

CHIANG MAI

THE “ROSE OF THE NORTH”

Mike Smith flew to Chiang Mai on Bangkok Airways where he visited exotic tribes, wats, walked in the mountains and was amazed with the elephants and, he says, he had a good time doing so.

Chiang Mai, nestling in the hills of northern Thailand is well known for culture, charm, tribes, wats and a cool climate in winter. And it's markets! I love colourful markets, but unless you are really into handicrafts, clothes and great food don't attempt to visit all of Chiang Mai's markets. There are too many, but I can recommend three exceptional markets.

Markets

The Sunday Walking Street Market in the old city is crowded, chaotic, massive and fun and sells just about everything. There are convenient foot massages for the weary along the way and bars at the end for the thirsty!

The daily Night Bazaar is part of Chiang Mai's history and is the place to bargain for clothes, DVD's, "branded goods" and Thai handicrafts.

Warorot Market is the largest fresh food market in the city and a great place to purchase local snacks and titbits, you can also pick up a very cheap meal at the food stall.

What's Wat?

Chiang Mai has hundreds of wats, but I find it very easy to get "temples out" so I focused on the important ones. Wat Phrathat Doi Suthep, the most revered, is a must see. It is on top of a hill so, depending on your energy level, you can take the "lift" or stairs. I chose the former on the way up and the latter on the way down which turned out to be a good move as groups of Hmong children were playing on the steps waiting to have their photos taken for a few baht.

Wat Chedi Luang, in the old city, is also impressive. In particular the semi ruined structure at the back, with



elephant statues, is very appealing. There was a celebratory festival going on when I visited. I found it interesting to see how the pragmatic Thai's mix religion, entertainment and blatant commercialism. The food, a mix of noodles, exotic insects, desserts and an abundance of fruit, was great.

Handicrafts

Cottage industries have been established in Chiang Mai for generations. Of course the handicrafts are on sale at all the markets, but it is fascinating to watch them being manufactured.

The easiest way to see a selection of handicrafts being produced; including celadon pottery, silver, lacquer, wood carving, Thai silk and umbrella making is to take a thirty-minute taxi ride to Sankampaeng village. For me the highlight is the umbrella factory where beautiful umbrellas and paper parasols are handmade using traditional techniques. After seeing the craftsmanship you are naturally encouraged to shop in the show rooms.

Day Trip to Maesa

Maesa has developed into a must-see area with numerous activities, several of which are controversial, including the elephant camp, Tiger Kingdom, snake farms and tribal villages.

Elephant Camp

I love paintings, but was staggered to see that Chiang Mai had found some big new names to fuel the contemporary art scene. Similarly they have a couple of good football strikers at Maesa Elephant Camp, though several of the 70 strong squad of elephants got red cards and took early baths!

This place is large, clean and efficiently run. The elephants seemed happy, but I'm no expert and this is not an elephant rescue sanctuary. It is a commercial concern, rather touristy and the mahouts are hungry for tips. Having said that, the show is extremely entertaining and the elephants have learned a lot of tricks including playing football and netball, throwing darts, and most amazing of all, painting pictures! Watching the elephants bathing and spraying water was amusing. I enjoyed my visit and the fact that the elephants are breeding is surely a good sign!

Baan Tong Luang

Baan Tong Luang is a very unique place and will affect your emotions in many



Craft Sellers



Elephant Painting



Elephant Polo

different ways; from feeling excited seeing exotic tribes, being uncomfortable at being an intruder, trying to help by buying souvenirs, to wondering how free the people really are.

There is a cluster of seven small tribal villages including the famous long neck women. You pay 500Bht to enter and you get the opportunity to take photos of the people, see them in their 'natural environment' and buy their goods. However, some of these people are refugees in a human zoo despite their happy appearance. This village gets very mixed reviews on social media. I recommend you visit, talk to the people and draw your own conclusions.

The Hmong village of Pha Nok Kok takes more effort to get to, but is the real deal. It has a small museum with an old spinning loom, a stand on clothes iron, a relaxed atmosphere and hardly any visitors. The people are shy, but friendly.

Head in the Clouds

The highest point in Thailand is in the Doi Inthanon National Park. Unfortunately it was misty, drizzling and relatively cold when I arrived at the peak, but that actually added to the atmosphere despite restricted views during the nature walk. The constant high humidity means that moss grows on the ground and hangs from the trees most eerily. The park is home to over 300 bird species and is one of the few places in Thailand where the temperature can reach zero degrees in winter.

The King and Queen's Pagodas and a small Hmong market are worth stopping at on the way down. If you have extra time you can visit Wachirathan Waterfall and the Wiang Kum Kam archaeological site.



Long Necker



Umbrella Painter



Native Lady



Temple



Temple

Chiang Mai's Grand Canyon???

I was somewhat surprised when I was told we were going to the Grand Canyon of Thailand. The name is rather tongue in cheek, but a former soil quarry has attractive rock formations and there is a pleasant terrace overlooking the lake at Tuang Thong Canyon View Restaurant. Daredevils jump off the rocks into the deep water, but be warned, the drop is close to 20 meters and there have been several deaths!

Mango Sticky Rice

I love Thai food and Chiang Mai has some of the best, but without a shadow of a doubt my mango sticky rice at a simple coffee shop in the old city was the best dish I tasted all trip.

Chiang Mai certainly has a broad range of attractions and is apparently a great city to live in too! Infrastructure, shopping and dining out is good and there is something there for all the family.

POCKET GUIDE

Hotel

Le Meridien Chiang Mai
www.lemeridienchiangmai.com

Airline

We flew to Chiang Mai from Koh Samui on Bangkok Airways.
www.bangkokair.com



Farmer



Elephant Washing



Temple



Elephant Walking