

Digital Nomad Guide to Chiang Rai

The Low Down

Nestled high in the northern most tip of Thailand is Chiang Rai, a small up and coming city that is becoming popular with Thais and expats alike. Positioned between the borders of Laos and Myanmar, Chiang Rai is situated 2km above sea level providing a more temperate climate in the winter months compared to the rest of Thailand.

Known locally as the golden triangle, the meeting point of the 3 countries is just 2 hours drive from the centre of Chiang Rai and is a popular tourist destination. A river forms a natural boundary between Thailand, Laos and Myanmar and is just a stone's throw across.

The small town of Mai Sai is a short hour's drive north which borders with Myanmar, making it very convenient for visa runs and shopping across the border.

The Chiang Rai population is around 62,000 and is slowly growing in size. The area is currently undergoing a property boom, which is driving up the prices of land and houses in the area but still remains a much cheaper place to live than areas like Phuket or Krabi in the south.

It has become a haven for wealthy Thai's who have been buying land and property in the area. A lot of the rice fields are now beginning to be sold off by retiring rice farmers who are looking to make a killing.

Most Thai's consider CR to be paradise compared to the sweaty polluted cities of Bangkok and Chiang Mai. With the emergence of low cost airfares from airlines such as "Airasia" and "Bangkok Air" more and more Thai's continually flock to their weekend retreats in the cool north.

Buying or renting a property is usually conducted through word of mouth or recommendations so getting integrated into the local community of expats and Thais would be best. Like all other places in Thailand if you are staying for an extended period of time then it is important, if you want get anywhere in Thailand to have good Thai woman (or man) behind you all the way, this is not crucial, but it helps a lot!

Having someone who speaks the local language is a huge benefit as even Thais who speak reasonable English will misunderstand what you are trying to say a lot of the time, particularly regarding technical information such as computers or building work.

Language will be a barrier specifically when it comes to employing tradesman to work on your house or garden etc. They won't speak English and can often be lazy. A watchful eye is wise to make sure they are not cutting corners. On the good side the charge is often 25% of what it would normally cost in the west and in general they are pretty competent and trustworthy.

For the budget conscious traveller living 2-3 km out of the town centre in one of the many villages is the best option. The prices are cheaper and a two bedroom bungalow would set you back around 2000 Bht a month but that is the bottom end. Nicer bungalows can be found for 1500 Bht a week, normally with some basic utilities included.

To find houses for rent you need to have friends who can point you in the right direction. Some landlords will probably be charging you more than if you were Thai but that is unavoidable, unless

you can get a Thai person to rent the place for you. Most will take you on for a minimum of a 3 month contract payable in advance.

Thai people are incredibly superstitious and will not live in a house where someone has passed away, for example an elderly person. They believe it to be haunted, which can be great for people looking for a bargain.

The surrounding area of Chiang Rai is full of miles upon miles of villages. Living there can be fun but also a little intimidating at first, especially if you are the only foreigner in the village. The people are always friendly, if only a little bewildered of the new guy in town.

Many villages have an appointed president that takes care of “village business” such as street lighting (bulbs) or pot holes etc. Electric bills are normally delivered to your door which has to be paid at your local 7Eleven store. If your Electric bill is less than 200 Bht for the month then it is free! This was introduced to help struggling Thais.....and nomads.

Water bills are normally collected by a villager on a motorbike, which can seem a little strange the first time if you don't know why they are asking you for money. It is normally less than 100 Bht for 3 months.

Chickens often roam free in the villages and can be a little bothersome, but soon you'll hardly even notice the constant blare coming from the horny little cockerels. Most people own at least one dog which has a tendency to bark a lot to keep potential thieves at bay but are no problem once you become familiar.

There are a lot of public holidays in Thailand which normally include festivals or free music events for the villagers. It can be a fun way to spend an evening and also to introduce one's self to the locals.

Most streets in Thailand have at least one daily speech that is given over a very loud megaphone by the president. When looking for a place to rent or buy, it is advisable to check how close the tannoy is to the property as these announcements can be as early as 6am. They are useless to anyone who doesn't speak Thai but are normally just about local events and council issues.

Land can be bought and sold through the Thai Visa website <http://www.thaivisa.com> though word of mouth is much more prevalent. Just mention the fact that you're looking for a place to rent or buy to one or two people in a local bar and you'll soon have many people offering to show you properties. These people will be looking to earn some commission from the owner of course. Expats will help you out the best they can without expecting anything in return.

Unfortunately the cost of living has risen in recent years but Chiang Rai remains a perfect combination of affordability and a majestic place to live in Thailand. Supermarkets are very expensive and in some cases items costing more than in the west. Due to a high import tax, anything not “Home-grown” is therefore very expensive.

The town centre is where it all takes place. There are local shops, restaurants, hotels, hostels etc. There are two main supermarkets, Big C and Central Plaza. They are opposite each other and are off the main road out of CR, but are too far to get to without transport.

Within the city limits there is an abundance of local shops and markets selling everything from household items to groceries at a much lower price, so you needn't leave the town centre if that is where you are staying.

