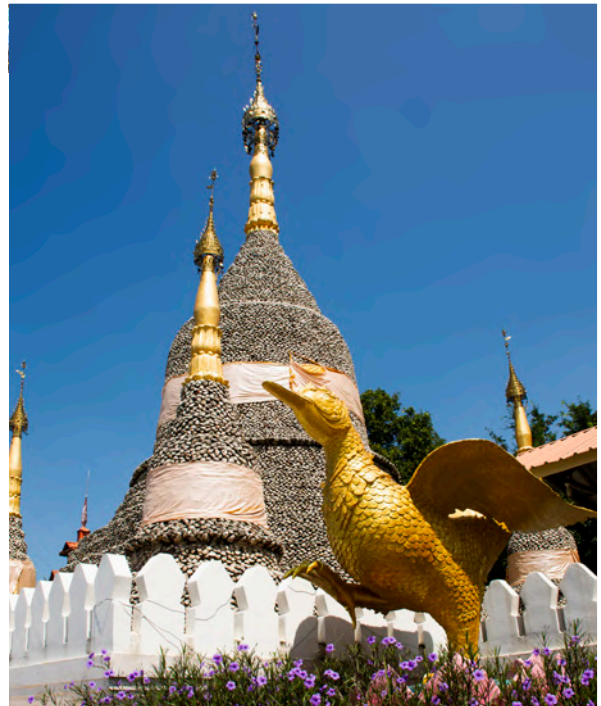
 *The shrine is busiest before the twice-monthly lottery draws (1st and 16th).*





CENTRAL

Across the central plains you will find a wonderful variety of unusual sites: a pagoda made from oyster shells, a Vishnu shrine beset by naughty monkeys, a temple that looks like a Christian church, and even a replica of the famous Kyaiktiyo Pagoda, a major pilgrimage site across the border in Myanmar.



WAT CHEDI HOI, PATHUM THANI

Wishes for a good year at a chedi made of oyster shells

Luang Pho Thong Kleung, the abbot of **Wat Chedi Hoi** (“Shell Pagoda Temple”), is a highly charismatic spiritual leader, who draws worshippers from far and wide. After studying magic in Myanmar for a year, he was searching for a temple site in the rice-growing plains north of Bangkok, when he came across hundreds of large, fossilized oyster shells. This reminded him of the ancient belief that “any area where shells are found will be fertile and prosperous”, so he decided to found a temple here and build a pagoda out of the shells.

It’s believed that the temple’s shells can turn a bad year into a good one, because the merit that brings good karma is deposited in aquatic animals such as shellfish. To make a wish and earn merit, you can leave a donation and write your name on a shell, which will be used in future constructions.

Elsewhere in the temple, visitors pray to Luang Pho Chana Mara, the main image in the ordination hall, which represents the Buddha achieving victory over evil. They ask for good fortune, especially in relation to the military and the police.


CONNECT

 Bo Ngoen, 50km north of central Bangkok

 www.facebook.com/nat.st12

 Daily 8am–5pm

 On merit-making

 *Feeding the fish and turtles in the temple ponds is another way of making merit here.*

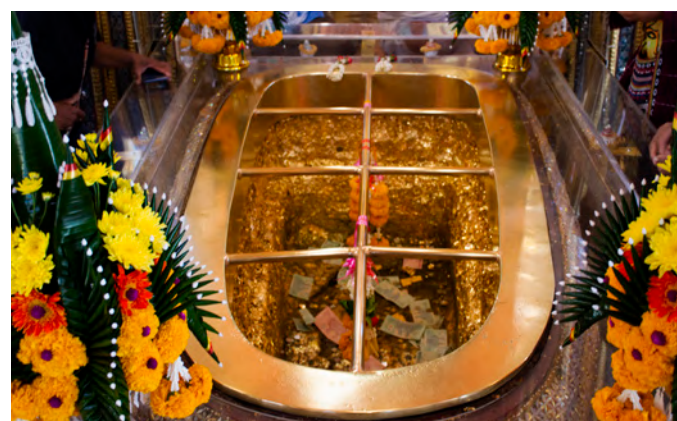
WAT PHRA PHUTTHABAT, SARABURI

A 400-year-old shrine that's especially vibrant at festival time

Wat Phra Phutthabat is the most important of Thailand's four major pilgrimage sites (the others are Wat Phra That Doi Suthep in the north, Wat Phra That Phanom in the northeast and Wat Phra Mahathat in the south). It enshrines a footprint, discovered in 1623, that's believed to show that the Buddha passed through Thailand during his life. Millions come to worship here every year, praying for forgiveness from sin, success in life or eternal happiness.


The main shrine is a magnificent pavilion with a seven-tiered roof and mighty doors inlaid with mother-of-pearl. Inside, visitors stick squares of gold leaf onto the 150-centimetre stone print and throw money into it; sometimes they then retrieve their coins as lucky charms.

Pilgrimages reach their peak in the week culminating in the full moon of the third lunar month (usually February) and the same period of the fourth lunar month (usually March). At these times, stalls selling souvenirs and traditional medicines around the entrance swell to form a small town, and traditional entertainments are laid on. Visiting the footprint three times during the festivals is thought to ensure a place in heaven; up to the nineteenth century, even the king used to come, performing a ritual lance dance on elephant-back.



CONNECT

-  On Highway 1, 20km southeast of Lopburi
-  Wat Phra Phutthabat
-  Daily roughly 7.30am–5pm
-  On Buddha footprints

 *According to legend, if you ring all of the 93 bells around the footprint pavilion – and count them correctly – you will live a full 93 years.*





WAT NIWET THAMMAPRAWAT, AYUTTHAYA

Intriguing multiculturalism at a royal country monastery

A temple of the strict Thammayut sect of Thai Buddhism, **Wat Niwet Thammaprawat** looks for all the world like a rural Christian church, complete with a spire topped by a clock and weather vane. To add to the mystique, it's on an island formed by a branch of the Chao Phraya River and the only way to get there is in a rustic cable car, operated by the monks, from the car park of Bang Pa-in Palace.


The palace is the reason for the temple's existence. It was built, in a mélange of Thai, Chinese and European styles, as a country residence by the modernizing king, Chulalongkorn, in the 1870s. The new palace needed a place of worship, so Chulalongkorn employed an Italian architect who worked in the then-cutting-edge Gothic Revival style.

The results of this extraordinary fusion include pointed arches and rose windows, while the main image of the meditating Buddha sits on a typically Gothic three-part altar. Stained-glass windows, including one portraying Chulalongkorn, shed a warm glow on the chapel, which is filled with chanting in Pali during regular services. There's often a monk waiting for worshippers on a Persian carpet, who will bless them with a prayer and sprinkle them with water and sacred oil.



CONNECT

-  [Bang Pa-in, 15km south of Ayutthaya](#)
-  watniwet.com
-  [Daily 9am–5pm](#)
-  [On Bang Pa-in Palace](#)
-  [On Thailand's kings](#)

 *In the grounds, devotees venerate statues of Chulalongkorn with flowers, garlands and strips of cloth in auspicious colours.*



THEWALAI PHRA PHROM, SINGBURI

Brahma gives spiritual refreshment on the main road to the north





Hundreds of motorists every day, on their way up Highway 32 towards northern Thailand, pull in at **Thewalai Phra Phrom** to venerate Brahma, the four-headed Hindu god of creation. The shrine was built in 2008 to commemorate the 80th birthday of the late Luang Pho Charan, revered abbot of Wat Amphawan, a nearby temple in Phromburi (which means “City of Brahma”).


The golden Brahma’s four mouths are shown creating the four Vedas, the first scriptures of Hinduism. In his eight hands, he holds a disc and a sceptre, symbolizing protection; a conch shell, for knowledge; the Vedas; a jar of water, symbolizing creation; a noose, symbolizing control of the senses; a lotus, for fertility; and rosary beads, symbolizing time.

At the front of the open pavilion, a sign in Thai tells you how to perform puja: walk around Brahma three times clockwise, asking for blessings at each face and chanting, “Om Brahman Nama Metta Karuna Mudita Upekha”. The first face, Metta (compassion), blesses work, study and responsibility in life; the second face, Karuna (kindness), bestows blessings on real estate and cars; the third, Mudita (pleasure in merit-making), blesses health and family; while the fourth, Upekha (equanimity), bestows blessings to do with money and children.



CONNECT

-  Highway 32, on the south side of Singburi town
-  singburi.go.th/_2017/travel_top/detail/5
-  24hr
-  On Brahma

 *Hundreds of model elephants, zebras, roosters and other auspicious animals are lined up at the foot of the shrine, given by people whose wishes have been granted.*

SAN PHRA KAN, LOPBURI

Vishnu brings good fortune to historic Lopburi



Foreign tourists come to Lopburi for its historic palaces and temples, but most Thai visitors head to **San Phra Kan** for spiritual sustenance. To follow them, you'll need to brave the traffic – the shrine now sits in the middle of a roundabout – as well as Lopburi's notorious monkeys, which are believed to be descendants of Hanuman, the monkey hero of the Ramakien epic.


At the base of San Phra Kan, which was rebuilt in 1951, kiosks sell all manner of offerings, which might include fruit, eggs and bottles of auspicious red soda. Meanwhile, Hanuman's progeny romp around the nearby rubble of what must have been a huge Khmer pagoda, dating back a thousand years.

Fragrant with incense and candle smoke, the raised shrine protects a damaged Khmer stone image of the Hindu god, Vishnu, topped with the sandstone head of a later, Ayutthaya-style Buddha. The main guardian spirit for Lopburians, Vishnu is no longer able to live up to his local name, the "Black God": supplicants coat him all over in gold leaf to add divine radiance and drape him with marigold garlands and strips of cloth in astrologically lucky colours.

CONNECT

 [Narai Maharat Rd, Lopburi](#)

 [History of Lavo](#)

 [Daily 5.30am–6pm](#)

 [Hanuman](#)

 *If you're especially grateful to Vishnu for granting a wish, you can return to entertain him by sponsoring the shrine's troupe of traditional dancers.*





พระพรางค์สามยอด

PHRA PRANG SAM YOD

SACRED OFFERINGS AND WISHES

Many visitors will remark on the eclectic nature of votive offerings seen around Thailand: bottles of red Fanta soda (straw included) placed at the door of spirit houses, jasmine garlands piled high in front of a Buddha image or even – in the case of a shrine to a revered Chinese trader and governor – whole roast ducks. Representing acts of devotion, supplication, or gratitude, as well as a physical gesture linking the giver to the presiding spirit, these offerings tend to reflect the preferences of the spirit itself or the symbolism and traditions associated with it.

At traditional Buddhist temples, for example, such giving may follow centuries-old norms. Lighting candles and incense, offering garlands or lotuses, pouring scented water or applying gold leaf on an image are considered well-intentioned acts of reverence that may also result in the giver's accumulation of merit and thus positive karma. They are also deeply imbued with **symbolic meaning**: flowers reflect purity, beauty and auspiciousness; candles bring light and gold leaf brings radiance, representing the Buddha's teachings; the smoke from the incense sticks purifies



istock.com/SuriyaDesarit



istock.com/traaphoto

the surroundings and rises up to communicate with the heavens; and purifying water is mixed with oil from a sacred herb or tree, such as ironwood. The number of incense sticks given also holds significance: Buddha images receive three sticks (one for the Buddha himself, one for the Dharma and one for the monkhood), shrines of spirits are given higher odd numbers than three, while a single stick is for a funeral.

Presenting such offerings is – in the stricter Buddhist sense – an act of humility and should not be focused on leading to personal gain, but instead the nurturing and spreading of compassionate, generous, and virtuous behaviour as exemplified by the Buddha himself. The reality is slightly different. At sites across the country, be they devoted to the Buddha, Hindu gods, magical monks or legendary mortals, shrines have developed their own unique spiritual calculus, with specific wish preoccupations, unique offerings, and often much commercial activity. The South's Wat Chedi Ai Khai, for example, hosts a statue of a 10-year-old boy wearing military camouflage and sunglasses known as "Egg Boy". He was once the companion of a revered wandering monk. Over a thousand worshippers a day ask this spirit for winning lottery numbers and other favours. In return, they purchase camouflage gear, children's toys, boiled eggs and desserts for his spirit.

When prayers are granted, devotees may return to make an ex-voto offering in thanks. A temple might receive a cash donation to support its work. At a shrine to the famous female country crooner Pumpuang Duangjan, people leave clothes, cosmetics and make-up mirrors. Or in the case of "Egg Boy", they may sponsor a dancing troupe or a shadow puppet performance to entertain him.





PUMPUANG DUANGJAN SHRINE, SUPHANBURI

Fans worship a pop-music goddess at this rural temple

With a voice that could turn your spine to jelly, **Pumpuang Duangjan** was a megastar of *luk thung* (“child of the fields”) music. When she died in 1992 at the age of just 30, 200,000 people, ranging from royalty to the rural poor, came to the funeral at her hometown temple, Wat Thap Kradan. A month later, she appeared to the abbot in a dream and asked him to build a statue of her, filled with some of her ashes. Since then, millions of fans have come to festoon the temple with garlands, strips of lucky cloth and portraits of the star, and the original statue has been joined by four others, each with a different significance.

Pumpuang’s first statue loves beautiful things, so people leave clothes, cosmetics and make-up mirrors if their wish is granted. Yui Yat Yer, another *luk thung* star who looks just like Pumpuang, commissioned the second statue, which attracts singers and actors to pray for success in their careers. At the third statue, admirers seek help with family issues and offer cash and jewels. Wearing a leopard-print outfit from one of Pumpuang’s famous concerts, the fourth image helps people who are in debt, while the fifth honours a famous monk, Luang Pu Pak Ruang, and accepts offerings only of red garlands or red roses.



(iStock.com/luayai (2))


CONNECT


 Wat Thap Kradan, Bo Suphan Subdistrict, 100km northwest of Bangkok

 [Biography](#)
 [Pumpuang sings “Sao Na Sang Faen”](#)

 [Wat Thap Kradan](#)

 [Trailer for biopic, *The Moon*](#)

 Daily 6am–5pm

 *Every year, modern luk thung stars gather at the temple on the anniversary of Pumpuang’s death, 13 June.*

WAT CHULAMANI, SAMUT SONGKHRAM

Worship a guardian giant and a hallowed monk at this seventeenth-century temple

Wat Chulamani was until the late 1980s the domain of the venerable abbot Luang Pho Nuang, who was believed to possess magical powers. Followers still come to the temple to pay respects to his body, which is preserved in a glass-sided coffin in a large wooden pavilion by the canal. The breathtakingly detailed decor of the pavilion is testament to the devotion he inspired: the black-and-gold lacquered artwork that covers every surface took years and cost millions of baht to complete. In front of the coffin sits a lifelike waxwork of Luang Pho Nuang, as well as votive offerings such as Buddha images and elephant tusks.

