

# Thailand

Limestone cliffs on the coast of Tonsai & Railey, Krabi.

## Intro to Thailand

### Geography

Thailand is a kingdom made up of 76 provinces occupying a total land area of 515,000 sq. km. It shares a narrow border with Malaysia to the south, Laos to the North, Cambodia to the east and a Myanmar to the west. The capital, Bangkok sits at the strategic centre where the most important tributary, the Chao Phraya river pours into the gulf of Thailand.

The Thai peninsular is nearly 2000 km longitudinally and 800 km at its widest point but barely 50 km wide at Ranong in the south. Here, the west coast fronts the Andaman sea whereas the east coast faces the gulf of Thailand thus sparking endless debates about the benefits of digging a deep water canal so ships do not have to sail around the Malay peninsular. This area is generally hilly with predominantly granite bedrock making up the east coast and outlying islands. The world famous limestone crags dots the west coast and on the islands in Andaman Sea.

Central Thailand is generally flat with plains stretching across as far as the eye can see. This fertile region irrigated by the numerous rivers flowing thru from the highlands to the north and west is the rice bowl for the region. Rare limestone crags can be found in Lopburi and Kanchanaburi areas whereas granite boulders are found in the Saraburi region.

The highlands to the north and west are actually part of the Himalayan chain where Doi Inthanon stands as the highest point in Thailand ( 2595 metres ). Other than Chiang Mai, this region has witness limited development due to its inaccessibility. Limestone crags can be found everywhere here though not as dense as the south. Distance between crags and access difficulties has also somewhat curtail route development.

The eastern parts of Thailand are hot, dry regions frequently hit by draughts. This is the most under-developed part of Thailand. Information about this region is limited but locals has spotted sandstone boulders and crags. However, first-hand climbers's accounts are non-existent.

## Climate

Though the entire country lies within the tropical belt, Thailand benefits from having one of the most varied climates compared to other South East Asian countries. This is due to the fact that it spans across nearly 2000 km from its southernmost border with Malaysia all the way to Laos and Myanmar to the North.

Central and north Thailand have 3 vaguely distinct seasons. The 'cool and dry' season extends from November to February. This is the most pleasant time of the year to visit Thailand. Tourist arrivals (and prices!) also peaks during this period due to the winter months in the Northern hemisphere.

The 'hot and dry' season lasts from March to May while the months of June to October experience the 'hot and wet' season.

The highland regions to the North are blessed with cool sub-tropical climates. Day temperatures hovers at a very bearable 20 – 25 deg C in the December to January months and can dip to below 10 deg C on especially cool nights. The cool temperatures coupled with dry conditions makes this period the most favourable for travellers and climbers.

Tropical south Thailand temperatures remains the same throughout the year and experiences just 2 weather conditions – the 'dry' season and the 'rainy' season.

The east coast as well as the islands in the gulf ( Ko Samui, Ko Tau etc) are subjected to harsh weather conditions during the North-east monsoon from November to February. Strong winds, choppy seas and rainy conditions makes it less attractive for travellers during these months.

The west coast ( Phuket, Ko Phi Phi, Krabi etc ), however, experiences cooler and dryer conditions during the North-east

monsoon. The humid and rainy season for this area stretches from March to October.

## Packing

Generally, you can't go wrong travelling with minimal clothes in this predominantly hot tropical environment unless of course if you plan to visit the northern highlands in

December. Even then, finding the right warm clothing in Bangkok or Chiangmai is a breeze and definitely cheaper than in Europe or US!

If you're arriving via Bangkok, you should be able to find everything you need there.. In fact Bangkok is the bargain capital of southeast Asia for clothing, bags and handicraft so plan for a few days and spare some Bahts if you can. Prices of electronic goods and media like batteries, films or memory cards are comparable to the rest of the world.

Access to almost all the crags described here does not involved hours of trekking so a simple crag bag or day pack with 40 litres carrying capacity would suffice to fit your gear and lunch. Sturdy sandals serves well almost everywhere in Thailand, particularly suitable on the beach climbs in Krabi. But be wary of sharp rocks and corals when walking along the coastline. Throw in a pair of approach shoes. Though more inconvenient, they protect your foot better and is more suited for the longer treks on loose soil in Chiangmai and Lopburi.

The usual travelling kit for a tropical destination applies. This include mosquito repellents/coils, sunblock, sunglasses and caps/hats. Thailand is one of the more liberal countries in Asia, so wearing bikinis to climb is perfectly fine everywhere from Krabi to Chiangmai.

However, exercise care and common sense if the crags are very near Wats or Temples. Its very insensitive to be barely clothed when next to praying monks! The southern provinces is predominantly Muslim so ladies should take care not to upset sentiments by being to public with their crop tops/sports bras.