Tuk Tuks can be used if you're in the mood for a little haggling. Metered Taxis however have recently become a new addition to the transport system in CR. If you speak Thai or have a Thai friend you can call them locally on 053-773-477 or 081-998-8918, otherwise they can be flagged down.

If you are staying in the centre of town there are numerous rental places offering motorbikes for as little as 200-300 Bht a day. A weekly or monthly price can be agreed for a reduced rate. The local area is a pretty easy place to get around once you have your bearings and the roads are much safer than those of Bangkok or Chiang Mai.

If you don't wish to take your chances on the main roads then car rentals can be found locally. A local company called "KM" can be found on Thanon Pernavipat road in town opposite the Wangcome hotel. Also the airport can be a good place to hire a car.

If you are looking to buy a car then dozens of car showrooms are on the major roads in and out of CR. Again due to high taxes, vehicles can be expensive but will also hold their price should you wish to sell it later on.

Buying a car or pickup truck can be done without the aid of a Thai person but all large purchases should be overseen by someone who knows what they are doing, just to make sure you have everything covered. There is a road tax but it is quite inexpensive and insurance can be the same as UK prices. Any information about paying for specific items or services should be gone through with a Thai friend.

There is no train service but there are two main bus stations, the old and the new. The old one is in the town centre and services are limited. The newly built station is a 5-10 minute drive out of town. Services can change without notice but in general are pretty good. Most buses leave the new station whilst some services may terminate at the old.

It is not unheard of to be expecting to arrive at one and end up at the other, but they are close together for this not to be an issue. There are varying prices and types of buses. The "Green Bus" is particularly good, offering VIP buses that are very comfortable. You can get to Chiang Mai for 288 Bht, but you could get there for as little as 100 Bht depending on the level of comfort to want.

Getting a pay and go Sim Card for your phone or tablet is cheap and easy to do. 7Eleven stores are everywhere and sell "One2call" Sim Cards by AIS which is the local mobile phone company, just ask for a "One2call" Sim card and you will be understood, normal cost 50 Bht.

Top ups can be bought as scratch cards for 50 Bht or higher denominations can be asked for and a till receipt with a 12 digit code will be given. You simply dial *120*12 digit code# then press call.

Providing your phone accepts the Sim you're away! There is also a package service with AIS for internet data. Visit <http://www.ais.co.th/12call/en/simcard-one2call-netsim-3g.html> for prepaid packages.

If you're seeking a more permanent internet solution for your home then there are several ways of doing it. The traditional way of getting it through your land line would be through the Thai state-owned telecommunications company TOT, Unfortunately in the more remote areas that are slightly out of town there may not be landlines, but this would normally only be an issue if you were buying land on a new development. Buying or renting a house shouldn't be a problem for landlines.

Mobile internet can be used if a landline is not present; DTAC is the company that provides a dongle service whether for Air cards or USB Dongles. A DTAC Sim Card can be bought at mobile phone stores. Failing that, an antenna can be put on properties which are the same size as a TV aerial from a company called C.A.T. Compared to Europe and North America the internet speeds in Thailand are considerably slower but are fine for most internet usage.

If you can't live without a bit of Western TV then you are in luck. European and American Television can be received through a satellite dish which can be installed by a company called True Visions. Depending on the package you buy you can have a wide range of viewing from Sport, Movies, American and British TV.

Nightlife

The main concentration of bars and restaurants is in the town centre. The main strip is called Jetyod road and the bigger type restaurants are on the main adjacent road. There are many western (pricy) restaurants offering Pizzas, Burgers etc. Street food is common but perhaps not as plentiful as the neighbouring city of Chiang Mai or Bangkok.

There are some nice Thai and Chinese food halls in an around Jetyod road. The "Siam Corner" restaurant opposite the Wangcome hotel is popular with both Thais and westerners. Breakfast buffet at the Wangcome hotel costs around 170 Bht if you're in the mood for some eggs and bacon! Coffee shops are numerous but Thai people are not as renowned for making coffee as say the Italians, but there are some good places to try.

The bars are all quite cosy, some with pool tables, music, sports etc. There are some "girly bars" along Jetyod road as well as bars that don't allow it. If you want to avoid the girly bars the Thai owned "Cat Bar" is a popular choice with expats and a good place to meet new people, principally if you are looking for somewhere to rent. Around 10 pm, the owner straps on his guitar and plays some rock classics, whilst encouraging other musicians to grab a guitar or sit behind the drums and jam with him.

Chiang Rai is a small town compared to Bangkok and Chiang Mai but there is still are large community of Expats. Jetyod road is the best place for catching up with friends or meeting new ones.

Festivals are common in Chiang Rai. Every year around February time a festival is held over 7 nights at the old airport on the runway. There are two stages with local bands, a fun fair for children as well as countless food stalls and other fairground attractions. Every month there will be some kind of party going on within a few miles of where you live.

The Pros and Cons

Chiang Rai is slap bang in the middle of Laos and Myanmar, which gives you a perfect opportunity to visit these countries for a weekend retreat etc. This however means that there is no coast and therefore no beach in Chiang Rai. There is a river area where locals like to visit but the water is best to be avoided.

