

Source: [chiangmainews.com](http://chiangmainews.com)

## Festivals & traditions of Chiang Mai, Thailand

### ●●● The Chiang Mai Flower Festival (February)



Once a year the streets of Chiang Mai explode in a kaleidoscopic array of color as the Flower Festival commences.

Towards the end of the cool season, in early February, Chiang Mai is looking its best. Everywhere there is a riot of color as temperate flowers such as asters, salvias and marigolds come into full bloom to join the tropical orchids and bougainvilleas.

This is the time when the glorious Flower Festival takes place. Some fifty villages as well as other private and government organizations compete to create the most spectacular floral floats.

These are covered overall with flower heads in intricate designs and made in the shape of dragons, castles, mountains and so on. Atop each float sits a beautiful girl dressed in sumptuous northern Thai costume. If you come at the time of the festival do not forget your camera there are many great shots to be taken.

The procession wends its way slowly through the streets of the city, which are lined with throngs of people cheering their favorite competitor. When the procession finally reaches Suan Buak Had Park, the flowers and the girls by now somewhat limp from the heat, the winners are announced.



At the Park there are competitions for various categories of flowers, fruit and vegetables, for flower arrangements and miniature gardens as well as hundreds of stalls selling everything you can imagine. You will be able to have fun browsing the festival's array of food and drink stalls and also buying some inexpensive knick-knacks to take home. This is a great time to experience something that Thai people do best, which is to hold events and enjoy them with friends and family. The festival is very popular and hotels are generally rather full so be warned to book in advance.



### ●●● Songkran Festival (April)

The history and traditions of the famous **Songkran festival**:

The ancient Kingdom of Lanna came into existence with the founding of Chiang Mai by King Mengrai in 1296. There is, however, strong evidence from old chronicles that the site had been inhabited for many years by Lawa people who lived in the area long before the coming of the Thai. By the time of King Mengrai, Thai people had spread across the heartland of mainland Southeast Asia, from Assam through Yunnan, Laos, Siam and Lanna, to Vietnam and Hainan - it is highly probable that many of their shared traditions and beliefs date back some two thousand years.

Over the centuries these original beliefs have been overlaid by influences from China and India, in particular, Hinduism and Buddhism. Sonkran or Paveni Pi Mai, the New Year Festival, is, together with the worship of the Rice Goddess and a wide range of ancestral, ground and water spirits, a remembrance from those most ancient days.

New Year in Thailand is highly complicated. The first month of the year in Lanna starts on the full moon in October, which marks the end of the Buddhist three month lent. The Siamese and Shan people consider the first month to start two moons later. In 1889 the Siamese government decreed that the new year should start on April 1st. In 1940, to comply with western practice January 1st became the official New Year. However, the citizens of Chiang Mai know that the real Pi Mai must be celebrated in the middle of April and in 1990 the Thai government made April 13th, 14th and 15th national holidays for the whole country. This is the time when the sun shifts from the sign of Pisces to the sign of Aries. This is one of the great Rites of Passage. The blessing of rain soon to come can be looked forward to and prayed for. The days are getting longer, light is once again overcoming darkness, the slow, hot and tedious days will soon be forgotten and rejuvenation, renewed hope and fertility are in the air. Soon the life giving rains will enable rice to be planted.

Onto these primitive ideas have been grafted Hindu, Buddhist and Shaman beliefs and, today, the whole mix has become one long, joyous celebration - the greatest water fight in the world - much of the original meaning of the Sonkran celebrations has been lost. And this is scarcely surprising given the sad history of Lanna. Following the years of its greatness in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, Lanna was occupied by the Burmese for two hundred years and became a neglected backwater. After the Burmese had destroyed the Thai world for the second time in 1767, the city of Chiang Mai was deserted for twenty years, it was re-occupied by a motley assortment of people, and finally was absorbed as a province of Siam, as Thailand was then called, at the end of the nineteenth century. Most local traditions were lost or suppressed.



The first day of the festival is the last day of the old year. Houses are spring-cleaned, clothes washed and Buddha statues and amulets blessed with lustral water. Up until the 1930's the Jao or Prince of Chiang Mai would go down to the River Ping and ceremoniously pour out sacred water to wash away all the sorrows and problems incurred by his people in the old year. He would then go in procession to pay his respects to the most important Buddha statues in the city.

The second day was an in-between sort of day when people prepared for the New Year which would start on the 14th. It was a day of fun and relaxation and the throwing of water intensified. Girls were allowed and encouraged to become physically and sexually aggressive, bawdy singing competitions were held between groups of boys and girls. Many a village romance started at this time.



New Year's day is a time for making merit in the local wat or temple, merit made this day will go to the ancestors - your own and also those of the village and the King. It is also the day when respect is paid to parents, elders, teachers and those who have helped you in the past year. Their forgiveness is asked for whatever you may have done wrong in the past year whether unintentionally or deliberately. Many think that this Dam Hua ceremony is the origin of the orgy of water throwing but in fact the recipient takes a few drops of water from the bowl offered and touches them to his own head, he will then sprinkle some on the hands of those who came to ask for his blessing.

It is only in very recent years that an effort has been made to revive, or recreate, a Lanna heritage. Much of the pageantry associated with the Songkran Festival - the Beauty Competition, the parade of girls on bicycles, the dances and drumming displays, etc.- have been newly created for the benefit of tourists.

