



Travelling to Thailand is a cultural norm for many Australians. But the experience of Thailand doesn't have to be limited to Phi Phi Island, Krabi and Phuket. If you want to take the path less travelled, divulge in traditional Buddhist culture, camp on the world's most beautiful beaches and experience the remote areas of Thailand, then cycle touring is for you.

My partner and I are cycle tourists and have been travelling from Malaysia to Europe by bicycle. Thailand was our second country of "residence" and we still reminisce the beautiful smiles, beaches, food, temples and endless one-dollar coffees.

You might think cycle touring is difficult, but it is very easy in Thailand with its endless flat plains, food stalls every few kilometres and free camping everywhere. All you need to do is start pedalling!



Thailand is the perfect country to cycle tour in.

The basic south to north route

We took a route from the southern city of Satun, near the Malaysia border, to the northeast Laos border crossing in Chiang Khong. This is a simple south to north route where you will pass many key attractions and cities.

Our route took us through the east coast of southern Thailand towards Bangkok. We caught a ferry in Surat Thani to the Island of Koh Tao before re-entering the mainland at Chumphon. Through these areas, we were able to camp often on the beach and have leisurely swims during the day.

In the north, we cycled through some of the more remote farmland communities on small dirt roads, visiting many famous temples and national parks.



We took a simple south to north route.

Alternate routes

It is common for cyclists to fly into Bangkok or enter Thailand from one of the northern land borders. From there you can choose to head in any direction depending on what you would like to achieve. For example, the beaches in the south, animals in the north, or travel east towards Laos or Cambodia.

Many cyclists travel part of the east coast before crossing west towards Phuket and Krabi or they will head into Myanmar. Other routes might include hugging the southeastern coastline around Pattaya City to head towards Cambodia, or, there is an option to go northeast towards Vientiane in Laos.

Our advice for planning is not to think too much about it and just start riding! A great experience will follow.



Plan your route by what you want to experience.

Climate

The climate in Thailand is basically separated by the northern and southern regions.



However, in both regions, the climate consists of a dry season and a wet season. The daytime temperatures are usually between mid-20 degrees to mid-30 degrees year around. The best time to cycle-tour Thailand south to north is between February and early May. However, it's very easy to travel to Thailand in the wet season too (May to October or September/December in the east coast of south Thailand), as we did. The rain usually lasts one or two hours each day and the rest of the time it's hot and humid. It is also hot in the dry season but a little less humid.



The weather is quite warm in Thailand.

Food

One of the best things about exploring Thailand by bicycle or backpacking is the food. Even better is that as a cycle tourist, you will have an endless appetite to eat as much of the amazing, spice-covered, carb-loaded and mind-blowing taste explosions the Thai's serve up. The food in Thailand is always spicy, particularly in the local areas. Be prepared to have spicy food for breakfast, lunch and dinner. As you are outside of the tourist areas, make sure you mention that you only want a small amount of spice because the food is hotter than in any other country we have cycled through.

You will be lucky enough to experience a range of local foods varying from boiled pork soup for breakfast, to spicy green papaya salad, the classic pad Thai or a range of noodles and curries. One of our favourite things in Thailand was their traditional stir-fried basil pork (Pat Krapao Moo Sap), which is usually very cheap (A\$1 or \$2) for a huge cyclist sized portion and incredibly tasty.

Additionally, if you are a vegan or vegetarian then Thai people can cook nearly all their meals to fit with your diet choices.



It's easier and a whole lot tastier to eat locally instead of cooking.

Learning the language

There will always be a Thai person in proximity to you that speaks English, even if it's just a little. However, we would recommend that you learn some basic words because every country appreciates travellers who do this. Otherwise, it's down to using your best hand gestures which will always get a laugh.

Note: in tourist areas, you will likely have to barter for prices in the market but outside of these areas we wouldn't worry too much about it.



Try to learn a bit of the local language to help you get by.

Attractions

Thailand is one of the most tourist-driven economies in the world and there is something for everyone. You can experience diving, rock climbing, white water rafting, animal encounters, massages, full moon parties, Buddhist culture or beers and cocktails after a hard day of



cycling. As a cycle tourist, you can be lucky enough to experience most of the big attractions and a few lesser known ones only accessible to the adventurous.

The southern regions of Thailand are famous for the tropical Islands, beaches and full moon parties but most of all diving. The islands and towns of the west coast are the most well known such as Phuket and Krabi. However, as a cycle tourist, you may be inclined to experience the slightly less tourist populated east coast.



Scuba and free diving are just a couple of the fun things to learn.

These areas are some of the most famous dive spots in the world and close to the cheapest place to obtain your diving tickets. We spent 7-days on the island of Koh Tao learning to both scuba dive and free-dive. We loved free-diving a little more because of the personal challenge and after two days we were able to dive down to twenty meters on a single breath! You've probably heard the phrase "you've seen one temple, you've seen them all" but honestly, we loved each one we visited. Each temple is designed by a different artist or a collaboration of artists, who bring their own flair to the place, or there are also ancient temples in the old capitals of Ayutthaya and Sukhothai.



Thailand has some of the most famous diving spots in the world.

