

## Did You Know?

- A Thai fruit called *durian* has a very strong, stinky smell. It smells so bad that hotels and planes don't allow it inside.
- At some point in his life, almost every Thai male lives in a Buddhist *monastery* (a place where monks live) for at least a few days, but most stay for about three months, usually sometime after finishing school and before starting a job or getting married.
- Thailand is home to elephants, monkeys, poisonous snakes, crocodiles, and lizards.
- During World War II, Thailand declared war on the United States, but Thailand's ambassador in Washington refused to hand the declaration over to the U.S. government, so the declaration of war was never official.
- Because the king is so popular, Thai celebrate his birthday every year by lighting candles and having parades.
- King Rama IV was the subject of the play and movie *The King and I*.
- Once known as Siam, Thailand is proud to be one of the only Southeast Asian nations that was never conquered or colonized by Europeans.
- Thai tradition states that souls live on doorsills, so visitors to a *wat* (temple) make sure not to step on the doorsill.
- The Mekong River, which forms the northern border between Thailand and Laos, is the third longest river in Asia.
- Thailand uses the Buddhist calendar, which is based on the number of years since Buddha passed away.
- Bangkok is known as the Venice of the East because it is built on many canals. More than 10,000 boats carry flowers, rice, and fresh produce across the city via the canals.

## Flag

The flag of Thailand is known as the *Trairong*, or "Three Colors." The flag is similar to the flag of Costa Rica but with the red and blue colors reversed. Blue represents the *monarchy* (royal family), red represents the nation, and white represents religion and the purity of Buddhism.



## National Image

Up until a few hundred years ago, Thai used elephants when fighting in wars. Elephants are still used in construction and in clearing forests. Asian elephants have light gray skin and trunks about 5 feet (1.5 m) long. They eat around 300 pounds (140 kg) of food a day.



## People and Places

### Land and Climate

Area (sq. mi.)  
198,117  
Area (sq. km.)  
513,120

Thailand looks a little like an elephant's head and trunk. The middle is flat, rich farmland. The long *peninsula* (skinny piece of land surrounded by water on three sides) is mostly rain forests and rubber and coconut plantations. Tree-covered mountains are in the far north. Thailand is just larger than Spain, or twice the size of the state of Wyoming. Thailand is bordered by Laos and Cambodia to the north and east, Myanmar (Burma) to the north and west, and Malaysia and the Gulf of Thailand to the south.

Thailand never gets cold, but the north gets a little cooler than the south in the winter (November to February). Everywhere else, it is hot and humid. The country experiences three seasons. April and May are very hot and dry, while the *monsoons* (heavy rains) come between June and October. The rest of the year is dry, with winds blowing from the northeast.

### Population

Population  
67,976,405

Most of the population lives in *rural* (countryside) areas, not cities. In the past few years, many of the country's citizens have left the villages and moved to the cities. Bangkok is the largest city, with roughly seven million people. The majority of the population is ethnic Thai. The largest minority is the Chinese; they reside mainly in Bangkok. *Refugees* (people forced to leave their homes by war) from Cambodia and Vietnam often live just inside Thailand's borders. A half million hill-tribe people live in the northwestern mountains.

### Language

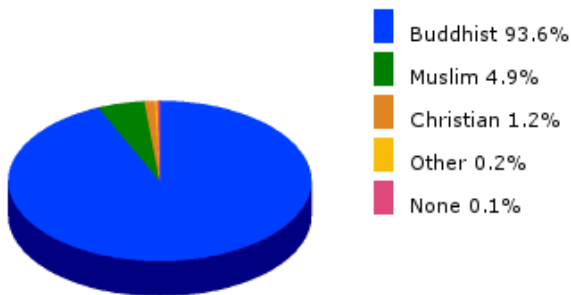
Speaking Thai isn't just about using words and letters—*tone* is important as well. Thai has five *tones* (mid, low, high, falling, and rising sounds). By saying the same word in a different *tone*, you can completely change its meaning, so the *tone* indicator is often placed over a letter. Written Thai has no spaces between words in the same sentence. Most people speak Thai, but others speak Lao, Khmer, Chinese, or Malay. Many Thai who have college degrees speak English, too.



