



The Ultimate Thailand Planning Guide

Everything You Need To Know
Before You Book

(From A Team That Actually Lives Here)

@WanderlustPro.travel



Why we created this guide:

WanderlustPro has been working with Thailand for over 15 years, with our team currently based here for the past 5. That long-term perspective means we've watched this destination evolve. We know what's changed, what's stayed the same, and how to navigate Thailand as it is today, not how travel blogs described it a decade ago.

In that time, we've planned countless trips and noticed the same issues coming up repeatedly. People booking the wrong islands for their travel style, underestimating transit times, or missing out on incredible experiences because they didn't know to look for them.

Thailand is an amazing destination, but it's also more complex than it appears. The advice you'll find in a quick Google search often misses the nuances - like which neighborhoods are actually worth staying in, how long island transfers really take, and what "shoulder season" really means.

We created this guide to share what we've learned over 15 years of Thailand travel and 5 years living here. It's a combination of practical logistics and insider knowledge that comes from actually being on the ground and working with the local tourism industry.

Whether you use this to plan your own trip or decide to work with us, our goal is the same: helping you have an incredible Thailand experience without the common (and expensive) mistakes. Let's make sure your trip is everything you're hoping for.



The Seven Mistakes:

1. Underestimating Travel Time Between Destinations

This is huge and almost everyone gets it wrong. Moving between islands isn't like hopping on a quick ferry. It can literally take an entire day.

Example: Getting from Koh Samui to Krabi involves a ferry (1.5-2.5 hours), then a bus or van (3-4 hours), plus waiting time. That's 6-8 hours of your day gone. And if you miss a connection, you might be stuck overnight in a random town.

Even "nearby" islands like Phuket to Phi Phi require specific ferry schedules that don't always align with your plans. Unless you're chartering a private yacht (which most people aren't), you're working within limited boat schedules, and those schedules change with weather and season.

The advice: Build in full travel days and don't try to pack activities on either side. If you're moving locations, that's what you're doing that day.

2. Picking Islands Based on Instagram Instead of Your Travel Style

Phuket has the infrastructure and variety, but it's busy and developed. Koh Phi Phi is stunning in photos but can feel overcrowded and party-focused. Koh Lanta is beautifully quiet, but you'll need to rent a scooter because taxis aren't readily available.

The "best" island depends entirely on what you actually want. Do you want easy access to restaurants and activities? Or are you looking for a quieter, more laid-back experience? There's no universal answer, and choosing wrong can define your whole trip.

3. Staying Near the Wrong Bangkok Airport

Bangkok has two airports: Suvarnabhumi (BKK: international hub) and Don Mueang (DMK: mostly domestic and budget carriers). They're about an hour apart in good traffic, longer during rush hour.

If you book a hotel near Khao San Road but you're flying out of Suvarnabhumi at 6am, you're looking at a 3:00am wake-up and a stressful morning. Choose your accommodation based on which airport you're actually using. Sometimes domestic flights are cheaper out of Don Mueang (DMK).

4. Booking Tours Through Your Hotel

Hotels mark up tours significantly, sometimes 40-60% above what you'd pay booking directly with operators. This can also include online agencies. That "exclusive private tour" they're selling you? It's often the same tour everyone else is on, just with a higher price tag.

We work with vetted local operators and can connect you with the same experiences at better rates, or you can research and book directly yourself once you arrive.

5. Not Planning for Meal Times

Outside of major tourist areas, many restaurants close by 9-10pm. If you're used to eating dinner at 8 or 9pm, you might find yourself with limited options. Street food vendors are most active in the early evening (6-8pm), and lunch is traditionally the main meal of the day. It's a small thing, but it affects your day-to-day experience more than you'd think.

6. Trying to See Too Much

We see this constantly - people trying to fit Bangkok, Chiang Mai, and three different islands into 10 days. What ends up happening is you spend half your trip in transit and never actually relax or enjoy where you are. You'll enjoy yourself a lot more if you just take it slow, you can always come back!

The Advice: Thailand rewards slower travel. Pick 2-3 areas and give yourself time to settle in. You'll have a much better experience.