A recent addition to Chiang Rai is the Central Plaza, a new multi-storey shopping complex offering all kinds of modern amenities. The supermarket now offers European food which until recently was unobtainable in Chiang Rai. All kinds of technology are now available; unfortunately

The airport is close by but the flights are limited. Normally you will have to fly to Bangkok first before moving on.

Thailand's second largest city Chiang Mai is only 2-3 hours drive away, which offers a playground of activities for people wanting to get away for the weekend or Xmas etc. The Chiang Mai airport also offers flights across Thailand and other parts of Asia, relinquishing the need to fly to Bangkok first from Chiang Rai.

It is a lot cheaper than other parts of Thailand whether renting a property or just going out for a few drinks. However the entertainment can be a little limited to the Jetyod area. There are other bars around the town to be explored but are few and far between.

Tourism

The weather in Chiang Rai can be divided into 3 seasons:

Hot & sunny (& sticky) - March to October.

Cooler (& sometimes cold) - October to Jan/Feb.

The rainy season - May to September.

The cheapest time to visit Chiang Rai would be the rainy season but when it rains it pours, so the best time to visit would be October to February. It can get a little cold in the evenings especially in the rural areas however the day light hours are filled with blue skies and glorious sunshine.

Chiang Rai hotel prices have risen over the past 5 years but some remain reasonably priced.

Getting long term discounts can vary on time of year. Christmas is a busy time and most hotels are full. A reasonably priced hotel is "Laluna", situated a minutes' walk from the old airport runway. Prices start at 350 Bht a night but can be as little as 250 Bht for longer stays

www.lalunaresortchiangrai.com

The "Sabai" is another fantastic spot. The hotel is positioned half way between the old airport and the town centre. It offers free Wi-Fi and Thai breakfast for a starting price of 350 Bht a night.

For those on a tight budget the "City Home Guest House" is just around the corner from the old bus station and prices start from 300Bht a night. Long term prices can be negotiated upon arrival. This is perfect for travellers looking to meet with fellow nomads.

Wat Rong Khun or White temple is becoming an increasingly popular tourist attraction. The temple was designed by the Thai visual artist called "Chalermchai Kositpipat". The artwork found on the interior is not what you would expect from a functioning Buddhist Temple.

The interesting modern day artwork depicts scenes from movies or shocking news reports, such as the twin towers burning or paintings of characters from the 80's horror film "Hellraiser". There is a unique feel about the place when you walk in and see the bazaar artwork cascaded on the brightly coloured walls. Unfortunately cameras are not allowed inside.

The local hot springs can be a refreshing way of spending the afternoon. There are swimming pools for taking the plunge but it can get a little too hot at times. Remember to take some eggs as there is a small dipping reservoir, so make sure you pack a picnic!

15km drive from town is a small elephant sanctuary where people can take a short 30 minute ride down river to discover the real rural Thailand. There is also a giant snake for brave souls to have

their photo taken.

There are several waterfalls in Chiang Rai but by far the most unsurpassed is the Khun Korn waterfall. There is a 1 km trek with a steep walk up a hill which can be quite tiring in the humid weather.

Chiang Rai zoo is free to enter however seeing some of the animals in captivity can be a little distressing for some people. A fun feature of the enclosure are the "Hill Myna" birds that can mimic anything you say, including a person's laughter, which then sparks off even more laughter!

Visa

Visa runs can be turned into a pleasant day out by taking a day pass and going over to the town of Tachilek in Myanmar for shopping. You will have to leave your passport in the Immigration office but it is perfectly safe.

In Mae Sai at the border, there is a chance to walk around the cavernous market dwellings in the surrounding streets in search of bargain treats from across the border. Chinese teas, children's toys, household items and clothes can be found at great prices.

Certain Items can be counterfeit and can be misleading. One example is chocolate bars that look so good in the packet, you just can't wait to get your hands on them, but instead the chocolate is of very poor quality and the filling is minimal.

Whether you decide to hop over the border or wander the market for some rock-bottom deals, you'll certainly be able to make a day of it when the time comes to renew your visa.

When flying into the country you will automatically receive a 30 day visa by which time you will have to leave. When crossing the border by Land you only get a 2 week visa. The rules are always changing for visas in Thailand but you are currently only allowed to cross the border by land 3 times at the Mae Sai crossing, which is costly and means you'll have to get to the border every 2 weeks.

So arranging a 3 month or a year visa beforehand is best. Normally you receive a 2 month visa that can be renewed for the extra month at the immigration office at Mae Sai. Also with a year visa you have to check in every 3 months at the immigration office.

Fortunately a monthly service has recently become available at the Central Plaza in Chiang Rai allowing locals to renew their visas without having to make the trip to Mae Sai, which can make things a lot easier, especially if you don't have your own transport.

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- Chiang Rai Beach
- Elephant Ride in CR
- English & Thai Bday Celebration
- Feeding the Elephants
- Hot Springs
- Khun Korn Waterfall
- New Year Party in CR Town Centre
- New Year Party Lanterns
- New Year Party Lanterns 2
- Two Bed Bungalow 2000Bht a month
- Village Party
- White Temple