

Chiang Mai Facts

History

A city and a region steeped in tradition and history, Chiang Mai has weathered seven hundred years of fascinating history.

There has been continuous habitation in what is now Thailand for over 10,000 years. Thailand lies between the two great civilizations of India and China and it has been much influenced by the both. Coastal trade came up the river to Siam, as the old capital now known as Ayutthaya, was called. Elephants or ox carts also carried goods across the narrow isthmus to avoid the long and pirate infested route through the Malacca Strait.



Over the centuries great Empires rose and fell in South East Asia - most of them being maritime states feeding off the merchants who traded along the coast. Such was Srivijaya based, some say, in Sumatra, the Khmer Empire of Angkor and the powerful kingdoms of Burma. Far to the north lay China, which sometimes stretched its tentacles down to the south.

Lanna, as the kingdom whose capital was called Chiang Mai, sits right in the middle of all these powers - a land-locked country surrounded and divided by forests and great mountain ranges straggling down from the Himalayas.

By 1300 A.D. the Thai people, moving out from the peripheral areas of China, had established themselves in the northern parts of Thailand. The two most important Thai kingdoms were Lanna and Sukothai, which was, a hundred years later, absorbed into Siam based at Ayutthaya. By the middle of the fifteenth century Lanna was firmly established, it fought successful wars against Siam over disputed territory and it became a major centre of Buddhist studies, hosting the Seventh World Buddhist Conference in 1477. Chiang Mai was also the key market on the trade routes from Yunnan to the Burmese ports where goods arrived from, and were sent to, India and beyond.

In 1557 the Burmese attacked the Thai world, utterly destroying Siam and turning Chiang Mai into a vassal state. For the next two hundred years Chiang Mai was an impoverished backwater cut off from the rest of the world and neglected by its rulers - it disappeared from the pages of history.

In 1767 Burma struck at Siam again and reduced the great city of Ayutthaya to a pile of rubble and it never recovered, the capital was recreated at Bangkok. Slowly the kingdom of Siam recovered under the new Chakri Dynasty.



Chiang Mai, after being deserted for twenty years following the Burmese onslaught, was gradually repopulated and willingly gave its allegiance to the king of Siam. But the journey up the river to Chiang Mai was slow and difficult so that the Prince of Chiang Mai was virtually an independent ruler. The first American Presbyterian missionary to reach the north from Bangkok in 1867 records that the journey took him exactly three months. McGilvary's mission brought in the modern age - as well as, largely unsuccessfully, spreading the gospel, he also

introduced modern medicine and education.

Towards the end of the century British teak companies in Burma began to seek concessions in the north of Thailand. There were frequent conflicts with the Prince who saw nothing wrong with leasing the same concession to two different people. Problems with the missionaries and the teak companies together with fears of British and French intentions along the borders finally forced the Bangkok Government to take firm control of Chiang Mai and the rest of the north in the 1890's. All real power was removed from the Prince and the last hereditary ruler died in 1939. In 1921 the railway blasted its way through the encircling mountains and Chiang Mai became an integral and loyal part of Siam, or Thailand as it came to be called in 1949.



The inhabitants of Chiang Mai are, as one would expect in a city situated at the crossroads of mainland South East Asia, a very mixed lot. The people living in the valleys think of themselves as Thais with a difference - they have their own distinct language and are in fact a mixture of Mon, Lawa, Lao and Thai Lue amongst others. To the west live many Shan and Karen while in the mountains, over the past hundred years, tens of

thousands of hilltribe people have settled after fleeing from troubles in Burma, Laos and China - Hmong, Akha, Lisu, Musser, Yao and the long necked Padaung. There are also many

overseas Chinese, Chin Haw Muslim traders from Yunnan and increasing numbers of Europeans and Americans who have come to live in the beautiful and gentle valley of Chiang Mai.

Location

Chiang Mai valley averages 310 meters (1,027 feet) above sea level, and the province covers 20,107 square kilometers (12,566,910 rai). The widest point of the province measures 136 kilometers (85 miles), and the longest 320 kilometers (200 miles).

To the north, a 227 kilometer (141.88 miles) stretch of mountains divides Chiang Mai's northern districts of Fang and Mae Ai from the region around Kengtung in the Shan State of Myanmar (Burma). On the east, Chiang Mai is bordered by Chiang Rai, Lampang and Lamphun provinces. The Mae Tuen River, Ream Mountains and Luang Mountains separate Chiang Mai's south from the province of Tak. Some stretches of Chiang Mai's south also border Lamphun province. To the west, Chiang Mai is bordered by Mae Hong Son province.

