

Thailand for the woman traveller

Travel writer and blogger **Ami Bhat** of Thrilling Travel discovers how Thailand is safe and fun for the solo woman traveller

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A curtain of clouds parts to reveal green fields, interspersed with mist-covered mountains. The landscape oozes serenity as you gaze down at it. The teasing preview is an unmistakable call of the land to explore its many secrets. As the matchbox buildings grow bigger, my excitement mounts. “Sawasdee Kha” – the voice says as the wheels of my Thai Airways plane touches down. “Welcome to Chiang Mai, Thailand!”

With its easy transport systems, a plethora of stay options and tourist-friendly laws, Thailand is a great escape for anyone who needs a break. A perfect medley of calm and thrill, culture and adventure, heritage and nature, my travel to this destination is just the indulgence I need to break the monotony. And it isn't just the place that appeals; it is also the culture and the people that adds to the comfort of travelling as a solo woman in Thailand.

Thai culture believes in respecting people. Every person – be it your cab driver or the porter at the hotel – will greet you with folded hands and a bright smile. The respect a woman is shown makes me feel quite revered and protected. So infectious is the hospitality that, by the end of my travel, the words “Sawasdee Kha” (Welcome) and “Kob Khun Kha” (Thank you) will become a part of my regular vocabulary.

My six-day travel in Thailand will take me to the diverse sights of Chiang Mai and Cha-am. I will get a chance to meet talented artistes in the local markets of these places, explore little-known caves, discover royal palaces and uncover the secrets of its ancient temples. Adventure activities like hot-air ballooning and kayaking promise to add the thrill factor to these places. I know the sheer variety in my itinerary will ensure that I have the time of my life in Thailand. →



Chiang Mai

The second largest city in Thailand, Chiang Mai is, happily, quite unlike most typical modern cities. Clean and green with a deep-rooted culture, the erstwhile capital of the Lanna kingdom was first a settlement built along the River Ping. Enclosed within the old crumbling walls of yesteryears, the old city still lives on. It seamlessly blends in with the newer settlement on the other side of the wall, offering a unique blend of the past and the present.

GO TEMPLE-HOPPING

My temple tour of Chiang Mai made me feel like Indiana Jones. Shrouded in legend and stories featuring the mythical creatures peeping out of every edifice, each temple was a showcase of the splendid craftsmanship of the Lanna tribe. With ornate pillars, intricate woodwork, glittering pagodas and time-tested murals, these temples will set your senses on fire. Be prepared to be awe-struck by the 400-year-old murals of the **Wat Phra Singh** temple; gasp at the sheer beauty of the collapsed pagoda at **Wat Chedi Luang**. The legend of its oldest temple, **Doi Suthep**, will entice you to climb 300 steps of a serpent-lined staircase – just to see the preserved relics of the Buddha.

It is amazing to experience the contrast of emotions you feel when you go temple-hopping in Chiang Mai: while the architectural beauty gets you on a high, the contrasting calm of its divine atmosphere soothes your senses. *Wat Phra Singh: entry: ₹ 20*
Wat Chedi Luang: entry: ₹ 80
Doi Suthep Temple: entry: ₹ 100

SEEK OUT TRADITIONAL UMBRELLA ART AND HANDICRAFTS

Greeted by a canopy of colourful domes adorned with artistic paintings, I venture into the traditional umbrella centre of **Bo Sang Village**. This is where you discover how each

of the famous Chiang Mai brollies is carefully made. This heritage art has been kept alive for generations by the same set of families who work here. The best part about this visit is that you don't just get to see the process of making these umbrellas; you even get to paint one of your own. While here, I recommend a visit to the wood-carving factory next door. It is quite mesmerizing to see the skillful artists chiselling away at teak wood to create intricate 3D carvings – ones that I have already seen on the various temple doors of Chiang Mai. *Bo Sang Village: 00-66-53-248-604; Chiang Mai-San Kampaeng Highway (Route 1006), 9km from Chiang Mai Old City; 8am – 5 pm; entry free, Paint Your Umbrella activity: ₹ 2,250*

ADD A DOSE OF ADVENTURE

An adrenaline high, when coupled with majestic views, can be quite a heady experience, as I discover on my hot-air balloon ride over Chiang Mai with **Balloon Adventure Thailand**. The short ride showcases the myriad patterns of the waterlogged green fields, beautifully contrasted with the vibrant roofs of the homes and temples around.

Renting a kayak from **Chiang Mai Kayaking** at Wat Faham is yet another way of getting this dose of thrill and sightseeing. As I guide my kayak under the bridges of the city, I get a waterside view of the buzzing markets along its banks, busy fishermen trying to get in their haul for the day, and excited tourists on a motor boat, wishing that they were in a kayak like me. *Balloon Adventure Thailand: 00-66-96-868-4176; www.balloonadventurethailand.com; 114/13, Moo 3, Talad Khwan, Doisakat, Chiang Mai; from ₹ 18,000*
Chiang Mai Kayaking: www.chiangmaikayaking.com; Chiang Mai Canoe Club Nakornping, Wat Faham, Chiang Mai; kayak hire from ₹ 200

EXPLORE THE LOCAL MARKETS

You cannot experience Chiang Mai if you don't step into its markets – some of these, like the **Khad Luang Market**, date back to the days of missionaries. Quite like the Bo Sang villagers,

the shops here have been owned by the same families for generations. It is quite an experience to meet a few of them, grab some mango sticky rice, and listen to the stories of the Great Fire that almost destroyed the market. The night market has quite a different atmosphere. Makeshift shops liven up the dark nights with colourful wares. For non-shopaholics, there are open-air massage parlours at which to relax with a soothing Thai foot massage, and lots of fresh fruit carts offering unusual shakes and desserts.