7. Not Carrying Enough Cash

Despite what you might expect, Thailand is still very cash-based outside of shopping malls and hotels. Street food, tuk-tuks, local restaurants, markets, and even some tour operators only take cash. Make sure you always have small notes, local shops might not be able to break ฿1000.

ATMs charge around ฿250 (~\$7-8 USD) per withdrawal regardless of amount, so it makes sense to take out larger sums. And the currency exchange booths at the airport have terrible rates—wait until you're in the city or use ATMs.



Where to Actually Go in Thailand:

BANGKOK – More Than a Stopover City

Bangkok deserves at least 3 full days. The city has distinct neighborhoods with completely different vibes, and where you stay matters:

- **Sukhumvit/Thonglor area:** Modern Bangkok. Great food scene, rooftop bars, easier to navigate. This is where locals with money actually hang out.
- **Silom:** Central, good transit access, mix of business and nightlife. Convenient base for exploring.
- **Chinatown (Yaowarat):** Incredible for food, especially at night. Not ideal for staying unless you like intense energy and crowds.
- **Old City (near Grand Palace):** Beautiful and historic, but quieter at night and farther from restaurants and modern Bangkok.

What to skip: Khao San Road unless you're specifically looking for backpacker party culture. It's not representative of actual Bangkok.

Time needed: 2-3 days



CHIANG MAI – Culture and Mountains

Chiang Mai offers a completely different pace - cooler weather, mountains, nature, and a more laid-back atmosphere.

What people miss:

- The Old City is charming but everything closes early. If you want evening options, look at hotels near Nimman area.
- Ethical elephant sanctuaries exist, but they don't let you ride elephants or do "bathing" photos. If a place offers that, it's not ethical regardless of their marketing.
- Bua Thong Sticky Waterfalls (about an hour outside the city) are incredible and not crowded. You can actually climb up the waterfall—it's a unique experience most people don't know about.

Be Aware: Burn season happens every year starting late February-April

Time needed: 3-4 days



THE ISLANDS – Understanding Your Options

Here's the reality: each island has a distinct personality, and moving between them takes significant time, especially anything that's more remote.

Phuket: Most developed infrastructure, widest variety of hotels and restaurants, good jumping-off point for Phi Phi and Phang Nga Bay. Kata and Karon beaches are better than Patong (which is very party-focused). It's convenient but can feel busy.

Krabi: Ao Nang is the main hub, it's functional but not particularly special. Railay Beach (accessible only by longtail boat) is stunning and much quieter. Great for rock climbing and kayaking. Book early for anything in Railay.

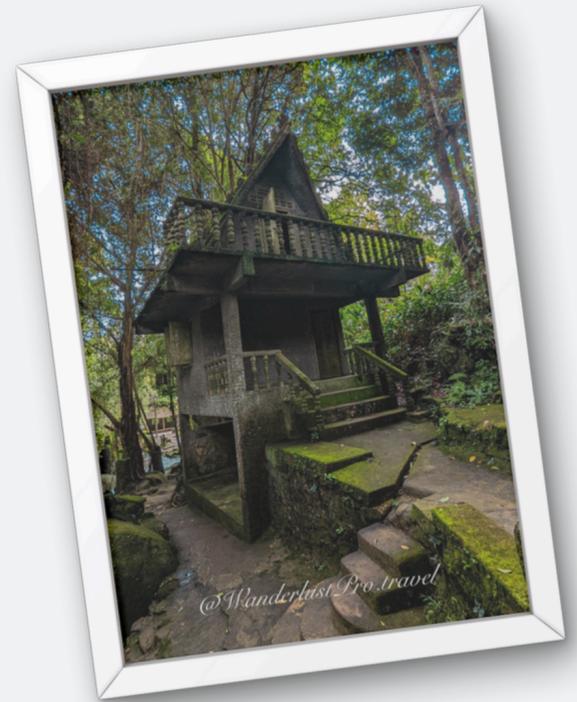
Koh Samui: Higher-end resorts, couples-oriented, beautiful but more expensive. Chaweng is the busiest beach, Lamai is quieter. It has a more polished, resort feel.

Koh Lanta: Quieter and more laid-back. Long Beach is the main area. You'll want to rent a scooter to get around since taxis aren't common. Good choice if you want to unwind without a lot of activity.