Travelers who do not want to get soaking wet whilst sightseeing should probably avoid visiting during this time. Travel is also made difficult during Songkran as the country tends to shut down for about five days. On the other hand, especially for the young and adventurous, Songkran is an amazing experience which cannot be found anywhere else in the world. Whatever is old, whatever is new, for a week in the middle of the dry heat of April, Chiang Mai is awash with joyous fun and boisterous young and older people taking part in the greatest water fight in the world.

### **Inthakin Ceremony (May or June)**

A unique ceremony held in Chiang Mai every year, visitors are welcome to join in and observe.

The annual rites connected with the sao inthakhin or pillar of Chiang Mai City, begin on the 13th day of the waning moon in the eighth Northern lunar month and continue until the second day of the waxing moon of the ninth month (It is difficult to find anyone who can tell you the exact dates but it is usually sometime in June). What is this famous Chiang Mai ceremony all about and what are its origins?

Old chronicles and modern experts have differing views. Some maintain that the lak muang or city pillar is a form of lingam and that the ceremony is a rite of fertility and rejuvenation as the rainy season begins. Others deny any phallic connotation and say that the lak muang - and many other regional Thai cities also have them - represents the centre of power of the local ruler.



The suwan kham daeng legend relates the story of the original city of Chiang Mai, which was founded by Lawa people before the birth of the Lord Buddha. At that time the city was in dead trouble, beset by demons. A certain hermit asked for help from the god Indra who gave them a protecting stone pillar and also much wealth for he knew that Chiang Mai was to become a great centre of Buddhist learning.



In the course of time, however, the people came to break the taboos and the guardian kumphan demons took the pillar away whereupon disaster struck. Again Indra was asked to help and he agreed to replace the pillar. This was the one that King Mengrai found amongst the ruins when he came to build his capital in 1296.

He found out from the Lawa prince what the pillar was and how it should be propitiated. This, much altered no doubt, is the ceremony that we see today. The inthakhin is kept in a pavilion which no women are allowed to enter, on the

grounds of wat chedi luang although it was not always there. If, and only if, the pillar is treated with due respect, Chiang Mai and all who live in her, will be prosperous, happy and safe.

Today the ceremony is organized by the Municipal Council together with many other groups and the Buddhist elements are stressed together with respect for authority, but nor are ancestors and the spirits of the city forgotten. An associated ceremony, pithee suab jata muang, is performed at the four city corners, the five city gates and at the Three Kings Monument, to ensure the continued long life of Chiang Mai.

### ●●● Pu Sae - Ya Sae Ceremony (June)

A particularly gruesome animist ceremony still performed by some in Chiang Mai.

According to tradition, Pu Sae and Ya Sae are the guardian spirits of Chiang Mai, who now roam the slopes of Doi Suthep. The original inhabitants of this area were the Lawa who in early days are thought to have been cannibals and this is closely bound up with the Pu Sae - Ya Sae ritual as it is practised today. Legend has it that the Lord Buddha visited Chiang Mai. These two, brother and sister, followed him with the intention of killing and eating him. The Buddha stopped and spoke to them and managed to persuade them to give up their cannibalistic ways. They pleaded with him to be allowed to eat buffalo flesh instead, even if only once a year.



So it is that once a year at the beginning of the rainy season, usually in May, a buffalo is ritually sacrificed. Formerly the Prince of Chiang Mai presided over the ceremony, which was also attended by Buddhist monks. This very ancient occasion now seems to be an attempt to bring together Shamanism and Buddhism and also to unite the Lawa people, some of whom still live in the area, and the Thais who replaced them.

In the words of the Pu Sae - Ya Sae invocation, 'Let not the rice of the Lawa die in their swiddens; let not the rice of the Thai wither and die in their paddies.' Clearly the association between Lawa and Northern Thai is both long and close.

## ●●● Loy Krathong (October or November)



One of the most beautiful festivals in Thailand, Loy Krathong, is held on the night of the full moon of the 12th month of the Thai calendar every year - around November. The people of Thailand have had a close relationship with water since ancient times. As a farming people, the Thais always used to build their homes and villages near rivers, for they depended on their waters for their crops as well as for a means to travel from one part of the country to the next. Generation after generation of Thais have been sustained by these waters, so water is held in deep respect. From this respect comes one of the most important

festivals of the year.

During the festival the rivers become full of floats, known as krathong, which are of different shapes and sizes. They are beautifully decorated with both fresh and dry flowers. With candles lit, they become like stars drifting through the heavens made bright by the light of the full moon reflected on the surface of the waters. The beauty of this scene and the atmosphere of celebration have made the festival famous for Thais and foreigners alike.

Though the manner of celebration and the conduct of rituals varies in each part of Thailand, the underlying purpose of showing respect and gratitude towards water is the same.

One of the most interesting objects is the colorful khom loy, or hot air balloon. Built in a variety of shapes and sizes, they are released into the sky during the day and night. Burning wicks are placed in those that are released at night. The lanterns in the sky and the lamps on the ground adorns the sky and the city with a myriad of lights, while all around firecrackers blaze and explode like thunder. This is an atmosphere you can enjoy only in the Yi Peng festival of Chiang Mai.



One of the most interesting objects is the colorful khom loy, or hot air balloon. Built in a variety of shapes and sizes, they are released into the sky during the day and night. Burning wicks are placed in those that are released at night. The lanterns in the sky and the lamps on the ground adorns the sky and the city with a myriad of lights, while all around firecrackers blaze and explode like thunder. This is an atmosphere you can enjoy only in the Yi Peng festival of Chiang Mai.

The festival is made even more lively by the activities of the municipality and private enterprise, which co-operate to put on dazzling shows. Chiang Mai is especially beautiful at this time of year, this is a truly magical time for those who are lucky enough to experience it.