In the last few years, the temple has also become famous for its courtyard images of Thao Wessuwan, the leader of the Four Heavenly Kings in Buddhism. Known in Thai as Thao Chetuklokban, these four guardian giants protect the world and fight evil from the four cardinal directions. Wessuwan, king of the north, is also the god of rain, and hence prosperity, and holds an umbrella or staff as a symbol of sovereignty. Throngs of worshippers pray to his statues for protection from evil spirits, better job opportunities and better prospects for their businesses. On leaving, many visitors buy a powerful Wessuwan or Luang Pho Nuang amulet.

CONNECT

-  80km southwest of central Bangkok in Amphawa
-  watjulamane.com  [On Luang Pho Nuang](#)
-  Daylight hours  [On Thao Wessuwan](#)

 *The most atmospheric approach to the temple is to hire a boat from Amphawa Market for the five-minute ride along Amphawa Canal.*



Bottom: from left: istock.com/Witsanu Potipatamak, anutr.rosikui



WAT PA PHUTTHARAM, RATCHABURI





A potent Buddha image in a remote cave

Behind **Wat Pa Phuttharam** rises a lonely granite outcrop covered in trees, which contains the temple's main focus. Here, a dragon staircase leads up to a well-lit grotto, where the Phra Nang Muang Kaew Buddha sits in majesty.

Carved from a three-metre-tall block of mottled grey granite, the image is unusual but serenely beautiful. Its style is inspired by Dvaravati, an Indianized Buddhist civilization that flourished in this part of Thailand between the sixth and ninth centuries AD. Instead of sitting cross-legged, the Buddha rests his feet on a lotus, in what's sometimes called the royal style, which was common in Dvaravati art. His hands are shown turning the wheel of dharma, a gesture that recalls his first sermon after enlightenment in the Deer Park in Sarnath.

Paying homage to the Phra Nang Muang Kaew will allow you to make headway in your life without hindrances and, it's believed, will make you famous in the three worlds of Heaven, Earth and the Underworld. Extra virtue comes from first prostrating yourself under his legs to pray, then slowly circling clockwise around his feet three times.

CONNECT

-  Nang Kaeo, 100km west of central Bangkok
-  [thamsati.buddha](https://www.facebook.com/thamsati.buddha)
-  Daily 8.30am–5.30pm
-  On Dvaravati

 *The grotto also contains a Reclining Buddha and a stall for buying offerings.*

WAT BAN THAM, KANCHANABURI







Literary ghosts haunt this lofty cave


Wat Ban Tham derives much of its spiritual power from its place in Thailand's great folk epic, *Khun Chang Khun Phaen*. In one episode of the 400-year-old poem, the beautiful Nang Bua Kli is forced to choose between duty to her criminal father and love for the heroic Khun Phaen, by whom she has become pregnant. Her father eventually persuades her to poison her lover's food, but Khun Phaen learns of the plot and kills both Bua Kli and their unborn son. Their fearsome spirits are believed to have been trapped in the cave here at Wat Ban Tham.

A human-shaped stalagmite, painted in the image of Bua Kli, is now worshipped by women trying to conceive, who bring pretty dresses and shoes for the spirit, and toys for her son. The airy, well-lit cavern also shelters a golden replica of the second holiest Buddha image in Thailand, Phitsanulok's Phra Phuttha Chinarat, surrounded by a flame-like halo.

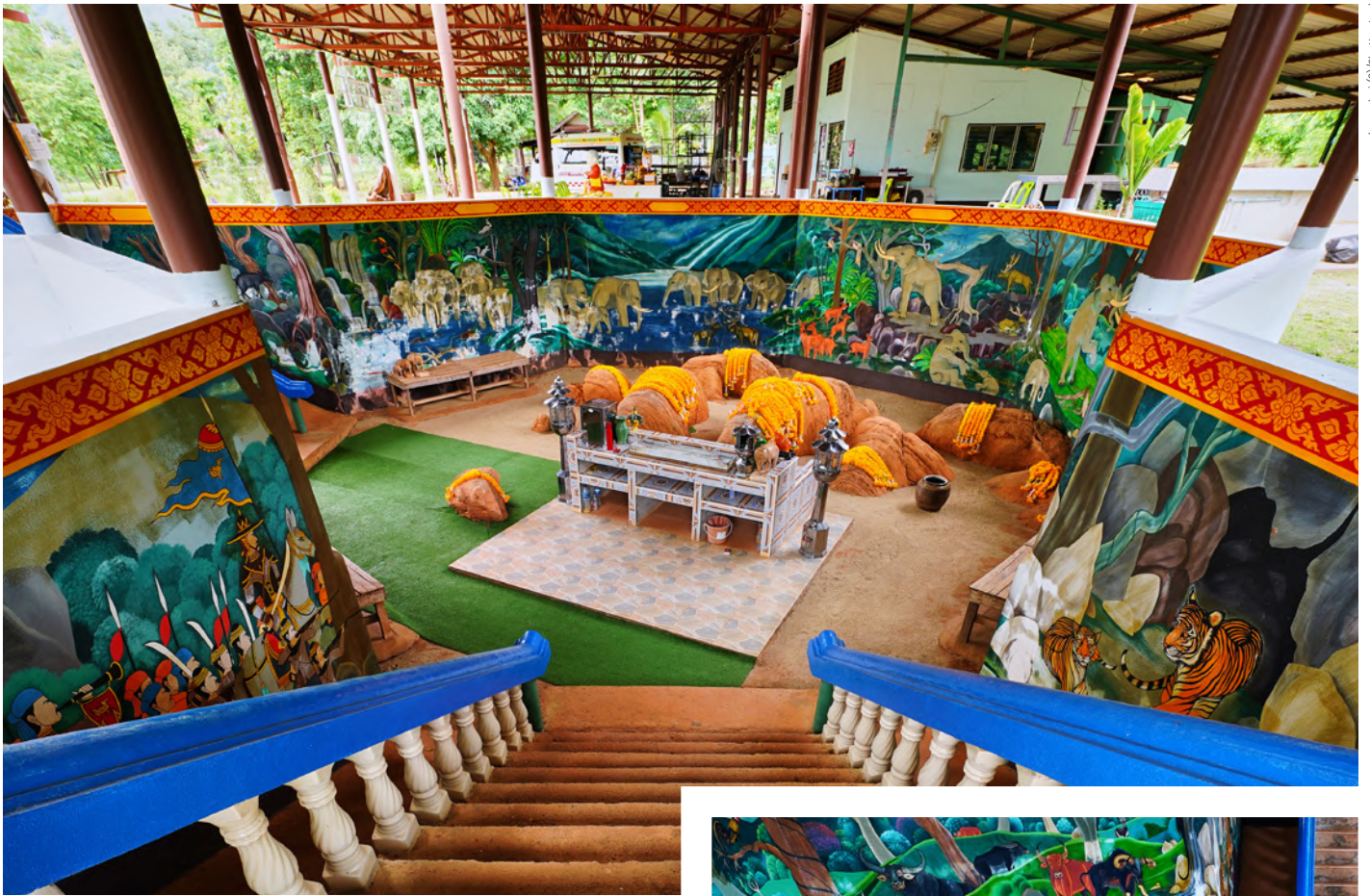
To access the cave, you'll need to climb a steep staircase and enter the mouth of the dragon: the steps ascend through a winding, multi-coloured tunnel in the shape of the mythical beast. Check out the brightly painted murals on the right wall of the tunnel for the full story of Nang Bua Kli.

CONNECT

-  12km southeast of Kanchanaburi on the south bank of the Mae Klong River
-  Wat Ban Tham
-  Daily 7am–5pm
-  [On Khun Chang Khun Phaen](#)
-  [Khun Chang Khun Phaen in translation](#)
-  [On visiting Kanchanaburi](#)

 *The scenic route to the temple is by longtail boat down the river from Kanchanaburi.*





WAT THAP SILA, KANCHANABURI

A hanging rock pagoda and divine war elephants

Two famous stone features draw worshippers to **Wat Thap Sila**. Near the entrance, steps lead down to a group of nine rocks, which bring to mind crouching elephants, with the rest of their bodies buried underground. They're believed to be the deified war elephants of King Naresuan, who in a nearby battle in 1593 won an elephant-back duel against Crown Prince Mingyi Swa and liberated Siam from twenty years of Burmese domination. It's said that if you pay homage with prayer, incense and the pachyderms' favourite foods such as bananas, sugarcane and pineapples, then touch all nine of the elephant god stones, all of your wishes will be fulfilled. Many devotees return to give thanks by offering elephant statuettes.

Above the temple, a great boulder, now covered in gilt and crowned by a golden pagoda, hangs precariously at the edge of the hill. It's a replica of the famous Kyaiktiyo Pagoda, a major pilgrimage site across the border in Myanmar. Praying here is especially lucky for those born in the Year of the Rooster, but everyone can appreciate the awesome panorama of the River Kwai valley and the mountain walls on either side.




CONNECT

 Route 3457, 50km northwest of Kanchanaburi

 Daily 8am–5pm

 On Kyaiktiyo Pagoda

 On the Nandric War

 *Wat Thap Sila combines well with a visit to the natural wonders of Erawan National Park.*



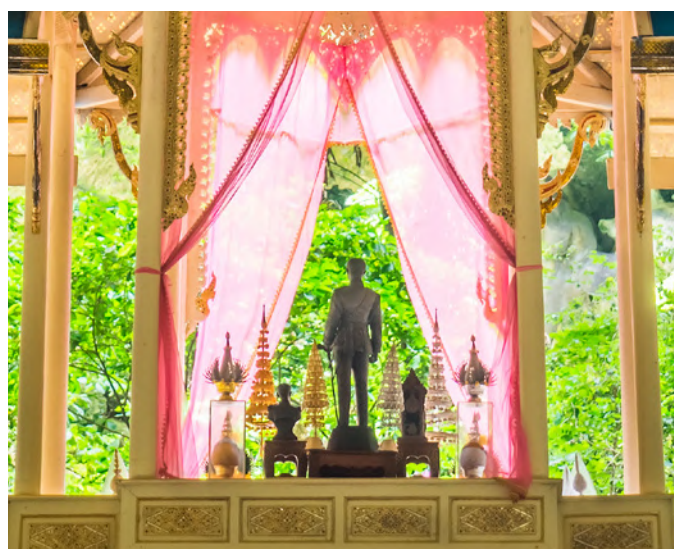
THAM PHRAYA NAKHON, PRACHUAP KHIRI KHAN

A natural wonder fit for a king

In the middle of every morning, the sun appears through the collapsed roof of **Tham Phraya Nakhon** cave and briefly shines a spotlight on an ornate royal pavilion. With gnarled trees, lianas and stalactites completing the stage set, it's pure theatre.


The cave was famous enough as a natural attraction back in 1890 that King Chulalongkorn decided to make the difficult journey to see it. For the royal visit, an open-sided, four-gabled pavilion was built in Bangkok and assembled on a mound of earth inside the sinkhole. Adding to the mystical aura, the much-revered king carved his runic initials on the cave wall, as did his son, King Prajadhipok, on a later visit.

Tham Phraya Nakhon is now protected within a national park. There's no vehicle access, so most visitors take a five-minute boat ride round the coast to Laem Sala beach, then walk for half an hour up a steep, shady trail to the cave entrance. Your efforts, however, will be rewarded with a magical scene inside the vast cavern.

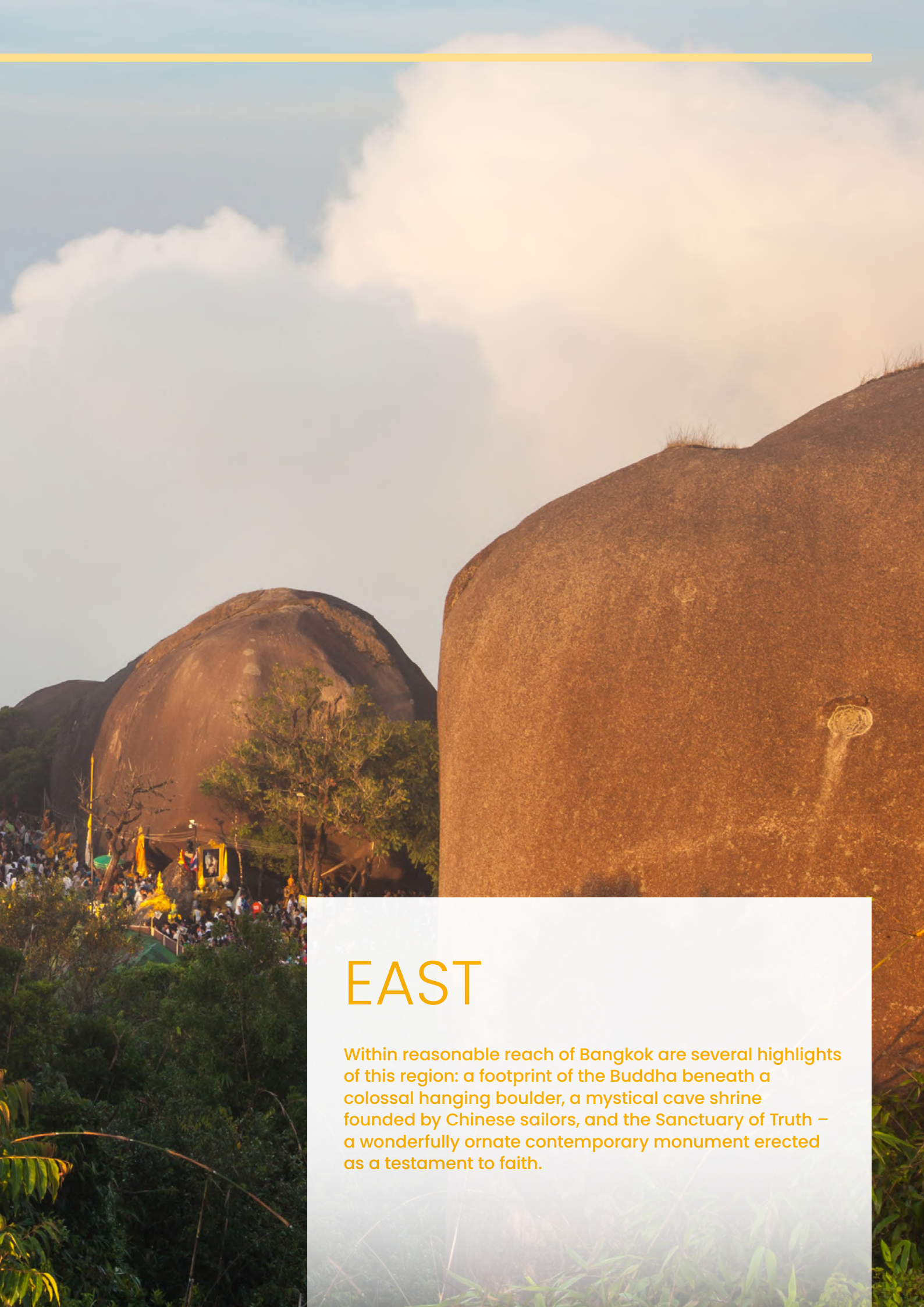


CONNECT

-  50km south of Hua Hin in Khao Sam Roi Yot National Park
-  Daily roughly 8am–4pm
-  On Khao Sam Roi Yot National Park
-  On Chulalongkorn

 *There's no entrance fee for the cave, but you'll have to pay B200 when you enter the national park.*





EAST

Within reasonable reach of Bangkok are several highlights of this region: a footprint of the Buddha beneath a colossal hanging boulder, a mystical cave shrine founded by Chinese sailors, and the Sanctuary of Truth – a wonderfully ornate contemporary monument erected as a testament to faith.