Koh Tao: Best for diving. If you're getting certified or love underwater exploration, this is your spot. Otherwise, the other islands offer more variety.

Important note on island logistics: Getting between islands takes longer than you think. Ferry schedules are limited, weather can cause delays or cancellations, and you often need to combine boat + bus + waiting time. A move from one island to another can easily take 6-8 hours or a full day.

Our recommendation: Choose ONE island, maybe two if you have 12-14+ days. Island hopping sounds appealing but you end up spending too much time in transit.



A Realistic 10-Day Itinerary & Budget:

Here's an itinerary that gives you a good mix without feeling rushed:

DAYS 1-3: BANGKOK

- Day 1: Arrive, settle in, explore your neighborhood, get oriented
- Day 2: Grand Palace and Wat Pho in the morning (arrive early to beat heat and crowds), Chinatown in the evening
- Day 3: Chatuchak Weekend Market (if weekend) or a cooking class, rooftop bar at sunset

DAYS 4-6: CHIANG MAI

- Morning flight to Chiang Mai (1 hour, typically \$40-60)
- Day 4: Explore Old City temples, get a traditional Thai massage, evening at a night market
- Day 5: Full-day ethical elephant sanctuary experience (if you can touch/bathe them, its not ethical)
- Day 6: Sticky Waterfalls or Doi Suthep temple, explore Nimman area

DAYS 7-10: ONE ISLAND (Phuket, Krabi, or Samui)

- Morning flight to your island
- Day 7: Arrive, settle in, beach time
- Day 8: Island boat tour or snorkeling/diving trip
- Day 9: Unscheduled beach/pool day (you need actual downtime)
- Day 10: Morning at the beach, afternoon flight home

Note on travel days: Each time you change locations, expect that to take most of the day. Don't schedule activities on arrival or departure days.

WHAT THIS ACTUALLY COSTS (Real Numbers):

International flights (US to Bangkok): \$600-\$1,200

Best pricing is typically 3-4 months out, sometimes even closer if you're flexible with dates

Accommodations (10 nights):

- Budget-conscious: \$30-60/night = \$300-600
- Mid-range comfort: \$70-100/night = \$700-1,000
- Upscale: \$150-280/night = \$1,500-2,800
- Luxury: \$300-500+/night = \$3000-5000+

Domestic flights: \$120-180 total (Bangkok-Chiang Mai-Island routes)

Food:

- Eating mostly local: \$15-20/day = \$150-200
- Mix of local and nicer restaurants: \$30-60/day = \$300-600

Activities & tours: \$150-350 (elephant sanctuary, boat trips, entrance fees, cooking class)

Ground transportation: \$120-200 (Grab, tuk-tuks, scooter rentals)

REALISTIC TOTAL PER PERSON:

- Budget traveler: \$1,400-2,000
- Mid-range: \$2,500-4,000
- Upscale/luxury: \$3,000-8,500+

This doesn't include travel insurance (which you should have) or our planning services, but it does reflect realistic pricing based on current rates.



When to Book (A Real Timeline):

3-4 MONTHS BEFORE DEPARTURE:

- ✓ International flights (this is typically the sweet spot for pricing)
- ✓ Hotels if you're traveling during high season (November-February) and have specific properties in mind
- ✓ Popular or limited-capacity experiences (certain elephant sanctuaries, liveaboard diving trips)

FLEXIBILITY NOTE: If you're flexible with travel dates, you can sometimes find excellent flight deals even 4-8 weeks out, especially on shoulder season.

4-6 WEEKS BEFORE:

- ✓ Domestic flights (prices are generally stable and affordable)
- ✓ Mid-range and boutique hotels
- ✓ Any tours or activities you know you want to do

2-3 WEEKS BEFORE:

- ✓ Remaining accommodations
- ✓ Restaurant reservations if you're planning upscale dining
- ✓ Spa appointments at resort properties

