

# CHIANG MAI, CULTURAL CAPITAL OF THE NORTH



*If you can write a short story about anything as long as it is Thailand orientated, we will give the author of the published story a 1,000 baht voucher to use at the Saxophone Pub on the beach road in Patong (valid until 30 Jan 07).*

*Each story should run no more than 1,000 words and can be emailed to; [andamanpost@yahoo.com](mailto:andamanpost@yahoo.com)*

*A picture or drawing can be included if you wish. So try your hand and let our readers know your story and enjoy a night out at the Saxophone Pub on us.*

I went to Chiang Mai by plane. I was originally considering going by bus or train, but I'm rather glad I didn't. Apart from getting to Don Muang Airport, which always seems to be a hustle, the journey itself was smooth and easy.

The airline was One-Two-Go and they sell the tickets at 711. After convincing the counter assistant that I didn't want a phone card for 1,600 Baht, I managed to get a ticket; very similar in appearance to a phone card, as it happens. I rang up and reserved my seat as per the instructions and took it along to the One-Two-Go check-in at the airport the next day, only to be told my reservation had been mysteriously cancelled!

After several minutes consulting various officials, the airline clerk managed to re-confirm my seat and I eventually caught the plane. The flight was short and sweet and they even served a snack, unlike several budget airlines I could mention. Chiang Mai Airport is a joy to use. Minutes from the centre of town, it's very accessible. I took a tuk-tuk rather than a meter taxi and surprisingly enough didn't get ripped off. Good start. The tuk-tuk driver did get lost, though, despite having assured me he knew where my hotel was, but by asking several taxi drivers, he eventually found it OK.

Chiang Mai has a completely

different vibe to Pattaya. Seemingly, no sex and drugs and rock-n-roll, for a start. They do have those things (this is Thailand, after all), but they're much less apparent. The major differences were, firstly, the temperature was much lower, the average being 25°C (three seasons) and, secondly, there are multitudes of young farang backpackers and cultural travellers, next stop from the Khao San Road in Bangkok, presumably. There are also lots of excellent bookshops and restaurants, many of which sell genuine vegetarian food, for which I was well-pleased having had to eat junk food substitutes for as long as I can remember. There are many other restaurants serving Thai, Chinese, Indian, and Western food, as well, of course. The prices seem generally lower than Pattaya, though the tuk-tuk and song-taew (Baht bus) prices seem marginally more expensive, but apparently the best policy is to bargain with a smile.

Chiang Mai is the cultural centre of the North and a prominent city of the ancient kingdom of Lan Na (the kingdom of a million rice fields). Having changed hands several times, there are relics of Mon and Burmese occupancy throughout the city. It was also the religious centre of the North with 300 wats, the oldest being Wat Chiang Man c.1296 AD. In short, it's a Mecca for tourists

and culture-vultures alike.

However, it's in its rich shopping opportunities that Chiang Mai really excels. Antiques (authentic and otherwise), repro, contemporary and chic furniture from Thailand, Burma, China, and Cambodia, lacquerware; bronze-work, stoneware, pottery, ceramics, crystal, glassware, craftwork; designer goods, fine furnishings, hand-woven fabrics, silks, handmade clothes, leatherware; jewellery, gems, scented candles; primitive and contemporary art, posters and paintings. All reflecting Chiang Mai's unique position as an ancient, multi-cultural crossroads. Dealers come from worldwide to source the bargains that abound and you can spend a fortune, or a pittance and still feel satisfied. The Night Market between Loi Khraw and Thae Phae Roads is a source of many of these goodies and you can practise your haggling skills to furnish your house, or buy souvenirs for all and sundry.

Chiang Mai is also a centre for spas offering yoga, meditation, T'ai Chi, Raiki, massage and aromatherapy. You can partake of and even learn to teach these arts.

There are many treks into the mountains, which surround the city and also into the jungle. I didn't go on any, not being your average tourist, but I'm told they're well worth the effort.

Travel agents abound, selling tours and excursions of all sorts and dimensions. Chiang Mai is the home-base for these trips and you can literally go anywhere from there, including by air to Nepal, China and Tibet. Locally, you can go white water rafting, elephant trekking, ox-cart riding, paintball fighting, scuba diving in the river Ping, visit the hill tribes like the Karen, Long Necks, Meo, Yao, Aka or Mien, or take boat trips to visit ancient Chinese buildings, caves, waterfalls and hot springs. The venues seem endless, limited only by the locals' imagination and resourcefulness. Indeed, if you went on more than several of these jaunts, you'd be totally exhausted. Perhaps that's the idea!

They are justifiably proud of their local handicrafts of pottery, silverwork, weaving and woodcarving, organising trips to see the manufacture of Thai Celadon, teakwood products, terracotta, silverware, mulberry paper products, silks and fabrics. It's a rich farming and growing area, so naturally, they'll take you on excursions to see the national parks and elephants, butterflies, bees, insects and orchids being raised. Many of these trips are not just I-day affairs, but involve camping out for 3 days; they even have 5-day river trips to China! And they're not cheap, either. A 3-day jungle trek will

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