THREE GANESH STATUES, CHACHOENSAO

Mighty Ganesh clears a path to prosperity

Wise, playful **Ganesh** is the most popular Hindu god among Thais, who call him “*Phi Kanet*”. Bangkokians can make an easy pilgrimage to three colossal statues of him within 20km of each other, in the next province to the east, Chachoengsao.

Closest to Chachoengsao town, a pink Ganesh sprawls languidly over 22 metres at **Wat Saman Ratanaram**. A short hop to the east, the **Klong Kheuan International Ganesh Park** is graced with the largest bronze Ganesh in the world, a 39-metre standing figure holding a mango, jackfruit, banana and sugarcane. In the north of the province, an even bigger, pink Ganesh sits on his throne overlooking **Wat Phrong Akat**.

The elephant-headed god is identified as the remover of obstacles, and so is worshipped before undertaking any major enterprise. Particularly associated with trade, education and the arts, he is the emblem of Thailand’s Department of Fine Arts. As well as garlands, incense sticks, a candle and holy oil, supplicants often bring the sweets and fruit that Ganesh loves to eat – all the universes of the past, present and future are present in his pot belly.



CONNECT

📍 Wat Saman Ratanaram
 📱 wat.saman
 📅 Daily roughly 8am–5pm

📍 Klong Kheuan International Ganesh Park
 🌐 ganeshthailand.com
 📅 Daily roughly 9am–5.30pm

📍 Wat Phrong Akat
 📱 WatPhrongAkat
 📅 Daily 7am–6pm

📍 On Ganesh



NA JA SA THAI JEU SHRINE, CHONBURI

Diverse prayers and offerings at a kaleidoscopic Chinese shrine


Even during the busiest times, devotees at the **Na Ja Sa Thai Jeu Shrine** are outnumbered by dragons. There are 2840 of them across the three buildings, all fangs, whiskers and claws, writhing around pillars and perched on rooftops. The main hall enshrines almost as many gods: the whole Chinese pantheon seems to be here, including a thousand-armed Kuan Im, the Goddess of Mercy, and the War God Kuan Yu, though most local worshippers have their own favourite deity to receive their prayers.

The shrine was founded in 1991, but proved so popular that it expanded rapidly over the next decade, backed by donations totalling 300 million baht. In fact, development is still ongoing, and one way of making a donation is to buy a roof tile and write your name on it. Other offerings at the shrine are eclectic, ranging from flowers and fruit to toys and oil for lamps. Incense burns in every corner, notably in a massive bronze bowl near the entrance and in two adjacent shrines with five-tiered roofs that house Buddha images. Elsewhere, you can seek out your birth year among sixty astrological statues, which combine the twelve years of the Chinese zodiac with the five elements of wood, fire, earth, metal and water.



CONNECT

-  Route 3134 on the south side of Ang Sila, Chonburi
-  Na Ja Sa Thai Jeu Shrine
-  Daily 8am–5pm, closes later at weekends
-  On Thai-Chinese history
-  On the Chinese 60-year cycle
-  On Chinese gods

 *A tall pole coiled with seven dragons of different colours symbolically connects our world with Heaven.*





CHAO PHO KHAO YAI SHRINE, CHONBURI






A mystical cave sanctuary on the nearest island to Bangkok

If you take the ferry across to Koh Si Chang at Lunar New Year, you'll find yourself surrounded by Chinese visitors. At that time, they come from all over Thailand and Asia to worship at the **Chao Pho Khao Yai Shrine** on the hill above the island port. It's believed that if you make this pilgrimage on three consecutive Chinese New Years, all your wishes will be granted.

The shrine was founded by Chinese seamen, who saw light coming from a cave and dedicated it to the "Lord Father of the Great Mountain". It has since expanded out into a cluttered complex of altars, but the enigmatic caves remain the big draw. Filled with incense smoke and the rat-tat-tat of firecrackers, they're hung with striking red strips of paper, on which devotees write down their wishes.

Suplicants focus their prayers on an image of the Goddess of Mercy, which is believed to be a natural rock formation in the cave, now smothered in gold leaf. Also highly revered is Sun Wukong (often called Heng Jia in Thailand), the Monkey King with many supernatural powers. Holding the Peach of Immortality and his magical staff, the Pacifier of the Four Seas, he is draped in offerings of beads and garlands.

CONNECT

-  Koh Si Chang, accessed by ferry from Si Racha
-  Daily 6am–5pm
-  On Sun Wukong
-  On Chinese New Year
-  On visiting Koh Si Chang

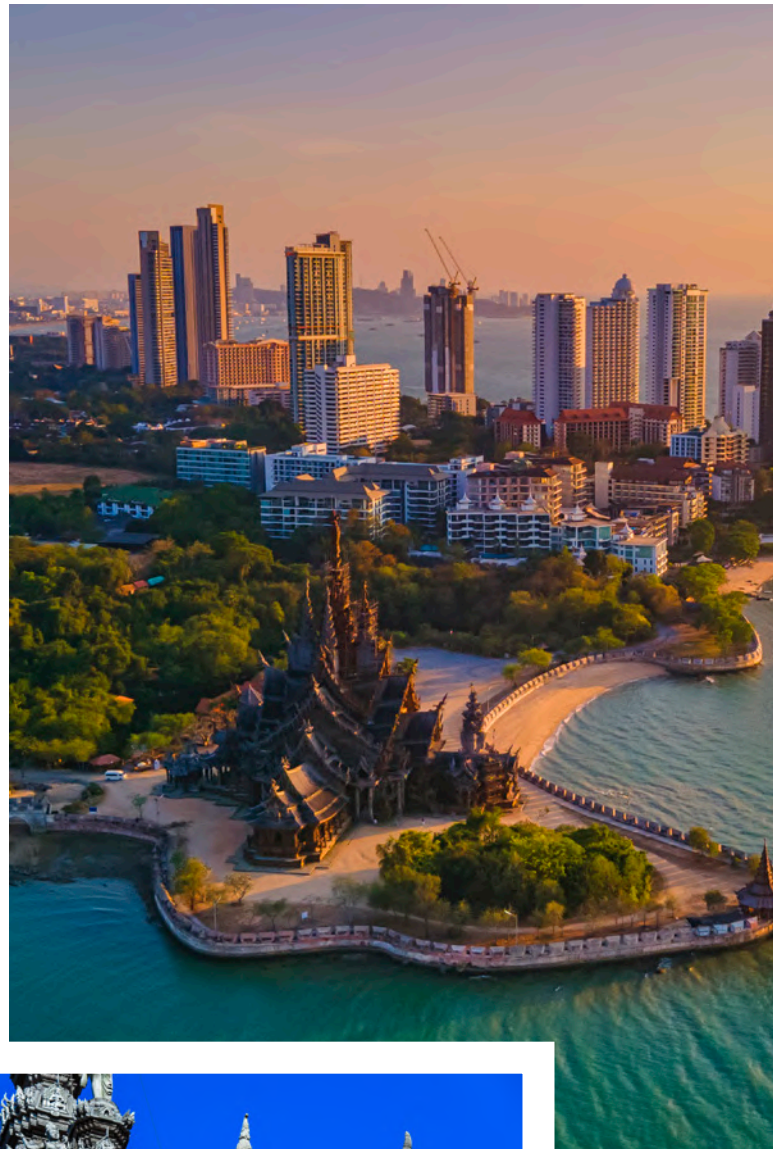
Above the shrine, you can walk up to a Buddha Footprint on the hilltop for awesome views of the channel between Koh Si Chang and the mainland.

THE SANCTUARY OF TRUTH, CHONBURI






Esoteric visions of spirituality sculpted in wood


The **Sanctuary of Truth** is the vision of the late Khun Lek Viriyaphan, wealthy businessman and patron of culture and the arts. Dramatically sited on a headland at the north end of Pattaya Beach, it's a majestic, 30-metre-high shrine with a multi-tiered Thai-style roof, built entirely of hardwood. Though begun in 1981, it is ever-changing, its walls covered in a growing gallery of beautiful, symbolic woodcarvings, inspired by Khmer, Chinese, Indian and Thai mythologies.

Khun Lek's aim was to honour the importance of religion, spirituality and philosophy in sustaining the world, and to convey ethics and good culture through art. The unpainted woodcarvings that cover every surface both inside and out embody seven truths: the elements of earth, wind, fire and water; the stages of life; death; civilizations; life goals (the carvings around the internal pillars); good and bad society; and family. The sanctuary was conceived as a place for visitors to escape the anxieties of the outside world and find calm and new energy through its powerful stories of faith. Guided tours are available in Thai, English, Chinese, Korean and Russian.



CONNECT

-  Soi Naklua 12, Pattaya
-  Sanctuaryoftruthmuseum.com
-  Daily 8am–6pm (last tour 5pm)
-  On Muang Boran
-  On the Erawan Museum

 *Khun Lek also built Muang Boran and the Erawan Museum in Samut Prakan, closer to Bangkok.*



KHAO KHITCHAKUT, CHANTHABURI

*Join a mass pilgrimage to a mountain-top
Buddha's Footprint*


Every year in the dry season, a huge but little-known movement of people takes place in the Cardamom Mountain range near the Cambodian border. In the two months around Makha Bucha, over a hundred thousand people from both sides of the border climb 1050-metre **Khao Khitchakut** to venerate a footprint of the Buddha. After such an arduous trip, the Buddha grants pilgrims' wishes, but each person is allowed to make only one request.


The journey is much less difficult than it used to be: during the pilgrimage season, pick-up trucks tackle the winding dirt road from the entrance of Khao Khitchakut National Park to a ranger station, leaving a 1200-metre walk up to the shrine. Massive queues await the pick-ups at weekends and on the holy day itself, but they run 24hr – many people go up late at night, make merit and then watch the sun rise before coming down.

The path up from the ranger station gets strewn with flower petals and is lined with bells that should be rung three times for luck. At the top, beneath a colossal hanging boulder, supplicants lay marigolds and cash on the footprint then enjoy the towering views over Chanthaburi town to the Gulf of Thailand.

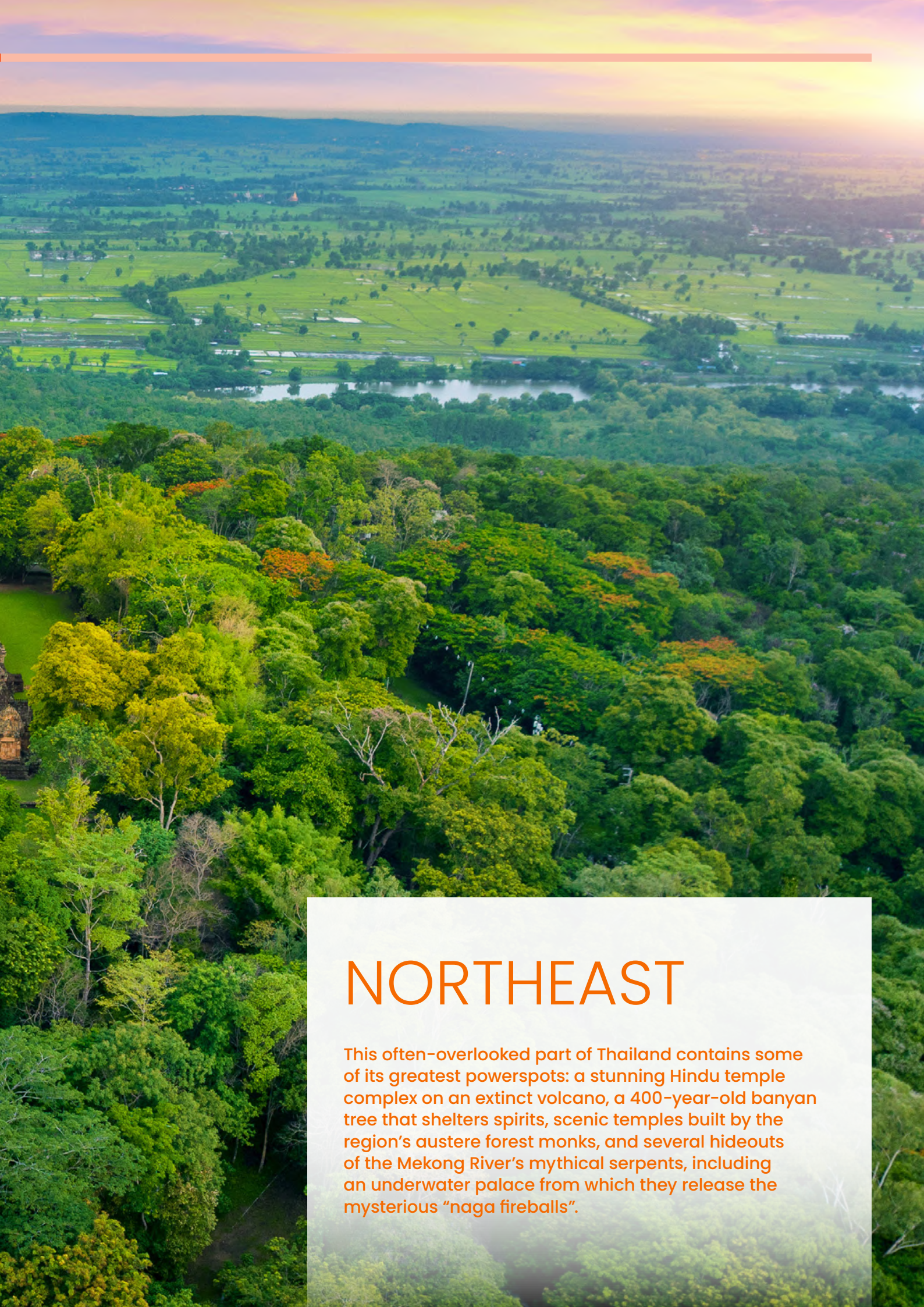


CONNECT

-  35km north of Chanthaburi in Khao Khitchakut National Park
-  Two months around the full moon of the third lunar month: late Jan or early Feb–late March or early April
-  On Khao Khitchakut National Park
-  On the Khao Khitchakut pilgrimage
-  On Chanthaburi Province

 *Many pilgrims make a further 45-minute trek to Pha Daeng, where they confirm their wish by writing it on a strip of red cloth and tying it to a tree branch.*





NORTHEAST

This often-overlooked part of Thailand contains some of its greatest powerspots: a stunning Hindu temple complex on an extinct volcano, a 400-year-old banyan tree that shelters spirits, scenic temples built by the region's austere forest monks, and several hideouts of the Mekong River's mythical serpents, including an underwater palace from which they release the mysterious "naga fireballs".