GET A TASTE OF CULTURE

My last night in Chiang Mai gives me a taste of Lanna culture – through food and traditional performances at the **Khum Khantoke centre**. The beautiful dances of North Thailand keep me entertained as I sample Thai delicacies like crispy tofu, rice noodles and grilled chilli paste with vegetables, served, Lanna-style, in a rattan tray. It is quite intriguing to note the similarities in hand gestures and storylines with Indian epics like the *Ramayana*. With that lovely experience of Chiang Mai, I am ready to move on to my next destination. → *Khum Khantoke: 00-66-86-428-8593; www.khumkhantoke.com; 139, Moo4, Nongprakung, Muang, Chiang Mai; 9am – 9pm; from ₹ 1,200*

STAY: ANANTARA CHIANG MAI

Located along the banks of the River Ping and just a walk away from the Night Market and the other local markets of Chiang Mai, the Anantara Chiang Mai offers spa facilities, a lovely fine-dining restaurant, and loads of activities. *00-66-53-253-333; www.anantara.com; 123-123/1, Charoen Prathet Road, Changklan, Muang, Chiang Mai*



Cha-am

From the mountains to the beaches, my next leg of travel takes me 173 kilometres from the Thai capital, Bangkok, to the Cha-am district. While Chiang Mai was a blend of heritage and contemporary city life, Cha-am is all out a relaxed, small-town vibe. It clearly sends out signals that this is a place where you just need to let your hair down, put your feet up, and relax.

SET OUT ON A PALATIAL QUEST

On my way to Cha-am, I experience yet another Indiana Jones moment. The mossy paths of the Khao Wang Palace at Phetchaburi lead me to the ancient throne room, the guesthouses and the beautiful temple of the Emerald Buddha. Built by King Rama IV, the palace has four huge *chedis* (stupas) spiralling into the sky in the four cardinal directions. Today, the Khao Wang Palace is little used; the current royal family is known to enjoy its time at the Maruegadhayawan Summer Palace in Hua Hin town. This cool white-and-blue palace has large open spaces leading to the sea. Make sure to visit the courtiers quarters, complete with their personal belongings like uniforms and wares. **Khao Wang Palace:** entry: ₹ 300, cable car ride: ₹ 80
Maruekhathaiyawan Summer Palace: entry: ₹ 120

VISIT AN ICONIC RAILWAY STATION

The king did not just arrive at his summer palace by road; he, in fact, took the train to one of the oldest railway stations in Thailand. With its royal waiting room and an ancient steam engine,

the Hua Hin Station seems to have popped out from a fairy tale. Happily, I find it quite an Instagram-worthy destination.

STROLL THROUGH QUAINT MARKETS

Speaking of Instagram, the one place you should visit in Cha-am is the **Plearnwan Market**. The whole market has a unique vintage feel due to its wooden shops, open food markets and vibrant street art. With its carnival-style games and pretty corners for those memorable photos, this place is so much fun – whether you shop or you don't.

The daily night market in Hua Hin is a great way to spend your evenings in Cha-am. If you are here on a weekend as I am, visit the weekend **Cicada Market**. This open-air bazaar bubbles with local artists showing off their skills on pieces that you can purchase. I am quite enamoured with the 3D caricature artist who sells you your face in a mini clay model. Don't forget to try out the street food at the **Tamarind Market**, next to the Cicada Market.

GO CAVING TO FIND BUDDHAS

Before I know it, it's time to head back to Bangkok for my Thai Airways flight home. Not, however, before I make yet another fascinating stop – at the **Khao Luang Cave Temples** at Phetchaburi. Glittering bright from the dark interiors of a steep cavern is a golden Buddha. As I pass through the natural opening lined with stalagmites, I gasp to see not one but many golden Buddhas. The cave was used by King Rama V for meditation and studies, and it was he who ordered these Buddhas to be installed here. From a reclining Buddha and ones with *nagas* (serpents) as their hood to statues of the King's ancestors, every statue in the cave will leave you awestruck.

The cave shrine is a befitting end to my entire Thailand journey. As I board my flight to Bangalore, the image of the serene Buddhas is with me, a fitting reminder of the association that I will always have with Thailand – a place that is fun, safe and hospitable to all solo travellers, especially women.

Khao Luang Cave Temples: entry free, car rental to the top: ₹ 20/ person

STAY: THE REGENT CHA-AM BEACH RESORT

Sited on Cha-am Beach, and with over 500 rooms, including cottages, this resort offers plenty of leisure activities like spa sessions, a children's activity centre, and facilities for tennis, beach ball, football, table tennis and more. 00-66-3245-1240-9; www.regent-chaam.com; 849/121 Petchkasem Road, Regent Beach Cha-am, Phetchaburi