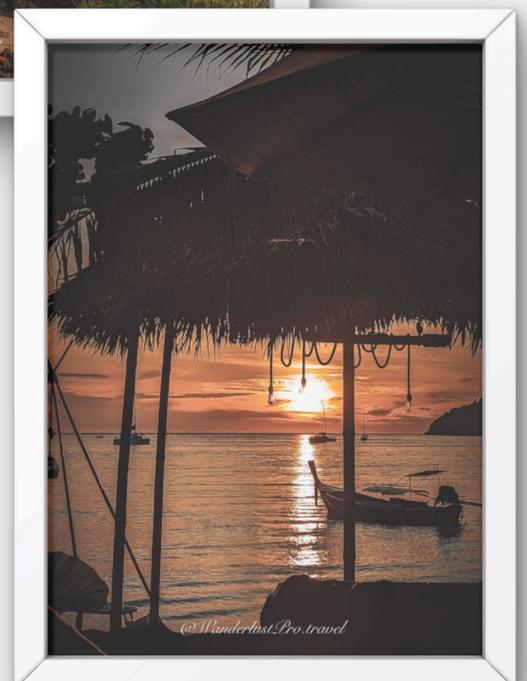
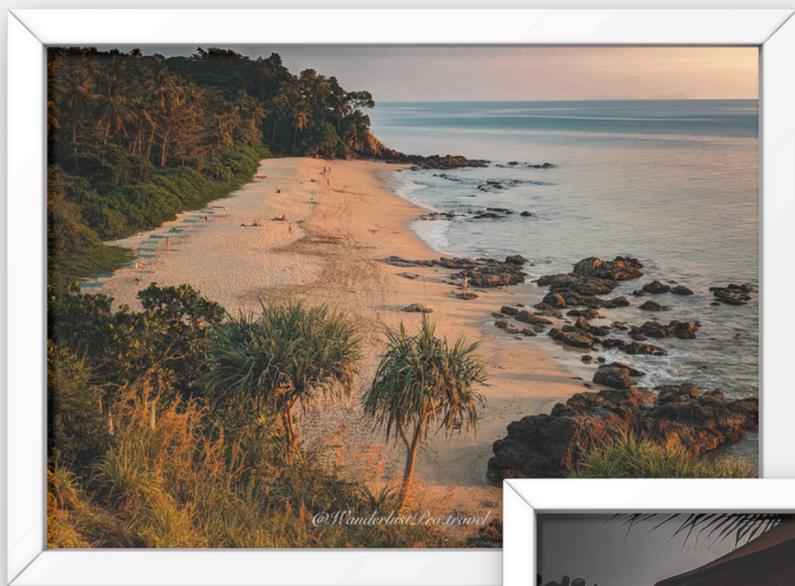
AFTER ARRIVAL:

- ✓ Most day tours and boat trips (seriously, many can be booked 24-48 hours in advance)
- ✓ Scooter and vehicle rentals
- ✓ Local experiences and restaurants
- ✓ Transportation as needed

THE REALITY:

Thailand isn't a destination where everything needs to be locked in months ahead—unless you're traveling during peak season (late December through January, Chinese New Year, or Songkran in mid-April). For most travel dates, booking 1-2 months out gives you good options at reasonable prices.

The main exception is accommodations. If you have specific hotels in mind or are particular about location, book those earlier. Everything else offers more flexibility than you might expect.



Island-Hopping: What It Actually Takes

This is the part most guides gloss over. Moving between islands in Thailand sounds romantic, ferry hopping through turquoise waters, but the reality involves multiple transfers, limited schedules, and eating up entire days of your trip.

Here's what you actually need to know:

| | | | | |
|---|----------|-----------|------------------|--|
| KOH SAMUI ↔ KOH PHANGAN | 45 min | 300-500฿ | Multiple daily | Close and well-connected. Easy day trip or quick hop. |
| KOH SAMUI ↔ KOH TAO | 1.5-2 hr | 500-800฿ | Several daily | Straightforward connection, popular with divers. |
| KOH SAMUI ↔ KRABI | 4-8hr | 550-1100฿ | Limited daily | This is a full day of travel! Ferry + bus combo via Surat Thani. |
| PHUKET ↔ KRABI | 2hr | 900฿ | Limited daily | Don't miss the boat or you'll be taking a 4+ hr bus/van combo. |
| PHUKET ↔ KOH PHI PHI | 1hr | 500-700฿ | Frequently daily | Very easy connection. Multiple operators, lots of options. |
| KOH LANTA ↔ KOH PHI PHI | 1.5-2 hr | 450-800฿ | Limited daily | Service is limited and weather dependent especially May-Oct. |