SAI NGAM, NAKHON RATCHASIMA

Lose yourself under a strange and beautiful banyan tree

Though it looks like a grove of trees, **Sai Ngam** (“Beautiful Banyan”) is in fact a single *Ficus bengalensis* that covers an area about half the size of a football pitch. Banyans reproduce themselves by dropping tendrils to the ground from their branches, which take root to become secondary trunks and spawn other tendrils, so growing further and further out from the central trunk.

As Sai Ngam’s gnarled trunks and coiling branches now form an eerie canopy beneath which dirt and brick paths meander, it is easy to see why the tree is believed to harbour spirits. To appease them, locals offer colourful garlands and incense sticks to a spirit house near Sai Ngam’s original 400-year-old trunk. Banyans are also a symbol of eternal rebirth, and the Buddha is said to have reached enlightenment while meditating in the shade of a banyan. You can make merit by feeding the fish in the adjacent branch of the River Mun or by releasing fish into the water (in the rainy season, the tree gets flooded, which makes an even more eerie sight). People whose wishes have been granted by Sai Ngam return with lucky model animals, especially turtles.



CONNECT

-  2km northeast of central Phimai
-  Daily 6am–6pm
-  On banyans
-  On Phimai’s Khmer ruins

 *Local fortune tellers and several restaurants have set up business on the road near Sai Ngam.*

PRASAT PHANOM RUNG, BURIRAM


Awesome solar alignment at a 900-year-old hilltop temple

The finest example of Khmer architecture in Thailand, **Phanom Rung** is a Hindu temple complex on an extinct volcano which is now used for Buddhist worship. A perfect alignment that allows you to see the sun rising or setting through all fifteen doors of the linear complex four times a year brings further energy to this remarkable powerspot.

Construction here probably lasted from the early tenth to the early thirteenth century, but the heart of the temple is made of sandstone in the early Angkorian style of the mid-twelfth century. The local ruler at the time was a devotee of Shiva, whose rituals involving fire, sex, alcohol and yoga are depicted among the thousands of exquisite stone carvings.

A 200-metre-long paved avenue leads up the hill to the central tower (*prang*), representing Mount Meru, the heavenly palace of the gods in both Hindu and Buddhist cosmology. To the southwest, an unfinished Khmer tower contains a stone Buddha footprint, which is now the focus of merit-making at the parades celebrating the sunrise and sunset alignments.

CONNECT

 60km south of Buriram town

 Daily 7am–6pm

 Virtual guide

 UNESCO application

 On the geology of the volcano

 *The sunrise alignment take place in early April and early September; the sunset alignment early March and early October.*





WAT THAM HEO SIN CHAI, UBON RATCHATHANI


A charming meditation temple in an idyllic setting

About fifty years ago, an ascetic monk named Luang Phu Khamla retreated to a cave near Khong Chiam to pass the rainy season. He liked it so much that he decided to build a meditation temple with the help of local villagers. It's not hard to see the appeal: set in leafy hills overlooking the River Mun, the shallow cave sits directly behind a cooling waterfall, which in the rainy season gushes into a pond between stands of bamboo.

The locals still cherish and support the temple, especially on Buddhist holy days, when they visit to make offerings of food and flowers to a long row of Buddha images in the cave. On the grounds, they have erected a statue of Luang Phu Khamla, protected from the rain by a seven-headed snake. Dozens of images of Sivali, an enlightened disciple of the Buddha, have also been donated. Carrying a walking stick, an umbrella and an alms bowl, he is on the one hand believed to ward off misfortunes at home such as fire and theft. But he is also the patron saint of travel, who received generous offerings of food in his alms bowl wherever he went, so people make offerings to him with prayers for wealth.

CONNECT

-  On the outskirts of Khong Chiam, 80km east of Ubon
-  [Wat Tham Heo Sin Chai](#)  [On Sivali](#)
-  Daily 8am–4pm (Sat open till 5pm)  [On Mae Toranee](#)

 *Statues of Mae Toranee beside the falls symbolize water's purifying effect: the goddess squeezed floods of water out of her hair to drown the demons who were attacking the meditating Buddha.*



WAT THUNG SETTHI, KHON KAEN

A regal image of the Buddha in a striking contemporary temple





Wat Thung Setthi (“Millionaire’s Field Temple”) is believed to lie at the point where Heaven, Earth and Hell meet and was consecrated on 5 May 2012 (according to the Thai calendar, the auspicious 5/5/2555). Since then, it has attracted a growing tide of visitors, who come to pray for wealth and admire the clean lines of its modern architecture.


Enshrining tooth relics of the Buddha, the main pagoda might be compared to the dome of a Viennese church, though with three tiers and topped by a gilt lotus-bud pinnacle. Unusually, it’s possible to enter the pagoda, which houses a powerful black-and-gold image of the Buddha in meditation on a throne; above his head, the sky-blue dome is pierced by teardrop stained-glass windows and a golden chandelier.

This central shrine sits on a square island in a moat, guarded by dynamic bronzes of the Four Heavenly Kings of the cardinal directions. From the opposite side of the moat, looking at the island’s reflection in the water represents the pagoda in the Underworld, while viewing it through a mirror represents the pagoda in the world of Heaven.



CONNECT

-  Phra Lap, 8km southeast of central Khon Kaen
-  Daily 8am–5pm
-  [On the Thai solar calendar](#)
-  [On the Four Heavenly Kings](#)

 *Incense sticks and candles are not allowed in the pagoda, so worshippers offer flowers.*







KHAM CHANOT, UDON THANI


Pray to the serpent grandparents on their mystical island

In the lake at Wat Sirisuttho, a pair of nagas (mythical serpents) have their underwater palace. “Grandfather” Sri Suttho and “Grandmother” Sri Pathumma also like to come out in human form and roam around **Kham Chanot**, an island covered in taraw palms (*chanot*). People from all over Thailand now come to worship the serpent couple, offering them food, garlands and *bai sri* – banana leaves that are folded into elaborate sculptures featuring nagas. If you cannot afford such an offering, you can pay homage by performing a traditional dance or song.

A long bridge lined with two nagas crosses from the temple buildings to the supernatural world of the island. Water from the lake feeds a fountain pool, where you can wash your face as a blessing or fill bottles to take home for luck. In a nearby clearing, you make your wish at a shrine to the grandparents. Then head to a huge banyan tree, where people stare at the trunk and roots until lottery ticket numbers magically appear. Finally, you’ll come across a series of metal gongs: the belief is that if you can make a gong “sing” by rubbing it then the wish you made earlier will come true.

CONNECT

-  Wat Sirisuttho, Ban Muang, 90km northeast of Udon Thani
-  [KhamchanodOfficial](#)
-  Daily 8.30am–4.30pm
-  [On bai sri](#)

 *Wat Sirisuttho holds a major festival on Visakha Bucha (full moon, usually in May), with parades, pop concerts, banquet tables of offerings and masked traditional dancers.*



istock.com/pressdigital



THAM ERAWAN, NONG BUA LAMPHU





A remote cave-shrine in beautiful countryside


Driving along Highway 210 between Udon Thani and Loei, you'll spot an opening high up in the cliff face of a karst tower on the north side of the road. The limestone outcrop is thought to resemble a kneeling elephant and the cave is **Tham Erawan**, named after the three-headed elephant king who is the vehicle of Indra, king of the Hindu gods. The cave is also associated with a famous northeastern folk tale, *Nang Phom Hom*, as the home of the "Fragrant-haired Princess" when she lived with her elephant father.

An archway of two white elephants holding the Buddha aloft with their trunks welcomes you to Wat Tham Erawan at the base of the outcrop. On the temple grounds, devotees offer garlands at shrines to Nang Phom Hom and Erawan – and, at the latter, bamboo stalks for the elephant to eat. From here, six hundred steps climb up to a giant golden Buddha image at the entrance to the cave, where you'll be rewarded with a broad vista of paddy fields studded with steep green hills. More steps then lead into the awe-inspiring cavern, which is full of stalactites and stalagmites and lit by three holes in its lofty roof. The formation that most closely resembles an elephant is wrapped in red cloth and hung with garlands.



CONNECT

-  3km north of Highway 210, 50km west of Nong Bua Lamphu
-  Daylight hours
-  On Nang Phom Hom
-  On karst

 *You're asked not to take incense sticks up to the cave, only flowers.*

THE FOREST MONK TRADITION



istock.com/olcquest



istock.com/paissa

If a deeper, challenging spiritual experience is what you seek then Thailand's northeast region has long been an influential beacon for such a quest. Its minimalist form of monastic practice known as the "forest monk tradition", or *tudong* in Thai, has gained international renown, and Thailand continues to host many inspiring meditation centres that espouse some form of this asceticism.

Emphasizing the cultivation of discipline (*sila*), concentration through meditation (*samadhi*), and wisdom or insight (*panna*), this branch of Thai Buddhism expects its devotees to break free from the material world in order to achieve sharper, if not transcendent, insight into the true nature of reality and a purer mind,



body and heart. Among the key vehicles of this path are nature, isolation and fear itself, which explains why its monks may occasionally stay in physically challenging settings such as caves and cemeteries. At the same time, the forest tradition strips out much of the rote learning, ritual, superstition, speculation and metaphysics of other Buddhist sects, replacing it with daily meditation practice and an almost science-like psychological pragmatism that values concrete actions and results (ie cause and effect).

Notable pioneers of the forest monk tradition from the last century, such as Ajaan Man Phurithatto and Ajaan Chah Subhaddo, may have led largely solitary lives, but ultimately their insights led them to become renowned teachers and spiritual guides themselves. Their disciples continue to spread their teachings on meditation, the Dharma and virtuous conduct to this day.

With COVID-19 having energised many to seek a different path to personal fulfilment, a growing number of temples in the northeast and across the country offer retreats to foreigners. Ajaan Chah founded **Wat Pah Nanachat** near Ubon Ratchathani in 1975, as a training community in the forest tradition for non-Thais. With English as the primary language, the ultimate aim is to ordain foreign monks, but serious lay guests may be allowed to stay for a week or more or visit for the day. In the South, Ajaan Buddhadasa, who has had a great influence on the forest tradition, established a popular international meditation centre at **Wat Suan Mokkh** near Chaiya. Meanwhile, **Wat Suan Dok** in Chiang Mai offers 2- and 3-day retreats. If you are looking for a non-sectarian, universal approach to meditation but with tenets similar to the forest tradition, **the courses of S.N. Goenka** are recommended.





WAT THAI PHON PHISAI, NONG KHAI


Visit the underwater city of the serpents to bring good luck

Every year around the full-moon night in October, “naga fireballs” (*bang fai phaya nak*) appear from the Mekong River near Nong Khai, small, pink spheres that float vertically up to heights of as much as 300m, then disappear. In some years, several thousand of the silent, vapourless balls appear, in others, just a handful. Local people believe that the nagas (serpents) of the river breathe out the fireballs to call the Buddha back to Earth from Heaven at the end of the rainy-season retreat (see opposite). The riverbank promenade in front of Phon Phisai’s **Wat Thai** is known as the best place for fireball-spotting, and hordes of people descend on it from all over Thailand.

To give thanks to the serpents, Wat Thai’s abbot has built on the promenade a 19-metre-tall naga statue and an image of the meditating Buddha, protected from the rain by a nine-headed naga as he approaches enlightenment. Underneath, you can enter a “cave” in the serpent’s belly that recreates the underwater city of the nagas, complete with rock gardens, richly coloured murals and a treasure chamber. It’s believed that anyone who goes into the cave will have their wishes granted.



CONNECT

 Soi 16, Phisai Soradet Rd, Phon Phisai, 40km east of Nong Khai

 Daily roughly 7am–5pm

 On nagas

 On naga fireballs

 On the Mekong River



The triangular column that props up the immense head of the naga statue is regarded as the underwater city’s lak muang, the pillar where its guardian spirit lives.



SADEU MAE NAM KHONG, BEUNG KAN

A powerspot on the river inhabited by fire-breathing nagas

Near its northernmost point in northeastern Thailand, the Mekong River passes through a pinch between large rocks, where a whirlpool sometimes rises up into a cone during the rainy season. Known as **Sadeu Mae Nam Khong**, the “Navel of the Mekong” is thought to be the deepest point of the river. Here, mythical serpent deities (nagas) have their underwater city in a large cave that goes through to the Lao side.