Topography

A large part (>82%) of Chiang Mai's land is covered by mountains and forests. The mountain ranges generally run in a north-south alignment through the province and give birth to several streams and tributaries (such as the Mae Chaem, Mae Ngat and Mae Klang) which in turn feed important rivers and irrigation canals (such as the Muand and Faay) which provide the water necessary to Chiang Mai's agriculture.

Chiang Mai's largest and most important river is the Ping, which originates in the mountains north of Chiang Dao and flows southwards for 540 kilometres (337.5 miles). It is along the banks of this river that Chiang Mai's flat valley area lies.

Chiang Mai is also home to Thailand's highest mountain, Inthanon Mountain, which stands 2,565 metres (8,498 feet) above sea level.

Weather

In general Thailand has a tropical warm climate and sunshine all year round. Chiang Mai is popular for having a slightly cooler climate compared to Bangkok or the south with an average yearly temperature of 25.4 degrees.

Although people from cooler climates may not believe Thailand has a winter time as it is pretty hot all year, the weather does get cooler between November and February, which is Thailand's 'winter' period. In the north of Thailand, especially if you go up into the mountains and stay overnight, it can be surprisingly cold despite warm sunshine in the daytime. During winter time, the temperature can fall to 4 degrees in the evening, though in the daytime you can still expect temperatures of 18 to 32 degrees. Because of the pleasant, less hot and humid climate from November to February this is the high season for tourism in Thailand. There is also an abundance of flowers, making this a time when Chiang Mai is at her prettiest. During the rest of the year, except in the mountains, the temperature is between 25 and 40 degrees.

From March onwards the hot summer weather begins, this is Thailand's low season for tourism, in which visitors usually experience cheaper prices for hotels and packages etc. April is statistically the hottest month, though you can always cool off at Thai New Year or Songkran which involves a large nationwide water festival.

From March to June the temperatures remain hot and from approximately June to October there is a rainy season. Though do not be totally put off as the rain is heavy but only lasts for a short period of time, monsoon rains can be beautiful and they make the mountains lush and green. Tourists should however research into specific weather conditions at beach resorts in the south, as some parts of the south of Thailand experience a lot of storms in this season, which could spoil your hopes for getting a tan! After August the weather becomes slightly cooler (than the hot season- but it's still going to be very warm!) and the rain begins to dry up.



Religion

For centuries past, Chiang Mai has been the centre of religious activity in Northern Thailand. During the Lanna era, Buddhism was the main religion that flourished and grew. Evidence of this is seen in the many ancient temples in Chiang Mai.

Currently, approximately 85% of the people in Chiang Mai are Buddhist. There are 1,253 temples in the province. Important religious functions and ceremonies are held at the Chiang Mai Buddhist Association, which also serves as an office for the Buddhist Youth Club. This club holds religious discussions and sermons on wan phra (Buddhist holidays).

Other religions are also present. Protestantism, Catholicism, Islam and Hinduism are all represented with 92 Protestant churches, 53 Catholic churches, 14 mosques, 1 Hindu temple, 1 Bahai temple and 1 Jewish synagogue.

Despite many Thai people, especially those in urban areas, living internationalised lives the Buddhist faith is still an important part of Thai culture and being Thai. You will without doubt come across Thais worshipping, Buddhist festivals or other religious activity on your trip to Thailand. If you are up early enough you will see lines of Buddhist monks dressed in saffron robes collecting alms from local people. In Thailand there is the opportunity to learn more about Buddhism or to practice meditation and stay in a temple.

● ● ● People and Culture ● ● ●

Chiang Mai Province has a population of some 1,600,000 of whom 172,000 live in Chiang Mai city. 80% of the people are locals by birth and speak kam muang, which is a language close to standard Thai but which has its own distinctive script, some different vocabulary and tones. The other 20% is made up of southern Thais, Chinese, Indians and an increasing number of farang (foreigners).

The term khon muang refers to all the people living in Lanna or upper northern Thailand which is made up of the provinces of Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, Lampang, Lamphun, Phrae, Nan, Phayao and Mae Hong Son.

The original inhabitants were the Lawa (as it were the Celts of Europe) and the Mons with their Kingdom of Hariphunchai base on present day Lampang and Lamphun. By the thirteenth century various Thai tribes had moved into and taken control of the fertile river valleys, defeated the Mon and pushed the Lawa into the hills.

Lanna was over-run by Burma in 1558 and they were not finally driven out until 1775. The legacy of those sad years is still to be seen in some architecture and customs. For twenty years after the withdrawal of the Burmese the city of Chiang Mai was deserted and much of the rest of Lanna depopulated.

Gradually the new ruler of Chiang Mai, Kavila, took control. He brought in Thai tribes from the north, Ngieo, Khoen, Thai Yai, Thai Lu, Yuan and Lao to till the land and populate the towns. It is this mix of people who are today proud to call themselves khon muang.