### Can You Say It in Thai?

Hello	<i>Sawatdee</i>	(sah-waht-DEE)
Good-bye	<i>Lar korn</i>	(lah KAHRN)
Please	<i>Dai proht</i>	(die PROHT)
Thank you	<i>Khobkhun</i>	(cob-KOON)
Yes	<i>Chai</i>	(chai)
No	<i>Mai chai</i>	(my CHAI)

### Religion



Source: *The World Factbook 2016. Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, 2016.*

Although Thailand guarantees freedom of religion, the majority of Thai are Theravada Buddhist. Muslims make up a small percentage of the population. There is also a small number of Christians. Thai Buddhists travel to temples to make offerings when they feel in need of blessings, in the event of a tragedy, or on religious holidays. Offerings include jasmine flowers and incense.

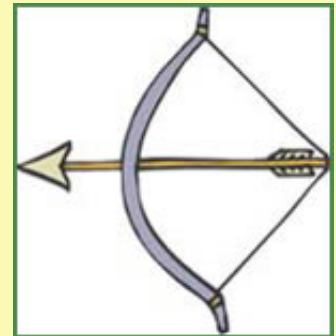
In Thailand, Buddhism has combined with many old folk beliefs. Some Thai build small alters or *spirit houses* (small wooden boxes that look like tiny houses) in front of trees believed to be inhabited by the spirits of dead people or animals. They then fill them with food in order to please the spirits. This is believed to keep the ghosts or spirits from entering the owner's house. While spirits are feared, they are also respected and are believed to be local people who have passed away. Most car and taxi owners hang flower wreaths from their rearview mirrors and paint a Buddhist diagram on the ceiling of their cars above their heads to protect them from danger on the roads.

## History

### Time Line

	Thousands of years ago, the people of Ban Chiang live in what is now northeastern Thailand
AD 800	
AD 800s	The area becomes part of the Khmer empire, which covers much of Southeast Asia
1238	The kingdom of Sukhothai is established
1350	The kingdom of Ayutthaya takes over Sukhothai

1569–90 The Burmese invade and conquer Ayutthaya



1700

1767 The Burmese take over Ayutthaya again, completely destroying the city; King Taksin chases out the Burmese, moving the capital to Thonburi

1782 Taksin goes insane and is replaced by Chao Phraya Chakri (King Rama I), the first Chakri king; the capital is moved to Bangkok, while the country is known as Siam

1868–1910 Chulalongkorn rules as King Rama V



1900

1917 Siam joins the Allies in World War I

1925 Prajadhipok becomes King Rama VII

1932 Military and government officials take over the government

1939 Siam changes its name to *Thailand*, which means “Land of the Free”

1941 The Japanese invade and use Thailand as a base to attack neighboring countries in World War II


1944 The pro-Japanese government falls, and Thailand joins the Allies

1945 World War II ends; Thailand is forced to return the territory it seized from Laos, Cambodia, and Malaya; King Ananda returns

1946 King Ananda, Rama VIII, is murdered; Bhumibol Adulyadej becomes King Rama IX



1947–73 The military governs Thailand

1965	Thailand provides military bases and soldiers to the United States in the Vietnam War	
1973	A student revolution forces the army out of power	
1976	The military takes over again	
1978	A new constitution is adopted	
1991	The military takes over; students riot, and King Bhumibol arranges peace talks	
1996	Thai celebrate the Golden (50-year) Jubilee of King Bhumibol's reign	
1997	After many years of growth, the Thai <i>bhat</i> falls sharply against the U.S. dollar during the Asian financial crisis; unemployment rises	
2000		
2004	Huge waves created by an undersea earthquake destroy coastal areas in southern Thailand, killing more than five thousand people; more than a hundred people are killed in attacks blamed on Islamic <i>militants</i> (soldiers) in southern Thailand	
2006	Thailand's prime minister is overthrown by the military, and a new leader is installed	
2007	A new constitution is written and approved	
2008	Abhisit Vejjajiva becomes Thailand's fourth prime minister in a single year	
2011	The former prime minister's sister Yingluck Shinawatra is elected Thailand's first female prime minister; monsoon rains cause the worst flooding in fifty years, killing over five hundred people and causing billions of dollars of damage	
2013	More than 100,000 protesters take to the streets trying to force the influential Shinawatra family out of Thailand's government	
2014	After months of anti-government protests, the Thai military takes control of the country in a <i>coup</i> (government takeover) and erases all references to former president Thaksin Shinawatra from high school history books	
PRESENT		

## The First Thai

Ban Chiang is the oldest known settlement in Thailand. It's thousands of years old. The people who lived there farmed, grew rice, and raised animals. They were some of the first in Asia to make pottery, jewelry, and tools, many of which they buried with their dead. The early Thai came to what is now Thailand from southern China and eventually settled in small kingdoms. Some of the kingdoms were later conquered by Cambodia's Khmer empire. The Khmer empire eventually grew so large it covered much of Southeast Asia. The Khmer believed their king had sacred powers given to him by the gods.