Every October on the full moon, the nagas let out “fireballs” to call the Buddha back after visiting his mother in Tavatimsa Heaven. A tentative scientific theory proposes that the balls are a combination of methane and nitrogen released from decomposed matter on the bottom of the river, which reach a certain temperature at this time of the year and combust in the presence of oxygen when they break the water’s surface. Whether gaseous combustion or serpent’s breath, hundreds of visitors trek to the Mekong every year to admire the phenomenon and enjoy the colourful festivities. Many bring sacred objects to bathe in the light of the full moon and pray to the goddess of the Mekong Navel for money and love at Wat Ahong Silawat, offering her two incense sticks, garlands, lipstick and perfume.

CONNECT



Kaeng Ahong, off Highway 212, 20km northeast of Beung Kan



On Wat Ahong Silawat



On Tavatimsa Heaven



From the Thai side, you can gaze at Wat Sawaeng Arom, the “Temple of Bright Emotions”, over in Laos, with its pagoda and reclining Buddha perched on a great boulder.





WAT PHU TOK, BEUNG KAN






A unique meditation retreat on a lonely crag


Known as the “bridge from hell to heaven”, **Wat Phu Tok** provides a physically and mentally challenging pilgrimage. This extraordinary meditation temple has been built on and around a 300-metre-high sandstone outcrop, whose sheer red cliffs jut out of the green plain. Vertigo-inducing walkways, linked by steep staircases, encircle the outcrop and divide the temple into seven levels, representing the seven stages of enlightenment. Making the ascent is compared to the path of virtue that leads to emancipation through effort and determination.

On the fifth level, “Insight”, the temple’s main Buddha image is housed in an airy, dimly lit cavern. Beyond several monks’ residences at the northwest tip, a bridge over a deep crevice leads to a dramatic anvil rock. Perched beneath the rock, a lean-to has been constructed to shelter relics of the Buddha and a statue of Wat Phu Tok’s founder, Ajaan Chuan, a revered monk in Thailand’s forest tradition. Up above, the flat top of the outcrop represents Nirvana, tufted with trees and blessed with amazing views. In an elegant, ochre pagoda back at ground level, there’s a shrine to Ajaan Chuan, housing his books and fragments of his bones.



CONNECT

-  [Wat Chetiya Khiri Wihan, 20km east of Ban Siwilai, Beung Kan](#)
-  [WadPhuThxk](#)  [On Ajaan Chuan and Wat Phu Tok](#)
-  Always open  [On the Thai forest tradition](#)

 *There’s no staircase between the sixth and seventh levels, just a rough dirt path covered in tree roots.*






AJAAN MAN MUSEUM, SAKON NAKHON


A solemn tribute to the northeast's most celebrated monk

Set in quiet, leafy Wat Pa Sutthawat, the **Ajaan Man Museum** is a shrine to one of Thailand's most famous monks, who died here in 1949. Ajaan Man Phurithatto was a wandering forest monk and charismatic reformer, who promulgated meditation and a more rigorous form of Buddhism around the country. He was known for his severe asceticism, which included meditating in cemeteries and wearing robes made out of rags from funeral pyres. Renowned for his magical healing powers and for mind-reading, he reported that he had discussed dharma with angels and spirits and that, after he had attained enlightenment, the Buddha himself visited to congratulate him. His greatest influence was probably as a teacher, inspiring a lineage of dozens of monks who themselves became influential teachers.

Housed in an austere modern pavilion, the shrine naturally focuses more on contemplation than on votive offerings. Some worshippers, however, bring flowers to lay before a bronze statue that captures Ajaan Man's famed ferocity of purpose. Cases display his few possessions such as flints for sparking fires and toothbrushes, as well as fragments of his bones, which are said to have miraculously turned into crystals, proving that he was an enlightened being.

CONNECT

-  Wat Pa Sutthawat, just off Sukkasem Rd, Sakon Nakhon
-  watsutthawat
-  Daylight hours
-  Biography of Ajaan Man
-  On the Thai forest tradition

 *The temple also houses shrines in tribute to two of Ajaan Man's disciples, Ajaan Lui in a contemporary pagoda and Ajaan Ta in the wooden hut where he lived.*





WAT PHRA THAT PHANOM, NAKHON PHANOM

The main pilgrimage site for northeastern Thailand and much of Laos

Wat Phra That Phanom is not only one of the **four main pilgrimage sites** in Thailand, but a symbol of transnational harmony: located just a kilometre from the Mekong River border, it also attracts crowds of pilgrims from Laos. Enshrining the Buddha's breastbone, its gleaming white and gold pagoda is built in a Lao style similar to the That Luang in Vientiane.


Seven pilgrimages to the 54-metre-high pagoda will make you a *luuk phra that*, "child of the holy relic", ensuring prosperity and an ascent to heaven. The relic's power is especially auspicious for those born in the Year of the Monkey and those born on Sunday.

In the traditional farmer's break between harvesting and sowing the rice, Phra That Phanom holds its lively ten-day festival around Makha Bucha on the full moon of the third lunar month (usually in February). Makha Bucha is regarded as a day to celebrate the monkhood (*sangha*), as it commemorates the time when 1,250 ordained disciples spontaneously travelled to see the Buddha in northern India, 80 days after his Enlightenment. On full moon night, modern disciples walk three times clockwise around the pagoda, carrying candles.



CONNECT

-  [That Phanom, Nakhon Phanom](#)
-  [Wat Phra That Phanom](#)  [On Makha Bucha](#)
-  [Daily 6am–8pm](#)  [On That Luang](#)

 *The three turns around the pagoda represent the Triple Gems: the Buddha, his teachings and the monkhood.*

PHAYA ANANTANAKHARAT SHRINE, MUKDAHAN

A bridge-side shrine to the Mekong's powerful nagas


In 2003, construction began on the Second Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge between Mukdahan and Laos' second city, Savannakhet, which would complete a route from Myanmar in the west, through Thailand and Laos to the Vietnamese coast. Building work was dogged with problems, however, including the deaths of several workers, which were blamed on the bridge's location above an underwater cave of the Mekong River's nagas (serpent deities). The **Phaya Anantanakharat Shrine** was built next to the mile-long span to appease the nagas, and the bridge was successfully completed in 2006.

At the shrine, an enormous naga coils round a golden column until its fierce head peeks above the parapet of the road bridge – which should at least remind westbound cars to switch from driving on the right (in Laos and on the bridge) to the left in Thailand. To make a request of the nagas, you should offer water (not incense sticks); betel nuts (a mild stimulant for chewing) or flowers such as lotus, marigold and jasmine; and auspicious fruits such as dragonfruits, coconuts and pomegranates. Or nothing – the most important thing is to have faith and focus the mind using incantations.



CONNECT

-  7km north of central Mukdahan
-  Daily roughly 9am–6pm
-  On Phaya Si Phuchong Mukda Nakkharat
-  On Phaya Si Mukda Mahamuni Nilapala Nakkharat

 *Mukdahan Province has two other huge naga shrines on the banks of the Mekong, Phaya Si Phuchong Mukda Nakkharat and Phaya Si Mukda Mahamuni Nilapala Nakkharat.*





NORTH

This area of ancient kingdoms and rainforested mountains hosts some of Thailand's most elegant and historic spiritual sites, often reinforced by potent foundation legends and the scenic power of hilltop locations. One shrine is dedicated to a beloved abbot who renovated hundreds of temples in the region, while another is a tribute to the "Black Prince", built among the ruins of the "Moon Palace" where he was born.



SAWAN PARK, NAKHON SAWAN

An exuberant water dragon in an urban oasis

The city of Nakhon Sawan marks the spot where the major rivers of northern Thailand, the Ping and the Nan, come together to form the Chao Phraya, which brings life to the fertile plains between here and the coast at Bangkok. Right beside the auspicious meeting of the waters, the municipality has laid out a beautiful park, **Sawan Park** (or “Paradise Park”), with a lake, an island and a dragon shrine. In a city with a strong Sino-Thai heritage, the shrine’s colourful Chinese style reflects the dragon’s role as ruler of water in both Chinese and Thai mythology.

The approach to the shrine leads visitors across a ceremonial arched bridge over a lotus pond. Floating on clouds, the heavenly dragon sits on a circular platform, surrounded by four smaller dragons and four Chinese pavilions. It’s believed that if you meet a beautiful, powerful dragon at the right time in your life, you will be blessed with goodness and will experience the best of luck, good health and long life. This chimes well with the park’s role as the main exercise venue for the inhabitants of Nakhon Sawan.



istock.com/Mateescu Mugur


CONNECT

 Nakhon Sawan, junction of Highway 1 and Highway 117 from Phitsanulok

 Daily roughly 4am–9pm

 On Chinese dragons

 On Chinese New Year in Nakhon Sawan

 *Healthy activities at the park include jogging, cycling, tai chi and aerobics.*





CHAO MAE THAP THIM SHRINE, PHICHIT

A beautiful 150-year-old Chinese shrine near the Nan River

Dedicated to the goddess of the sea and sailing, the **Chao Mae Thap Thim Shrine** dates back to 1867, when the owner of the local dockyard on the Nan River brought the deity statue over from China and donated two rafts full of teak logs to build an enormous shrine. She has now been joined on the right by Chao Pho Kuan U, an early-third-century Chinese general, who was deified in about 600 for his loyalty and glorified in the fourteenth-century historical novel, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*; and Poon Thao Kong and Poon Thao Ma on the left, a tutelary god and goddess that are worshipped by overseas Chinese. Women pray to Chao Mae Thap Thim, who has her major festival every December, for children.

Worshippers first pray and light three incense sticks at the altar of the spirits in front of the shrine; then three incense sticks each to Chao Mae Thap Thim, Chao Pho Kuan U and Poon Thao Kong–Poon Thao Ma; then one incense stick each at the main gateway and the two side gateways; before burning auspicious gold and silver “money” paper in a big red furnace.

CONNECT

-  Tha Lo, 10km north of Phichit town
-  Daily 8am–5pm
-  On *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*
-  On teak logging

This is the older of two shrines to Chao Mae Thap Thim in Phichit.





WAT PHA SON KAEW, PHETCHABUN

Awesome sanctuary high in the Phetchabun mountains





Travelling through the Khao Khor mountains between Lom Sak and Phitsanulok, you can't miss **Wat Pha Son Kaew's** five white Buddha images sitting on an 830-metre-high ridge. Despite its remoteness, you're unlikely to have this meditation temple to yourself: Khao Khor is now a popular getaway, especially during the cool season, for Bangkokians and other lowlanders, most of whom will come to pay homage to the Buddhas.

Like Russian dolls of ever-decreasing size, the five meditating figures nestle in each other's laps. They represent the five Buddhas of the current *kalpa* or world age (24 other Buddhas in previous *kalpas* are also recognized in Theravada Buddhism): Kakusandha; Konagamana; Kassapa; our Buddha, Gautama; and Maitreya, the future Buddha.

The mosaic-floored platform in front of the Buddhas offers awe-inspiring views of the surrounding mountains, which locals like to compare to Switzerland. Nearby, the temple's pagoda is also an extraordinary structure. Topped with three golden lotus buds on the point of opening, it's covered in millions of coloured beads and shards of ceramics, reminiscent of Gaudí's great works in Barcelona.



CONNECT

-  2km north of Highway 12, 25km west of Lom Sak
-  [watprathatphasonkaew](#)
-  Daily 6/7am–5/6pm
-  [Lists of Buddhas](#)



Any bus between Phitsanulok and Lom Sak can put you off at the head of the access road, leaving a two-kilometre walk to the temple.

WAT RATCHAKHIRI HIRANYARAM, PHITSANULOK






Float a lotus candle for the goddess of compassion


At the western edge of the Khao Khor mountain range, half a dozen places of worship cling to the outcrop of Khao Samo Khlaeng. The most popular is **Wat Ratchakhiri Hiranyaram**, which enshrines a much-loved statue, carved in milky-white jade, of Kuan Im, the Goddess of Mercy.

Rare white jade denotes purity, which is also represented by the water the goddess is pouring from a small vase. This “dew of compassion”, one of the eight Buddhist symbols of good fortune, is believed to relieve suffering and lengthen life. Kuan Im is also depicted standing on the lotus pad from which she was born, a further symbol of purity. Her headdress shows her teacher, the Amitabha Buddha, while the beads of her necklace represent the living beings she leads towards enlightenment.

Modelled on a famous Kuan Im statue in Hangzhou, the image was carved in China in 1992. It stands on an island in a pond, surrounded by an open cloister that gives a fine view of the plains below. As they make their wishes to the goddess, worshippers release onto the pond lotus-shaped candles, which neatly combine the symbols of fire (wealth), water (peace) and lotuses (prosperity).

CONNECT

-  Just off Highway 12, 15km east of Phitsanulok
-  Wat Ratchakhiri Hiranyaram  On Kuan Im
-  Daily 8am–6pm  On visiting Phitsanulok

 *If you continue to the 220-metre summit of Khao Samo Khlaeng, you'll find an ancient, brick-built pagoda and even better views of the countryside below.*





NARESUAN SHRINE, PHITSANULOK

*A warrior king revered for overthrowing the
Burmese*


Most provinces in north and central Thailand have a statue of **King Naresuan** (1555/6–1605). As a boy, the “Black Prince” lived in Pegu for six years as a hostage of the Burmese king, which made him determined to overthrow Burmese dominion of Siam. After coming to the throne of Ayutthaya, Naresuan decisively defeated the Burmese at the Battle of Suphanburi in 1593, which culminated in an elephant-back duel between him and Crown Prince Mingyi Swa, his schoolmate from his time in Pegu.

One of several Naresuan statues in Phitsanulok sits in a shrine that was purpose-built in 1961, among the ruins of Wang Chan, the “Moon Palace”, where he was born. A red carpet is kept laid out at the entrance, and the king is shown pouring water from a gourd to sever ties with Burma. During his time in Pegu, Naresuan was allowed to keep fighting cocks, which always defeated Mingyi Swa’s. Worshippers now bring rooster statues to the shrine, especially after a wish has been granted, and *muay thai* boxers revere Naresuan for his fighting spirit. Other offerings include garlands and *bai sri*, elaborate structures of folded banana leaves and flowers.