Our recommended top five temples to see in Thailand are:

- Wat Arun, (Temple of Dawn), Bangkok
- Wat (Temple of the largest Reclining Buddha), Bangkok
- Wat Chaiwatthanaram (Temple of long reign and glorious era), Ayutthaya
- Wat Mahathat (Buddha temple head in a banyan tree), Ayutthaya, and
- Wat Rong Khun (White Temple), Chiang Rai northern Thailand

The northern regions are famous for their artists, hill tribes, temples, mountains, hot springs, jungles, mountain trekking or jungle flying fox adventures and animals such as tigers, cobras and elephants. We didn't visit the animal attractions for personal reasons and would urge you to do good research if you wish to visit any of the animal attractions to ensure they're appropriately managed.

Finally, you must have regular Thai massages to relax those sore, tired muscles after long days of cycling. You can get a massage in most villages and they are usually very cheap outside of the tourist spots.



The temples of Thailand are a must visit when you're there.

Required gear

We travelled with more gear than required because we were on a long-term cycle touring trip. If you are only travelling to Thailand or South-East Asia, then you can travel very light as it's warm and the food and the accommodation is very affordable.



Our recommendations for a basic bicycle touring (not an extended tour) list would include:

Camping

- A lightweight tent, bivvy, swag or just a good quality large mosquito net. Do not bring a 3 or 4 season tent because they are just too hot for Thailand and not necessary.
- Sleeping mat and a sleeping bag liner. A sleeping bag is not required unless you are in the north in dry season where you might need a lightweight sleeping bag.
- An air or compressible pillow (or just use your clothes and put them in a bag).
- Head torch
- Toiletries
- Medical kit
- A gas or multi-fuel stove (if you really want to cook, then you will need the below items too).
- One pot for cooking and as a bowl
- Small chopping knife
- Utensils
- Small chopping board
- Cup
- Cleaning cloth and a small amount of detergent

Clothes

- Two days of cycle clothing i.e. shorts, t-shirt, cycling gloves and sandals/shoes to cycle in.
- One or two sets of street clothes including sandals/a pair of thongs (flip-flops) and in dry season a jumper for northern Thailand. A long set of trousers or similar for mosquitos.
- A neck buff



The length of your trip will determine how much gear you'll need.

Electronics

- Smart-phone for mapping
- Small battery pack in-case you couldn't find a powerpoint (unlikely though)
- Camera or GoPro or both
- Universal adaptor



- Various cords and charging ports for electronics

Bicycle gear

- A multitool
- Spare spokes or a Kevlar universal spoke
- A hand bicycle pump
- Tyre repair kit
- Small tyre levers
- Spare inner tube
- Chain lube



To carry your gear, you'll need pannier racks and panniers.

Extras

- A book or tablet with e-books
- A travel diary
- Playing cards
- Water bottles x2
- Chocolate

Obviously, you will need a bike with pannier racks and panniers to carry your gear. If you try and pack light you might be able to get away with two back panniers only.



Costs may differ depending on how touristy the area is.

Costs

Thailand's currency is the Thai Baht which, at the time of our trip, was at A\$1 to 20 Baht. Thailand is still one of the cheapest countries to travel to in the world, particularly when you are outside of the tourist hotspots.

Generally, we spent for two people between A\$10 to \$20 per day when we were able to camp and \$13 to \$30 per day when we paid for accommodation. It was about double that price in the tourist areas and on the Islands.

For food, you can get meals between 20 Baht to 60 Baht (A\$1 to \$3) with beer/wine/soft drinks/coffee costing between 10 Baht and 100 Baht (50 cents to \$5) depending on where you are. We only cooked once or twice and then realised it was so cheap and time effective to eat out.

Accommodation varies significantly but we were able to find cheap, basic accommodation in most villages between 60 Baht (\$3) and up to 300 Baht (\$15). However, be aware that it can



increase significantly in tourist areas so it's worth researching and comparing prices beforehand.



Thailand is such an affordable place to visit.

Camping/accommodation

Depending on your trip and budget, you can camp or find very cheap accommodation. In Thailand, you have the opportunity to camp nearly anywhere you like. We put up our tent on beaches, in temples and our favourite was camping at the friendly police stations. All these spots offer a rich experience and it's usually worth braving the hot overnight temperatures for that beachfront sunrise or sunset.

If you can't handle the heat at night, then there take up shelter in an air-conditioned/fan room or bungalow for just a few dollars. Accommodation can be found in any village and usually, it is very affordable.

If you are lucky you might be invited in by a family to share a meal and stories.



If you are staying in a bigger city, the accommodation will cost more.

Visas

Australians obtain a 15-day visa free on arrival in Thailand at any of the land or sea ports or 30 days at any airport. If you need a longer stay you can apply for a visa at an embassy in another country or in Australia a month before you leave which can give you either 60-days single entry or 60-days multiple entries. It usually only takes about 2-5 business days to process this visa.

Safety

Some people worry about thievery but in our experience, the risk is usually low if you take some simple precautions such as locking your bike up at night. We were always very cautious about our valuables in tourist areas and in busy marketplaces.



The wonderful people we met was what made our trip so amazing.

Favourite experience in Thailand

The Thai people were our favourite experience. As in most countries, the people you meet can make or break your trip.

Towards the end of our trip, before the border crossing at Chiang Khong into Laos, we stayed at our last temple. The monks here spoke a little bit of English and we decided to give them some Australian small lightweight souvenirs that we gave to our friends we met along the way. This was to say thank you to all the kind monks that had let us stay in Thailand.

However, in return, they gave us two books in English that detailed the story of Buddha and two buddha pendants that can be worn on a necklace or bracelet.



This last stay at a temple summed up the mentality of the Thai people we met while travelling. Always giving and always kind.

Have you ever been on an overseas cycling trip?