*All prices are shown as one way

What Most People Don't Realize:

- **Weather Cancellations Are Common.** Ferry schedules change with weather, especially during monsoon season. Rough seas = cancelled ferries. Always build in buffer days if you have a flight to catch.
- **"Ferry + Bus" Packages Take Longer Than You Think.** When a route says "ferry + bus," you're not just adding travel times together. Add 1-2 hours for:
 - Waiting at piers
 - Transferring between vehicles
 - Potential delays
 - Immigration if crossing between certain zones
- **Limited Luggage Space.** Ferries have baggage limits. Large suitcases are fine, but if you're traveling with a lot of gear, check beforehand. Some speedboats have strict weight limits. Also, mini busses have limited space and you could be charged for an extra seat if you are carrying too many bags.
- **Peak Season = Book Ahead!** During high season (November-February) and holidays, popular routes sell out. Book at least a few days in advance, especially for weekend travel.
- **Private Speedboats Are Expensive (But Worth It Sometimes).** If you're in a group of 4-6 people, chartering a private speedboat can actually make sense:
 - Go on your schedule
 - Direct route (no stops)
 - Faster travel time
 - Cost: \$300-600USD+ depending on distance

*For couples or solo travelers, it's usually not worth it--stick with regular ferries.

The Bottom line: Island hopping sounds amazing in theory, but in practice, it eats into your vacation time. Most people have more fun picking one or two islands and actually relaxing, rather than spending half their trip on ferries and in transit.

If you want help figuring out which islands match your travel style and how to get between them efficiently, that's exactly what we do for you at WanderlustPro!



How We Can Help You Plan This Trip:

Planning a Thailand trip involves a lot of moving pieces! Deciding which islands match your travel style, timing connections properly, finding the right balance between activity and relaxation, and knowing which operators are reliable, is a lot to think about.

After 5+ years living and working in Thailand, WanderlustPro has the local connections and practical knowledge that make a real difference. We know which islands match which travel styles, which operators are actually reliable, and how to plan trips that avoid the common (and expensive) mistakes most people make.

If you're interested in working together, here are your options:

OPTION 1: Trip Kickstart Consultation – \$249

This is designed for travelers who want expert guidance but prefer to handle bookings themselves.

What's included:

- 90-minute consultation call
- Pre-call questionnaire so I can understand your travel style and priorities
- Custom destination and itinerary recommendations
- Realistic budget breakdown based on your preferences
- Our list of vetted hotels, tour operators, and restaurants
- Answers to all your Thailand planning questions

Bonus: If you decide to move forward with full-service planning within 30 days, the \$249 is credited toward that fee.

OPTION 2: Full-Service Planning – Starting at \$649

This is for travelers who want the entire trip handled professionally from start to finish.

What's included:

- All of the above
- Completely customized itinerary based on your interests, pace, and budget
- All bookings: accommodations, domestic flights, tours, activities, restaurant reservations, and ground transportation
- Access to experiences and operators that aren't available through standard booking platforms
- Detailed itinerary with local information, helpful check-lists, and backup plans
- Support while you're traveling (because weather, delays, and changes happen)

This service is designed to give you peace of mind and let you actually enjoy your trip instead of managing logistics

Why You Should Work With Us!

WanderlustPro creates fully planned trips to Thailand and beyond, handling all the research, bookings, and logistics so you don't have to.

Save 20-30 hours of research: We do the legwork comparing hotels, vetting tour operators, and figuring out logistics so you can skip straight to enjoying your trip.

Expertly curated, not overwhelming: We present carefully vetted options based on what we know works, so you're not drowning in reviews and choices.

Local expertise: We're based in Thailand with personal relationships with trusted dive schools, villa owners, restaurants, and tour operators.

Ready to start planning?
We'd love to hear from you.

✉ Email: wanderlustpro.travel@gmail.com

🌐 Website: www.wanderlustpro.online

■ Instagram: [@wanderlustpro.travel](https://www.instagram.com/wanderlustpro.travel)

💬 Substack: [@wanderlustpro](https://www.substack.com/p/wanderlustpro)

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