CONNECT

-  Wang Chan Rd, Phitsanulok
-  Daily 7am–5pm
-  On Naresuan

 *January 18, the date of Naresuan’s elephant-back duel, is celebrated here and throughout Thailand as Royal Thai Armed Forces Day.*

PHRA MAE YA SHRINE, SUKHOTHAI






The spirit of ancient Sukhothai's queen mother watches over the city


In 1914, reformer and historian Prince Damrong Rajanubhab discovered a mysterious stone figure in a remote cave in Sukhothai province. Over a metre high, the woman was bare-breasted, crowned and wearing ancient noble dress. Since then, the image has been credited as representing the thirteenth-century queen, Nang Suang, mother of Sukhothai's greatest king, Ramkhamhaeng. It's believed that her son had the statue made out of reverence for his late mother and that she acts as a powerful guardian spirit for Sukhothai from her shrine in front of city hall.

Townfolk pray to **Phra Mae Ya** ("Holy Grandmother") to alleviate suffering, and to inspire pregnancies or career success. They offer her marigolds, incense sticks, candles, betel (a mild stimulant for chewing) and *bai sri*, folded banana-leaf trees. She's also fond of custard cakes, and if she grants a wish, the grateful might return with a chicken or a pig's head. In February, she is honoured with an annual festival, in conjunction with the Red Cross Fair, featuring exhibitions, stalls selling local products and entertainments, such as women dressing as Phra Mae Ya and performing traditional local dances.



CONNECT

-  [Nikhon Kasem Rd, Sukhothai](#)
-  [Daily roughly 8am–5pm](#)
-  [On Ramkhamhaeng](#)
-  [On Prince Damrong](#)
-  [On betel](#)

 *At Songkran (Thai New Year in April), Phra Mae Ya is paraded through the streets and sprinkled with water.*

A SPIRITED DEFENSE: ON CHANTS, TALISMANS AND TATTOOS



The lines separating formal religious practice, superstitions and the occult are permeable in Thailand. Instead, the three mix in countless ways, manifesting themselves in consecrated objects, protective tattoos and other sacralized forms which often seem eccentric to outsiders. Thais, however, readily embrace them as means to balance and navigate the cosmic order.

Chants

Buddhist monks are often sought to provide blessings and recite chants for individuals, special occasions, objects and spaces, such as a new home. These chants are spoken in Pali, the ancient Indian language used to record the Buddha's teachings. The blessings or chants often provide protection or promote auspiciousness for the recipient. However, in the case of objects such as amulets, the chants are believed to activate and charge them with power via the monk's sacred authority.



Sacred Objects and Relics

Many Thais believe that wearing amulets can provide protection against negative energies, accidents, illness, and other forms of physical and spiritual harm, or enhance one's own luck, charisma or libido. Buddhist amulets may depict a monk revered for his magical powers or asceticism, or even contain some of his ashes. Takrut are tiny scrolls or sheets of metal inscribed with sacred symbols, mantras and spells. They are then rolled up and encased to be worn as a pendant or bracelet. The white cotton thread known as *sai sin* must also be blessed by monks and is typically worn around the wrist until it falls off naturally.





After his cremation, the Buddha's remains were divided up and enshrined in various temple pagodas. Including teeth, bone fragments, hair and nails, these relics are so venerated that the temples hosting them have become popular pilgrimage sites. A "Buddha footprint" is a symbolic representation of the Buddha's time on earth that inspires similar pilgrimages by the devout.

Yantra Tattoos

Yantra tattoos (*sak yant*) are highly geometrical designs that offer protection, blessings, and other benefits to the wearer. Considered a form of sacred art, they are often administered by skilled tattooists who are also spiritual practitioners. Deeply rooted in animistic and Buddhist beliefs, they consist of intricate patterns, sacred symbols, and images of deities and use a special mixture of ink with unusual ingredients such as ash from burnt sacred texts. Before receiving a Yantra tattoo, individuals often undergo an empowerment ceremony conducted by a monk or a shaman. This ritual involves chanting, blessings, and the infusion of spiritual energy into the tattoo.



Top: iStock.com/DimaBerikut. This photo: iStock.com/dacoodas



istock.com/kuamungadd



WAT BAN PANG, LAMPHUN


A remote temple honours its favourite son who re-energized northern Buddhism

Khruba Siwichai, the “patron saint of northern Thailand”, became the abbot of **Wat Ban Pang** aged just 24 and died there in 1939 at the age of 60. In between, he carried out an extraordinary campaign to breathe life into Buddhist worship in the north, by renovating around a hundred of its temples. Popular for his compassion, generosity and selflessness, he attracted many followers and donors. His greatest work was the construction in 1935 of the first paved road from Chiang Mai up the mountain to Wat Phra That Doi Suthep, a distance of 11km that was completed by an army of volunteers from all over the north within six months.

Dozens of pilgrims come to Wat Ban Pang to pay homage to this “great soul”. The staircase up to the temple is modelled on the one Siwichai had built at Doi Suthep, while the main pagoda imitates that of Wat Phrathat Hariphunchai in Lamphun, which Siwichai renovated. A museum-cum-shrine houses his monk’s robe and the donated car that gave him the first ride on the new road up Doi Suthep. You can also buy statuettes and amulets of the revered abbot, to bring you good luck while also making merit by giving money to the temple.

CONNECT

-  Just off Highway 106 in Ban Pang, 70km south of Lamphun
-  Daily 8am–4.30pm
-  On Khruba Siwichai
-  On his monument in Chiang Mai
-  On Wat Phrathat Hariphunchai

 *All over northern Thailand, you’ll still see pictures and statues of Siwichai over 80 years after his death.*



NAPHAMAYTHANIDON CHEDI AND NAPHAPHONPHUMSIRI CHEDI, CHIANG MAI





Soaring shrines to a beloved king and queen on the roof of Thailand


Beneath the summit of Thailand's highest mountain, Doi Inthanon (2565m), stand two magnificent pagodas, **Naphamaythanidon Chedi and Naphaphonphumsiri Chedi**. They were built by the Royal Thai Air Force to honour the sixtieth birthdays of Thailand's then-king and queen: Naphamaythanidon in brown granite for King Bhumibol Adulyadej (1987); Naphaphonphumsiri in lilac for Queen Sirikit (1992). Set in well-tended gardens, they offer a sublime panorama of the surrounding national park: on some days, you'll be looking down on a sea of clouds, pierced by mountain peaks, but on clear days, you can see the mountains of Myanmar far to the west.

In visiting the pagodas, devotees pay homage to the enshrined relics of the Buddha and to the spirit of their beloved late king and his queen. Not only are they rejuvenated by the clean air and the awe-inspiring views, but they also believe that they will increase their power to attract money and fortune into their lives. To soak up a bit more of the site's natural beauty, you can walk the nearby Kew Mae Pan Trail, through sun-dappled forest and open savanna, to the steep western edge of Doi Inthanon.



CONNECT

-  11km beyond the headquarters of Doi Inthanon National Park, Chiang Mai Province
-  Daily 8am–5pm
-  On Doi Inthanon National Park
-  On King Bhumibol's 60th birthday

 *Before entering the national park, you could visit Wat Phra That Si Chom Thong, a revered fifteenth-century temple and meditation centre.*






THREE KINGS MONUMENT, CHIANG MAI

History, politics and spirituality reinforce this landmark powerspot

Chiang Mai folk offer garlands, trays of marigolds and boiled eggs to the **Three Kings Monument**, while praying to the spirits of the monarchs who reside there. The over-lifesize bronze statue was erected in 1983 as a display of inter-regional harmony in the capital of the north. It shows Mengrai, who founded Chiang Mai in 1296, in the middle, with Ramkhamhaeng, the great king of Sukhothai, on the right, and Ngam Muang of Phayao, a smaller city-state to the east, on the left. As boys, the three had studied under the same religious teacher in Lopburi, but we don't know if the depicted scene – Mengrai discussing with his friends the plans for his “new city”, Chiang Mai – actually took place.

Many layers of history come together at this site. The piazza in front of the monument is now the main venue for city events, flanked by two museums on the region's history. These two colonial-style buildings used to house a law court and the provincial government offices. Before Chiang Mai became a province of Thailand, however, this was the site of the local king's palace – in one corner, you can still see the tall white building (now part of Yupparat School) that once stabled the royal white elephants.

CONNECT

-  Phra Pokklao Rd, Chiang Mai
-  24hr
-  On Mengrai
-  On the museums
-  On white elephants

A hundred metres down Phra Pokklao Rd, there's another popular shrine on the spot where King Mengrai was killed by lightning at the age of 79.





WAT DOI KHAM, CHIANG MAI






*A small but potent Buddha image who loves
jasmine flowers*


Scores of hawkers line the roads to **Wat Doi Kham**, which sits on a low hill in the shadow of Doi Suthep. Drivers pull in to buy as many fresh jasmine garlands as they can afford, to supplicate the temple's presiding Buddha image, Phra Jao Tun Jai. Sustained by a powerful mythology, the "Temple of the Golden Mountain" has recently become one of Thailand's most popular and well-endowed sites of pilgrimage. In 2023, a businesswoman gave half a million garlands to thank Phra Jao Tun Jai for granting her wish; excess jasmine flowers are now dried and made into amulets for sale at the temple.

There are many Buddha images called *tun jai* ("fast") throughout northern Thailand and Burma. The name indicates a statue that has been constructed by a whole community within a twelve-hour period, in a show of cohesion and faith that greatly enhances the image's power. Phra Jao Tun Jai is said to be over 500 years old, but the temple itself was founded in the eighth century by Queen Jamathewi of Haripunchai (modern-day Lamphun), the first Buddhist city-state in the north. Now honoured with many statues at Wat Doi Kham, the queen enshrined a hair relic of the Buddha in a pagoda here, after subduing the indigenous Lawa people.



CONNECT

-  10km southwest of central Chiang Mai
-  DoiKhamTemple  On worship at Doi Kham
-  Daily 8am–5pm  On Pu Sae Ya Sae

 *The Buddha is said to have given his hair to two local cannibal giants, Pu Sae and Ya Sae, after persuading them not to eat him and converting them to Buddhism.*



WAT PHRA THAT DOI SUTHEP, CHIANG MAI

A sacred golden beacon high above the city






Watching over Chiang Mai from its hilltop eyrie, **Wat Phra That Doi Suthep** is northern Thailand's most important place of pilgrimage. Visakha Bucha, the anniversary of the Buddha's birth, enlightenment and death on the full moon in May, is a good time to visit, when thousands of people walk up to the temple through the night from the city.

The original pagoda was built by King Ku Na at the end of the fourteenth century. The king placed a Buddha relic on the back of a white elephant and waited to see where the sacred animal would lead: it eventually climbed Doi Suthep, trumpeted three times, turned round clockwise three times, knelt down and died, so indicating that this was the spot.

The elephant is honoured with a statue at the northwestern corner of the temple's lower terrace. Before going to the main upper terrace you have to remove your shoes – and if you're showing a bit of knee or shoulder, the temple provides wraps to cover your impoliteness. This terrace is possibly the most harmonious piece of temple architecture in Thailand, a dazzling combination of red, green and gold. Worshippers walk around the gold-plated pagoda three times clockwise and are sprinkled with holy oil and water and blessed with chants by a monk in the adjacent pavilion.



CONNECT

-  11km up a mountain road from the northwest side of Chiang Mai
-  Daily 6am–8pm
-  On the temple's meditation courses
-  On the surrounding national park
-  On hiking up to the temple



An old black-and-white photograph opposite the northeastern corner of the chedi shows a rooster that used to peck the feet of visitors who entered with their shoes on.



Mon Tha Than waterfall, Doi Suthep-Pui national park



WAT PA DAET, CHIANG MAI

A powerful Ganesh shrine in an elegant Lanna temple

Actors, TV executives and businesspeople from Bangkok fly up to Chiang Mai to worship at **Wat Pa Daet**, a tasteful Lanna-style temple in well-tended gardens. There they make a wish to Ganesh, the elephant-headed god of knowledge and the arts, while offering auspicious fruits and donations of money. Demand is so great, especially at weekends when a Brahman is on hand to anoint each worshipper's forehead with a red *bindi* spot, that the temple has set up a reservation system.

In the Ganesh shrine, visitors first whisper their request into the right ear of Musika, his rat vehicle, while covering its left ear. Next, they pour holy water over a phallic Shiva linga, catch some of it in their hands from a spout below and dab it on their heads. Then they light a candle in front of the shrine and "pass through the belly of Ganesh", by walking three times clockwise in the basement beneath his bronze statue. Moving to another building, they embrace two huge teak pillars and ring a holy bell three times. Finally, they stick squares of gold leaf onto statues of two sacred giant turtles, symbols of longevity.



CONNECT


 5km south of central Chiang Mai

 Wat Pa Daet

 On Ganesh

 Daily except Wed 8.30am–5pm

 On Shiva lingas

 *If you haven't made a reservation, you can have a simpler ceremony with an offering of sacred grain.*






WAT NAM HU, MAE HONG SON


*A remote temple for a tragic princess,
built by her brother*

On one of his many expeditions against Burma in the late sixteenth century, the warrior king Naresuan founded **Wat Nam Hu** in honour of his elder sister, Suphankanlaya, the “Golden Princess”. Naresuan and his younger brother, Ekathotsarot, had been taken as hostages to Pegu after the Burmese defeat of Ayutthaya in 1564, but seven years later their sister took their place. In 1593, however, after Naresuan killed the Burmese crown prince and threw back his army from Siamese soil, the enraged Burmese king murdered Suphankanlaya.

Set on a grassy slope in a bucolic Shan village, the temple’s main hall shelters the Phra Un Muang Buddha image. Unusually, its topknot can be opened to reveal holy water, which is available in plastic bottles at the temple. Behind the hall, Suphankanlaya’s relics are preserved in a small golden pagoda, where devotees leave flowers. Especially since the 1997 Asian financial crisis, she has been revered as a symbol of sacrifice and national assertiveness. Down the slope in a charming wooden shrine built over a pond, you’ll find bronze statues of the princess, Naresuan pouring water onto the ground to sever ties with Burma and Ekathotsarot. Worshippers offer wooden swords and **rooster figurines** here.