## Sukhothai

The people wanted freedom from the Khmer. Two chiefs led their followers to overthrow the Khmer. In 1238, the chiefs set up a city and kingdom called Sukhothai, which means "the dawn of happiness." King Ramkhamhaeng was one of Sukhothai's greatest leaders. He ruled from 1279 to 1298. He introduced *Theravada Buddhism* (a religion). Some say he was the first to create the Thai alphabet. Music and the arts also developed. During this time, architects built beautiful buildings with patterns that are still in use today, including great spires and tiered rooftops. Many call this time Thailand's Golden Age. After King Ramkhamhaeng's death, Sukhothai fell into decline and became subject to another emerging Thai state: the Ayutthaya kingdom in the lower area.

## Ayutthaya

Sukhothai lasted until 1350, when it was taken over by the kingdom of Ayutthaya, also called Siam. The kingdom often went to war for new land. They captured prisoners of war and forced them to work as their slaves. Thai were divided into *nobles* (people who are part of the ruling class) and *commoners* (people not in the royal family). *Nobles* were given a certain rank depending on how much land they owned. They also had complete control over the *commoners* who worked on their property.

In the 18th century, the power of the Ayutthaya kingdom gradually declined due to fighting between princes and officials. Outlying principalities became more and more independent, ignoring the capital's orders and decrees. The kingdom of Ayutthaya was taken over twice by the *Burmese* (people from Burma, Thailand's neighbor). The second time, the kingdom was completely destroyed, and all the gold was carried off.

## Chakri Dynasty

A leader named Taksin finally defeated the Burmese. He managed to reunite the Thai from his new capital of Thonburi and declared himself king. But he later went insane and was replaced by the first Chakri king, Chao Phraya Chakri (Rama I), in 1782. The fifth Chakri king, Chulalongkorn, became king in 1868, when he was only 15 years old. He knew Thailand could progress only by educating the people. So he outlawed slavery and set up the first schools for commoners. He built the first railroad and the first medical school, too. He is still loved and respected today.



## Thailand Today

In 1932, military generals took over the government. Under the new constitution, King Prajadhipok was still king, but he wasn't allowed to run the country anymore. A prime minister and an elected *legislature* (lawmaking body) actually ran the government. A few years later, Siam changed its name to *Thailand*, meaning "land of the free." During the next 70 years, the military overthrew the government about 17 times. In the 1990s, Thai students fought the military for *democracy* (government by the people). The ninth and current king, Bhumibol Adulyadej, got everyone together to talk. He helped set up a new and more *democratic* government. King Bhumibol travels all over his country and helps his people however he can.





## Lifestyle

### Games and Sports

*Takraw* is a unique Thai sport that is kind of like volleyball, except players can't use their hands. Instead, players use their feet, elbows, and even heads. Kickboxing started in Thailand. But originally, kickboxers didn't use gloves, just their bare hands. Today, boxing, martial arts, soccer (called *football*), tennis, and basketball are favorite sports.



### Holidays

Thai have up to three New Year's celebrations: the International New Year (1 Jan.), the Chinese New Year, and the Thai New Year, called *Songkhran* (in April). *Songkhran* is a very special holiday, and most Thai try to spend time with their family and relatives in the countryside on that day. People throw buckets of water on each other and even on strangers passing by! The water is thought to bring good luck. Thai also give gifts to the Buddhist monks and elders.



*Loi Krathong* is a festival celebrated on the twelfth full moon of the year. On this day, Thai fill the rivers and canals with baskets full of flowers and candles. They let the baskets float away, believing that they carry away all the bad luck from the past year.

### Food

Thai try to eat dinner together as a family. Some favorite dishes include *pad Thai* (pan-fried noodles), *tom yam* (a salty, spicy, lemon-flavored soup), and *satay* (barbequed meat on a stick with peanut sauce). Thai food is usually spicy-hot from the curries, chilies, spices, and garlic that Thai cook with. Rice is often served with breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Many Thai, especially in the cities, eat out at restaurants. Thai versions of Western favorites such as pizza, spaghetti, and steak are popular. Tropical fruits like mangoes, guavas, pineapples, coconuts, and papaya are common. Fresh juices are available everywhere as well. Cold coconut and sugarcane juices are popular. A favorite treat is toasted bread with condensed milk spread on top. Bugs are coated in honey, fried, and eaten as a delicacy.



