

After Hours



Relax under the Buddha's watchful gaze at Wat Phrathat Doi Suthep.

Recharging in Chiang Mai

Immerse yourself in Thailand's spiritual soul with a visit to the city of Chiang Mai.

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Thai silk for sale at Wororot Market.



Orange-clad monks live within the temple's walls.

HIGH on a hilltop at the end of a curling mountain road, far above the glitter and smog of the city below, sits Chiang Mai's must-see temple, Wat Phrathat Doi Suthep.

I am among hundreds of visitors including curious international tourists, the serene, shaven-headed, orange-clad monks who live and worship within the temple's gilt-edged pagodas and walls, and devout lay Buddhists who have made the pilgrimage to walk the 309 steps up to the temple.

This may sound steep, but pilgrims and tourists have an easier time making it up Doi Suthep mountain than the elephant that, according to legend, climbed the mountain with a holy relic on its back before reaching a level piece of ground, kneeling down and dying at what is now the site of the temple.

Chiang Mai is located in the foothills of the Himalayan Mountains, some 700km from the Thai capital, Bangkok.

At 40km², Chiang Mai's metro area is not even one-tenth the size of Bangkok's, but it has almost as many temples, or *wat*. They sit at street corners and emerge from leafy enclaves, and are particularly enchanting at dusk, when the monks chant their evening prayers.

But there is much more to this city of 170,000 residents than its temples.

The walled and moated Old Town is at the heart of the modern day tourist district, where a thriving community of expats and outward-looking locals brings the comforts of home to its walled and moated confines — Thai style.

Spend a day wandering or cycling around its small, winding streets, or *soi*, and you will stumble across cafes and restaurants offering food and drink to rival any cosmopolitan city.

Blue Diamond on Soi 9 and Little Tibet Restaurant on Soi 6 feed the senses at any time of day, while the upmarket Whole Earth Restaurant on Th Si Donchai will serve you an evening meal to remember. Keep the party grooving with the relaxed yet sophisticated jazz experience at the North Gate Jazz Co-op on Th Si Phum, where customers are invited to jam with a live band on stage every night.

Like most Asian cities, Chiang Mai rises early and sleeps late. Early birds can shop with the locals at the Wororot Market, one of Chiang Mai's largest markets and an easy walk from the

Walled City on the corner of Th Chang Moi and Th Chang Klan.

Night owls will prefer the tourist-oriented Night Bazaar — open from sunset until midnight — where hundreds of street vendors offer stunning handicrafts from around the region.

Yoga and meditation classes, steam saunas, beauty treatments and massages are aplenty.

For something a little out of the ordinary, take a walk to the Chiang Mai Women's Correctional Institution on Rachvithi Road, where strong-armed, smiling female prisoners give spine-cracking massages to tourists as part of a rehabilitation program designed to give them above-board skills to use on their release.

The prison also features a hairdresser and a boutique selling handicrafts made by prisoners.

Chiang Mai has been continually inhabited since the ancient days of Siam, but until the 1920s could only be reached by an arduous journey upriver or atop an elephant. Today Chiang Mai is much easier to get to; only with so much going on, it's harder to leave.

It might be only the country's fifth-largest city, but it's Thailand's unofficial second capital, its smiling spiritual soul. You'll leave enriched. ●

FACTFILE

Getting there: Various international carriers offer flights to and from Chiang Mai. See your local travel agent. Connect domestically with Bangkok Airways, Thai Airways or Air Asia, or make the journey by bus (9-12 hours) or overnight train (12-15 hours) from Bangkok.

Staying there: The Old Town is overrun with reasonably priced accommodation for the penny-conscious traveller. Go cheap but clean and cheerful at Montra Happy House on Chang Moi Kaow Road (\$32 a night), be sensible at the Rimping Village (\$100 a night), or blow the budget at Chedi Chiang Mai on the grounds of the former British Consulate on Charoen Prathet Road (\$375 a night).

More information: Visit www.tourismthailand.org and www.tripadvisor.com. The Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade recommends tourists exercise a high degree of caution when travelling to Thailand. For more information visit www.smarttraveller.gov.au