CONNECT

-  3km west of Pai, Mae Hong Son Province
-  Daylight hours
-  On Suphankanlaya’s life
-  On the movie *Suphankanlaya*
-  On visiting Pai

 *In 2004, among many period dramas about the Naresuan era, a movie was made about the legend of Suphankanlaya.*





WAT TILOK ARAM, PHAYAO

Candle processions by boat on Buddhist holidays

On the nights of Makha Bucha (on the full moon usually in February), Visakha Bucha (May full moon) and Asanha Bucha (July full moon), a magical ceremony takes place on the lake of Kwan Phayao. Wooden longboats carry devotees holding lighted candles slowly around a sacred island three times, with the lights and the moon reflecting off the glassy water. The island stands on the site of **Wat Tilok Aram**, which was built between 1476 and 1486 by the lord of Phayao in honour of the great Chiang Mai king, Tilokarat, but submerged in 1939 when the reservoir was created. The temple's original sandstone Buddha image, Luang Pho Sila, has been rescued and installed on the islet under a five-tiered umbrella, alongside a small pagoda.

Worshippers can sail across during the daytime, too, if the lake water is high enough. They offer Luang Pho Sila three incense sticks, lotus flowers, marigolds, candles and *bai sri*. Many also float lotus candles in a well and write their wish onto an orange strip of paper before tying it to the branch of a tree.



CONNECT

 500 metres from Phayao town on Kwan Phayao

 On Makha Bucha

 Wat Tilok Aram

 On Visakha Bucha

 Daily 8.30am–5pm

 On Asanha Bucha

 *At night, look out for the floodlit standing Buddha image at Wat Analayo, on the mountains across the lake.*



LAK MUANG, CHIANG RAI

An intriguing map of the Buddhist universe

In a clearing on Doi Tong, the small hill northwest of Chiang Rai's centre, stands a kind of phallic Stonehenge, centred on the town's new **lak muang** (city pillar). The erection of a *lak muang* as a home for the city's guardian spirit marks the official founding of a Thai city, precisely dated to January 26, 1263 in the case of Chiang Rai. This new *lak muang* and the elaborate stone model around it, which represents the Buddhist layout of the universe, were consecrated 725 years later to the day, as part of the celebrations for the late King Bhumibol's sixtieth birthday. Following northern Thai tradition, the *lak muang* was made to the same height as the king, 1.72 metres, with a diameter five times the size of his fist. It represents Mount Sineru (or Meru), the axis of the universe, while the series of concentric terraces, moats and 108 pillars represent the heavens and the earth, the great oceans and rivers, and the major features of the universe.

Sprinkling water onto the *lak muang* and then dabbing your head with the water after it has flowed into the basin below brings good luck. Worshippers also offer joss sticks, candles, marigolds, auspicious strips of colourful cloth to wrap around the pillars, and ceramic models of elephants and horses, as transport for the spirits.


CONNECT

 Doi Tong, on the northwest side of downtown Chiang Rai

 On Thai city pillars

 On Buddhist cosmology

 24hr

 *Chiang Rai's old city pillar is down in the town centre at Wat Klang Wiang.*







SOUTH

Here you will find spiritual sites on small islands and clinging to towering limestone outcrops, as well as shrines dedicated to a prince who mastered the occult, to a tin-mining politician, and to a 10-year-old nicknamed “Egg Boy”. Having hosted Brahmans and Chinese traders for centuries, the South combines the natural beauty of its coast with powerspots steeped in history.

PRINCE OF CHUMPHON SHRINE, CHUMPHON

A popular shrine to a revered admiral, boxer, doctor and shaman

Dedicated to the “Father of the Thai Navy”, the **Prince of Chumphon Shrine** attracts naval personnel, fishermen and others in the maritime industries, many of whom carry protective amulets of the prince at all times. Born in 1880 as the 28th child of King Chulalongkorn, Prince Abhakara Kiartivongse trained with the Royal Navy in Britain and returned home to help modernize the Thai fleet, before his death here at Sairee Beach in 1923. A renowned *muay thai* boxing trainer, he also practised folk healing and the occult, which helps to explain why his portrait hangs in many Chumphon homes and why there are over 200 shrines to him around the country.

The base of the shrine here is modelled on the prince’s former ship, the HTMS *Phra Ruang*. Several cannon and model sailors guard his statue, which is venerated with gold leaf, incense sticks, firecrackers and red roses. Festivals include the anniversary of his birthday on December 19, when hundreds of women wearing red come to dance at the shrine.



CONNECT


 20km southeast of Chumphon at the north end of Sairee Beach

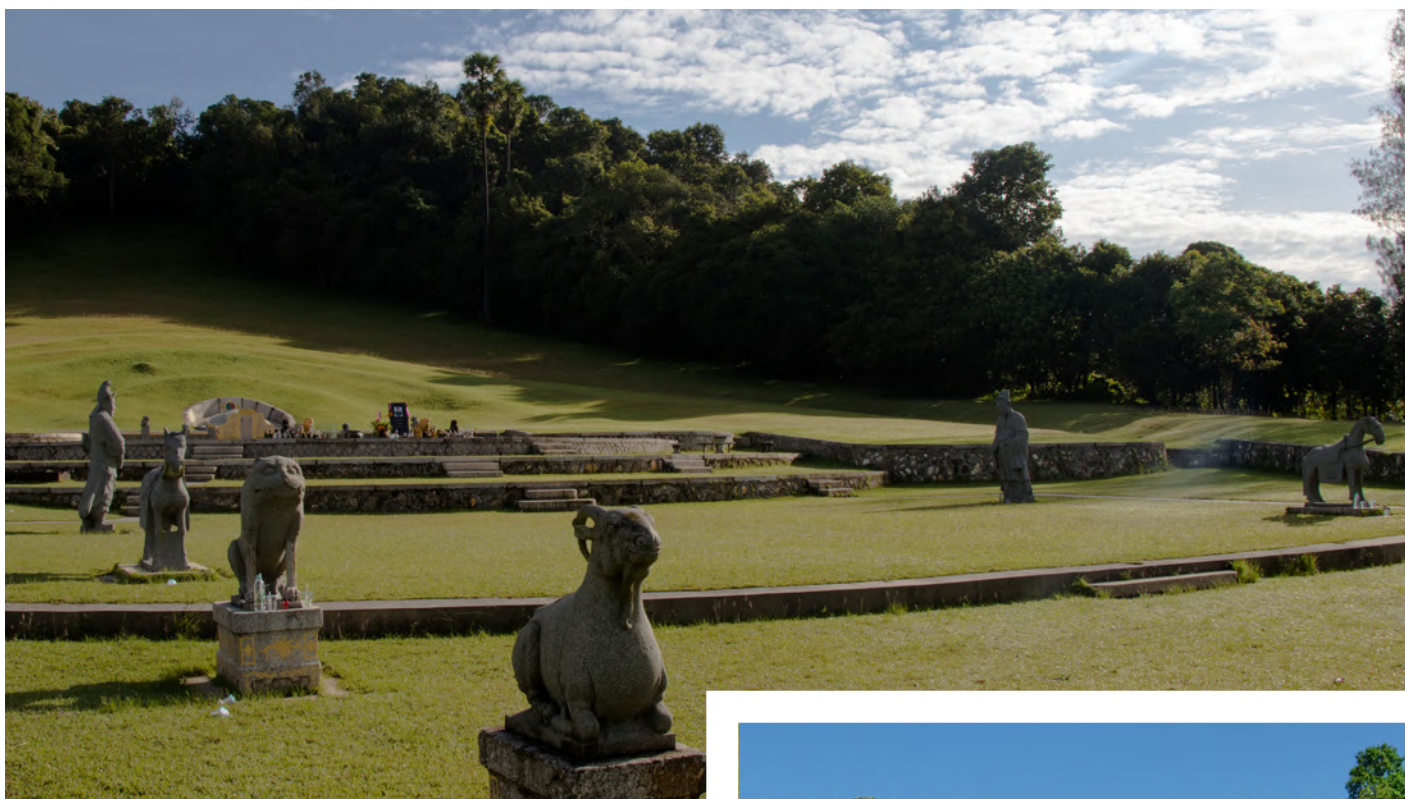
 Daily roughly 8am–7pm

 [On the prince's life](#)

 [On his charitable family foundation](#)

 [On muay thai](#)

 *Across the road from the shrine sits HTMS Chumphon, a 68-metre torpedo boat which was decommissioned in 1975 and encased in concrete.*

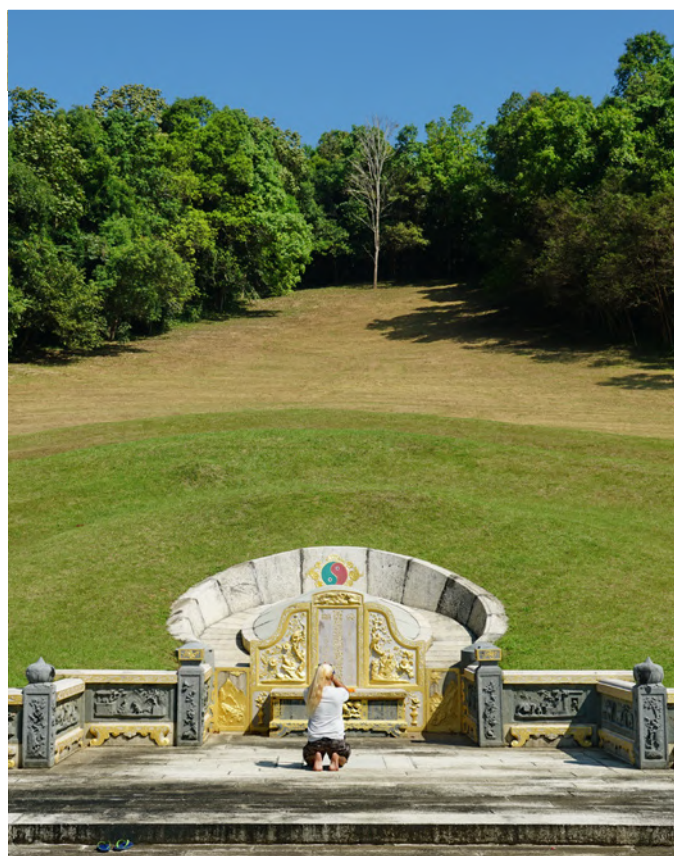


GOVERNOR'S CEMETERY, RANONG


The spirit of a nineteenth-century governor is worshipped in a beautiful cemetery

What looks like a neatly landscaped park at the foot of Rakhang Thong Hill turns out to be the **cemetery of Ranong's first governor**, Khaw Soo Cheang (1797–1882). An emigrant from Zhangzhou in southern China, he landed in Penang, Malaya, in 1822, where he set up a shipping company on the route up the coast to Rangoon in Burma and obtained lucrative tin concessions in Ranong. Appointed governor in 1854, he was given the aristocratic title Phraya Na Ranong (the Na Ranongs are still one of the most prominent Thai-Chinese families in Thailand).

The extensive land for his grave site, which has good feng shui with its back to a mountain and facing the sea, was also granted by the king. On the hillside above the tomb, trees were cleared to leave a grassy area in the shape of a crown. In front are a granite plaque with Khaw Soo Cheang's life story in Thai and Chinese engraved in gold, as well as the symbolic stone statues that he had imported from China: warriors connoting the strength and stability of Ranong, wise men for the city's intellectual attributes, goats for generosity, tigers for power and horses for proficiency in trading. Politicians and other admirers leave generous offerings to the governor's spirit, including whole roast ducks, desserts, whisky, boiled eggs and fruit.




CONNECT

 2km north of central Ranong

 [On Khaw Soo Cheang's life](#)

 24hr

 [On Thai links with Penang](#)

 *Elsewhere in Ranong, you'll find a bronze statue of Khaw Soo Cheang, a museum to him and his clan house.*

KHAO NA NAI LUANG DHARMA PARK, SURAT THANI

Peaceful meditation and worship in a dramatic mountain sanctuary

Surat Thani Province is famous for the hedonistic island of Koh Samui, but its extensive mainland is sprinkled with quiet mountains, which shelter the meditation retreat of **Khao Na Nai Luang Dharma Park**. It is believed that anyone who practises meditation in this serene spot will gain insight, mindfulness and great merit. In addition, visitors can ask for blessings at a Buddha footprint and the Phuttha Silawadi, a simple pagoda of bare laterite bricks containing relics of the Buddha.

Slowly developed by the monks and local villagers since 1982, the park spreads over an abrupt outcrop that rises to 350 metres. Entrance is through the picturesque Phutthawadi Gate, an archway topped with a small pagoda and wreathed in vegetation. Steep trails, narrow bridges and a rickety, open-sided cable car will then allow you to explore the rugged, jungle-clad park, where half a dozen pagodas perch on limestone crags. It's best to visit in the morning: the view of a sea of mist over the plain to the east is the highlight of Khao Na Nai Luang's natural beauty.



CONNECT

 Route 4246, 80km southwest of Surat Thani

 Daily 8am–5pm

 [On Buddha footprints](#)

 *The park is marked on Google Maps as “Thamma Park (Ban Khao Na Nai)”.*





WAT THAM SEUA, KRABI

A meditation powerspot set in lush jungle around a limestone outcrop





Wat Tham Sua dates back to 1975 when a famous monk, Ajaan Jamnian, spent time meditating in a cave under Khao Kaeo hill. His practice was fruitful, including visions of tigers, so he decided to found the “Tiger Cave Temple” here. The cave is still the temple’s main place of worship, now containing over a hundred images of the Buddha and one of his footprints. Visitors often buy amulets blessed by Ajaan Jamnian here, and return with tiger statuettes to give thanks for the granting of a wish.


If you want to do some meditation yourself, a staircase next to the statue of the Chinese Goddess of Mercy, Kuan Im, will take you down into a deep dell encircled by walls of limestone. Here the monks have built themselves meditation cells in crannies in the lush ravine.

At quiet times, some visitors meditate on the top of Khao Kaeo. Over 1200 steps lead up to a golden pagoda and an image of the meditating Buddha on a platform at the summit. From here, the panorama is awesome, taking in jungle-clad karst outcrops, Krabi town and the islands beyond; on some mornings (between roughly September and January), you’ll find yourself staring down on a sea of mist, which is even more spectacular.