### Schools

Adult Literacy  
97%

All Thai children have to take English and computer classes in school. They take these classes along with their math, Buddhism, history, Thai, geography, and music classes. Kids always wear uniforms, usually a white shirt and dark-colored shorts (for boys) or skirts (for girls). For many years, the law required boys and girls to have short hair. Though the law no longer exists, some teachers in schools in the countryside still go around with a ruler and force girls to cut their hair to the exact length. Boys are required to shave theirs.



All kids start school at about age five. High school is not required, and few students go to high school. Even fewer go to college, though the numbers are growing. High school

lasts longer in Thailand, from age 11 to age 18. At college, students are given very few freedoms, even though they are living on their own away from their families.

### Life as a Kid

In Thailand, respecting one's parents is very important. So every time they come home, kids put their palms together and bow to their parents. This bow consists of a tilt of the head toward their raised hands. The height at which they hold their hands depends on the level of respect they are giving their elders. Most hold their hands up to their noses. Friends do not usually bow to each other.

Kids also help around the house with cooking or cleaning. Many Thai kids have to do farm chores before and after school. But after chores and homework, they can go outside and play with their neighborhood friends. Thai kids like to watch television and play games online. Girls like to play store, house, and a skipping game called *gradot cheuak*, in which they have to jump over a knee-high piece of string in various patterns. Boys might climb trees and play marbles or sports.



## Society

### Government

Capital

Bangkok

Head of State

King Bhumibol Adulyadej

Head of Government

Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha

Thailand has a *constitutional monarchy* (a government with both a constitution and a royal family). Although he has influence over government decisions, the king doesn't run the country on a day-to-day basis. Instead, the people elect representatives to serve in the National Assembly. The National Assembly representatives then elect the prime minister, who governs with the help of his cabinet. The National Assembly has two houses: a 150-member Senate and a 500-member House of Representatives. In villages, local chiefs are elected. The voting age is 18.

### Money and Economy

Currency

Baht



Farming used to be the only way that most Thai earned money. Farming rice, tapioca, and sugarcane is still important. But now, Thai work doing anything from farming tropical fruits to growing and selling *orchids* (beautiful tropical flowers). Many people make clothes, electrical parts, or jewelry or sell seafood products such as shrimp.



Thailand produces more tin than any other country in the world. Tourism is also important to Thailand's economy. Sadly, one-tenth of the people live in poverty.

### Getting Around

Thai travel in buses, taxis, cars, and trains. They also use motorcycles as taxis—you can just hop on the back of one and tell the driver where to take you. In Bangkok, you can travel on a *klong* (canal), instead of on a road. In fact, *klongs* often have floating markets, where people go from boat to boat to buy vegetables and fruits. In Bangkok, Thai take colorful *tuk-tuks* (three-wheeled, motorized taxis). Traffic in Thailand travels on the left side of the road.



## Culture Facts & Contacts

### Buddhism

Almost everyone in Thailand is Buddhist. Buddhists worship their dead relatives and Buddha. Food is offered in memory of dead relatives, and special ceremonies at a temple or in the home remind the living to honor the dead. Buddhism in Thailand also includes a special reverence for life based on a belief that all living things have spirits. Buddhists believe in *reincarnation* (that people are reborn in another life after they die). Buddha's teachings were meant to release people from the misery of life's cycles (birth, life, death, rebirth).

Every village has a *wat* (temple). *Wats* aren't just places to worship, however. They were once used as schools. Women can attend the *wat*, but they aren't allowed near the monks, who live in the *wats*. Buddhist monks only eat before noon, so they get up early, around 5 a.m., and eat the food the villagers provide them. For many years, monks owned no possessions. Today, many monks own cell phones and other modern items, but some people argue they should not because Buddhism teaches that all possessions are temporary and therefore not important.



### Learn More

Contact the Royal Thai Embassy, 1024 Wisconsin Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20007; phone (202) 944-3600; web site [www.thaiembdc.org](http://www.thaiembdc.org). Or contact the Tourism Authority of Thailand, phone (323) 461-9814; web site [www.tourismthailand.org](http://www.tourismthailand.org).

# Thailand



Thailand's highest point is Doi Inthanon, at 8,514 feet (2,595 m).

At 198,455 square miles (514,000 sq km), Thailand is about the size of Arizona and Utah put together.

Phuket is just one of Thailand's famous islands. It's beautiful and fun; you can go snorkeling, parasailing, and scuba diving.

The Khorat Plateau is made up mostly of sandstone and doesn't get much rain.

The middle of Thailand is a large plain (flat land) that's often called a rice bowl because of how much and how well rice grows there.

Thailand has about 2,000 miles (3,200 km) of coast.