CONNECT

-  10km north of Krabi town centre on Route 6017
-  [Wat Tham Sua](#)  [On Ajaan Jamnian](#)
-  Daylight hours  [On visiting Krabi](#)

 *There’s a drinking-water tap at the top of Khao Kaeo.*

HINDU GODS AND RITUALS



In Bangkok every May, before the start of the rice-planting season, sacred oxen pull a lavishly decorated plough through a specially prepared field, under the watchful gaze of the king, his Brahman priests, and throngs of anxious farmers. Afterwards, the oxen are led to troughs for a ceremonial meal featuring corn, grass, rice, sesame, water and rice whiskey. What they choose to eat, among other factors, allows the Brahmans to forecast the success of the upcoming harvest.

These Brahman priests act as the Thai king's liturgists, preserving and performing major court rituals. Through them, a new monarch's political and spiritual authority are affirmed at his coronation. Outside of the court, "folk Brahmans" are also important keepers of ritual, especially in the South, where they have a **school of sorcery** in Phatthalung.

As Buddhism marched eastwards out of India from early in the first millennium AD, it brought along many elements shared with its antecedent, Hinduism, such as rituals, cosmology, and architectural styles; the language of Buddhism, Pali, is a close Indian descendant of Hinduism's Sanskrit. Meanwhile,



Top: iStock.com/toplen22photo. Bottom left: iStock.com/Worleera Pearipai



the mighty Khmer empire, which loosely alternated between Hinduism and Buddhism, held sway for several centuries over most of modern-day Thailand from its capital, Angkor. In the fourteenth century, when the Buddhist Thais of Ayutthaya took over the western Angkorean empire, they adopted the Khmers' hierarchical style of government and Hindu-influenced cultural practices and rituals, many of which persist to this day. And when they conquered Angkor itself in the following century, they brought back to Ayutthaya the Khmers' Brahman priests to conduct royal rites.

It's perhaps not surprising then that Thais, who have a highly syncretic attitude to their objects of worship, have chosen to adopt the Hindu pantheon. Particular gods have special areas of responsibility, and Thais will often pray and make offerings to them for short-term goals. Bangkokians have a choice of eight **Hindu shrines** at the Ratchaprasong Intersection, including a golden statue of Brahma – who has hardly any temples in India – at the **Erawan Shrine**. Otherwise, they can head to the nearby **Sri Maha Mariamman Temple**, where Thai Buddhist worshippers outnumber the city's small Hindu community. In recent years, Ganesha, whose many roles include “Remover of Obstacles” and “God of Wisdom and the Arts”, has become particularly popular. The hundreds of shrines to him in Thailand range from an elegant chapel at Chiang Mai's **Wat Pa Daet** to the truly elephantine outdoor **statues of Chachoengsao**.



BIG BUDDHA, PHUKET






A natural and spiritual powerspot high above the Andaman Sea


Gazing down on Chalong Bay from its 400-metre-high perch on Khao Nak Goet hill, the **Big Buddha** is described on its Facebook page as “heaven on a hill”, and you can see why. Serene but powerful, the glistening-white image presents the Buddha resisting the temptations of the evil Mara, calling the earth to witness by pointing his right-hand fingers downwards. It is said that those who come to pray here will have any kind of blessing fulfilled as requested, and that their evil enemies will defeat themselves.

Visitors who make it up the steep, winding access road are also blessed with an extraordinary panorama, ranging from Kata Noi Beach in the west to hilly Ko Lone island out over Chalong Bay. The dimensions of the white colossus only add to the sense of awe. Made of reinforced concrete faced with marble tiles, the 45-metre-tall image boasts hair curls that are almost a metre wide and sits on a 25-metre-wide lotus flower, which symbolizes the purity of the enlightened mind arising amidst suffering.



CONNECT

-  [Soi Yod Sanae, 7km southwest from Chalong Junction, Phuket](#)
-  mingmongkolphuket.com  [On Mara](#)
-  [Daily 6.30am–6.30pm](#)  [On visiting Phuket](#)

 *Although the Big Buddha is only 2km as the crow flies east of Kata Beach, the only way to drive there is from the northeast near Chalong Junction.*



WAT CHEDI AI KHAI, NAKHON SI THAMMARAT

A boy ghost with many powers in a southern backwater

At **Wat Chedi Ai Khai**, over a thousand worshippers a day pray to the statue of a 10-year-old boy wearing military camouflage and sunglasses. Some even drive up from Malaysia to visit Ai Khai, meaning “Egg Boy”, a common nickname for small boys in the south. He’s said to have been a companion of the wandering seventeenth-century monk, [Luang Pu Thuat](#), who died during a stop at a deserted temple. The old monk asked the boy’s ghost to remain there until meritorious people were born to renovate the temple, and so Ai Khai became a guardian spirit for the local villagers. Especially since the COVID pandemic, his fame has spread far and wide, under a slogan that translates as “Ask, Pray, Get”.

Rooster statues are everywhere here – fighting cocks were Ai Khai’s favourite pets as a boy – and the pop of firecrackers is constant. Originally, visitors asked the spirit to help them find lost things, but his powers have expanded. People now pray to Ai Khai for a son who is smart and as cute as an egg and for lottery numbers – afterwards, they’ll rub a sacred tree trunk in the hope of revealing a winning number. In return, they offer camouflage gear, children’s toys, boiled eggs and desserts (Ai Khai, apparently, has now gone off bottles of red soda). When prayers are granted, rich devotees return to sponsor a dancing troupe or a shadow puppet performance.



CONNECT

-  6km west of Highway 401, 60km north of Nakhon Si Thammarat
-  [Wat Chedi Ai Khai](#)
-  Mon–Fri 9am–5pm, Sat & Sun 7.30am–6pm
-  [Ai Khai in the news](#)
-  [Worshipping Ai Khai](#)
-  [Ikai Dek Wat Chedi movie trailer](#)

Everyone can take home an Ai Khai ring, figurine or amulet to pray to – they will ward off enemies but, as he is considered a novice monk, they can’t harm them.

LUANG PU THUAT KOH NUI NOK, NAKHON SI THAMMARAT

A boat trip to an island with a holy well


“**Luang Pu Thuat** stepped on the sea and turned it into fresh water” (*luang phu thuat yiap nam thale jeud*) is a saying that all Thais know about the revered seventeenth-century monk. Here, on the islet of **Koh Nui Nok**, there’s a freshwater spring in a rock cranny, which is believed to be Luang Pu Thuat’s sacred footprint.

Born not far down the coast in Songkhla Province, Luang Pu Thuat is famous for his magic powers, which saved many lives, and for his travels around Thailand. At Koh Nui Nok, local fishermen take shelter during storms, under the protection of the great monk, and draw fresh water from the footprint. Meanwhile, Luang Pu Thuat’s movements in the south form a pilgrimage trail for his followers, and many charter a longtail boat for the short journey over to the island. To avoid sickness and other misfortunes, they pray to the monk’s spirit while offering to his statues garlands, fruit, incense and candles. Indeed, it is said that Luang Pu Thuat’s powers are so great that when you’re in danger, just thinking of him will miraculously save you.



CONNECT

-  110km north of Nakhon Si Thammarat, 70km east of Surat Thani
-  Daylight hours  [Luang Pu Thuat pilgrimage sites](#)
-  [On Luang Pu Thuat](#)  [Luang Pu Thuat amulets](#)

 *Koh Nui Nok can be easily visited from the resort of Khanom or en route to Don Sak, the ferry port for Koh Samui.*





Sichon Beach, Nakhon Si Thammarat



WAT PHRA MAHATHAT, NAKHON SI THAMMARAT

Prayers for good fortune and children at the south's major pilgrimage site

Enshrining a tooth relic of the Buddha, **Wat Phra Mahathat** draws hundreds of pilgrims every day from all over southern Thailand. The relic has for centuries inspired devotion and the desire for merit-making in local people: after many well-funded renovations, its pagoda now reaches a height of 78 metres, including a pinnacle made of 600 kilogrammes of gold.

Worshippers head for the enclosed steps on the north side of the pagoda to pray. Here they decorate with gold leaf the stairway's demon guards, to add to the shrine's radiance and gain merit. The attached museum houses 50,000 artefacts donated by grateful visitors, ranging from Buddha statues to ships made out of seashells. At the entrance to the museum, you'll pass the Phra Puay, an image of the Buddha giving a gesture of reassurance. Women pray to the image when they want to have children, and the lucky ones return to give thanks and leave baby photos.

For the festivals of Makha Bucha (usually February) and Visakha Bucha (usually May), a strip of saffron many hundreds of metres long is paraded then wrapped around the pagoda. It's said that anyone who takes part in this spectacular procession will have all their wishes come true.



CONNECT

-  [Ratchadamnoen Rd, Nakhon Si Thammarat](#)
-  [Wat Phra Mahathat](#)
-  [Daily roughly 8.30am–4.30pm](#)
-  [On relics of the Buddha](#)
-  [On visiting Nakhon Si Thammarat](#)

 *The main pagoda is surrounded by 158 smaller copies that house the ashes of devotees.*



<https://oei.learnonline.com/ol/267475> (2)

HO PHRA ISUAN AND HO PHRA NARAI, NAKHON SI THAMMARAT

Brahman shrines and a giant swing in the spiritual capital of the south

Most of Nakhon Si Thammarat’s Brahman families, who migrated from India over a thousand years ago, have moved to Bangkok, where they play a vital role in royal ceremonies such as coronations. A few, however, remain, carefully tending the **Ho Phra Isuan and Ho Phra Narai shrines** on opposite sides of Nakhon’s long main street, Ratchadamnoen Road.

“Isuan” is the Thai name for Shiva, who is represented by a stone linga, possibly sixth-century, and a golden Shiva Nataraja in a ring of fire, dancing away the world of illusion. He is accompanied by his wife Uma (Parvati) and their son Ganesh who, as the remover of obstacles, is always worshipped first. In the shrine across the road, you’ll find a sandstone Narai, a form of another of the three main Hindu gods, Vishnu. Devotees offer marigold garlands, candles and incense sticks to all of these deities, which are replicas of originals held in the nearby National Museum.

The giant wooden swing in front of Ho Phra Isuan used to be the focal point of a ceremony to honour Shiva’s annual visit to earth at Brahman New Year, in which teams of young men competed to swing and grab a suspended bag of gold with their teeth. The act of swinging probably symbolized the rising and setting of the sun, but accidents were so common that it was outlawed.



CONNECT

- Ratchadamnoen Rd, Nakhon Si Thammarat
- Mon–Fri 8am–4pm
- On Shiva Nataraja
- On Shiva lingas
- On Nang Kradan

Shiva’s welcoming ceremony, Nang Kradan, has now been incorporated into Nakhon’s exuberant celebrations of Songkran (Thai New Year) on 14 April.



WAT KHAO OR, PHATTHALUNG

An occult powerspot among the rice fields of Phatthalung

In a province that's famous for its folk Brahmans, the **Wat Khao Or** tradition of sorcery has long been considered the most powerful in Thailand, for casting spells, releasing people from spells, exorcisms and making love potions. A centre of esoteric learning, the Thisa Pamok School, is thought to have been founded here over a thousand years ago by Brahmans from India. These days, Wat Khao Or mostly attracts people in dangerous lines of work, such as policemen, who partake in ceremonies instilling invincibility.

The ritual centre of the temple is a cavern at the base of Khao Or hill, where devotees pray to images of the Buddha, revered monks and magical hermits, which are joined together by lengths of white thread – a kind of sacred power cable that gives protection. A little way up the hillside is a bathing pool: it's believed that if you soak in a bath infused with *wan*, a wild herbal plant (*melientha suavis*), for seven days and nights, you will become invincible. On the eighth day of the third lunar month (usually February), a black sticky rice ritual is held, which, if repeated three times, will bring immortality. Bare-chested participants kneel on a tiger skin, with their feet on a piece of steel and a bearskin on their heads, while a monk utters incantations and feeds them the black rice.



CONNECT


 17km north of Phatthalung

 Wat Khao Or

 Daylight hours

 On Brahmans in Thailand

 On sacred white thread

 *Consecrated amulets, statuettes of revered monks, jewellery and other sacred objects are available at the temple.*



Top: iStock.com/bryant (2), Bottom: iStock.com/fpkhourd

LAK MUANG, SONGKHLA

A multicultural guardian shrine in Songkhla's old town

Fleeing war and famine in southeast China, many Hokkien refugees settled in Songkhla in the eighteenth century, where they prospered on trade. Even though they had come to Siam illegally and had a different religion, in 1842 Rama III sent them a cassia wood *lak muang*, the pillar that houses a Thai city's guardian spirit, and officially elevated Songkhla to city status. The king also allowed them to house the *lak muang* in a Chinese shrine next to all their other gods.


Plastered with gold leaf by visitors, the pillar now stands right in front of a Chinese statue of Jao Pho Lak Muang, the city spirit, so that people can worship both at once. Peacock feathers, symbols of sovereignty and prosperity, are also offered, and some devotees pour tea for the deities.

The city pillar has its major festival in early July, accompanied by Chinese opera performances. On the first night, lanterns are raised on tall poles to announce the event, and on the second, local politicians, whether Thai-Chinese or not, come to walk around the shrine with candles to dispel bad luck. On the last day, the deities are carried vigorously on palanquins around the town to bless people's homes. In return, householders lay out offerings of food and place joss sticks on the litters.



CONNECT

-  [Nang Ngam Rd, Songkhla](#)
-  [Daily 6.30am–5pm](#)
-  [On the Songkhla Chinese](#)
-  [On Songkhla Creative District](#)

 *Visitors are asked to light incense out in the courtyard not inside the shrine, which has been recently renovated as part of Songkhla Creative District.*





This e-book was produced by
Palotai Design Co. Ltd.



1077/28, Siamese Ratchakru
8th Floor, Phaholyothin Road
Samsennai, Phayathai
Bangkok 10400 Thailand

+66 2 278 0797
www.palotaidesign.com
email: ben@palotaidesign.com

Text by **Nicholas Grossman**

Research by **Gade Gray**

Creative direction and design by

Benjapa Sodsathit
Patinya Rajnukkarin
Sirirat Prajakthip
Nuttapong Pundee
Siree Simaraks

Coordinating by
Jaruphan Phan-in

Cover photo by
Chaikrit Sutthi

Copyright Palotai Design Co. Ltd.

First published in 2023.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without the prior written permission from Palotai Design Co. Ltd.

amazing
THAILAND

● ● ● a
palotaidesign co., ltd.

