

Make a splashing start
to your adventure trip
with a white water
rafting experience.

OUT & ABOUT IN CHIANG MAI

Adventure travel doesn't have to be all rough and tumble. Chiang Mai and its northern surrounds offer some of Asia's best adrenaline-filled outings balanced by a huge dose of luxe hospitality to take the edge off all the leg work. DAVE STAMBOULIS shows us the direct routes to the top.

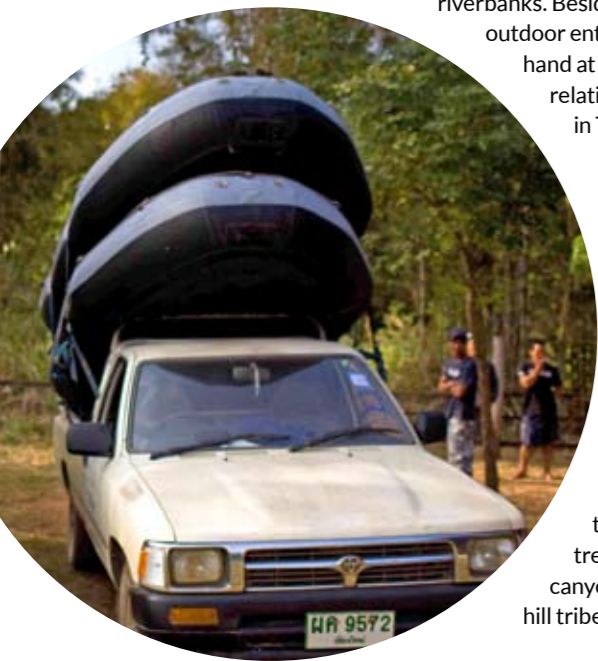
Wet and wild

Chiang Mai is well-regarded for its spectacular mountain scenery and array of activities to keep you on your feet for days on end. Get your adventure trip to a thrilling start with a rafting run along the scenic Mae Taeng River. Quite possibly the most exhilarating stretch of white water in the country, it boasts kilometre upon kilometre of Class III and IV rapids (white water with rapids fast enough for a major adrenaline rush but aren't perilous if handled properly, ensuring constant thrills and challenges for paddling aficionados). Unlike mountain climbing, the ideal time for rafting is during the rainy season or slightly after (July to September), when the rivers are raging and the water level is high. During periods of heavy rain, the Mae Taeng can actually turn quite savage, with some rapids becoming Class V or even VI, which should only be attempted by expert or extreme rafters.

Mae Taeng River runs through canyons and lush jungle, and is wedged between Chiang Dao nature reserve and Huai Nam Dang, a large rugged mountainous national park. Passing boaters can expect to see birds and wildlife amid beautiful jungle scenery, and even observe traditional life among the Lisu, Lahu and Chan hill tribe settlements dotting the riverbanks. Besides joining a rafting team, outdoor enthusiasts can also try their hand at white water kayaking, a relatively new adventure sport in Thailand.

Veteran adventure tour specialist Siam River Adventures (siamrivers.com) conducts kayaking clinics on the banks of the Mae Taeng. Along with basic white water trips that include safety briefings, transportation, lunch on the river and competent guides, they also run full-moon rafting trips, rafting and elephant trekking trips, kayaking, canyoning, mountain biking and hill tribe trekking tours.

BELOW: Loading up and preparing to return to base camp after a day of thrills and spills. **RIGHT:** A popular climbing area in northern Thailand, Crazy Horse Buttress offers more than 160 routes to cater to all manner of climbers.



Rock it

Just a decade ago, you'd be hard pressed to find a bolt, rope or anyone who knew about a rock route in northern Thailand. But all that changed when a few local rock enthusiasts started scaling the rocks and establishing routes. At the centre of it is Khaetthaleeya Uppakham (Kat to her friends), a member of the Thai National Rock Climbing Team who's won medals in speed climbing at the Asian Games. Together with Josh Morris, an avid climber, the pair wrote *A Guide to Rock Climbing in Northern Thailand*, which put the area on the map. They went on to host competitions, teach top roping (climbing with a fixed rope and belay set up), conduct climbing courses and develop a strong rock climbing community around Crazy Horse Buttress (thailandclimbing.com), an area in northern Thailand that is safely bolted with fixed routes in the Mae On area, 40km east of the city centre.

Today, the Chiang Mai rock-climbing scene is thriving. The limestone karst rock formation at Crazy Horse boasts lots of vertical and overhanging bits to challenge even the most dedicated climber. But with a choice of over 160 routes, there are essentially climbs for all levels.

After a hard afternoon in a harness, soak your aches away at San Kamphaeng Hot Springs (Moo 7, Tambon Ban Sahakorn, Tel: 66 53 92 9077) in Mae On. The best-kept public hot spring in Thailand is housed in a park with huge spouting geysers, a 55°C pool that's used to boil eggs, and a long meandering canal of knee-deep 40°C water set in tree-covered grounds. The star attraction of San Kamphaeng though, is its large mineral water pool, with 38°C turquoise waters and a waterfall you can sit under to relax and invigorate your senses – the perfect way to end a day. ▶

LOCAL'S PICK

Learn the ins and outs of Chiang Mai from Joe Cummings, long-time resident and author of the original *Lonely Planet* guide to Thailand.

1 STAY A NIGHT Designed by renowned architect Ongard Satrabhandu, both Tamarind Village (www.tamarindvillage.com) and Rachamankha (rachamankha.com) offer a traditional feel and ambience of the city.

2 HOT EATS Huen Phen (112 Rachamankha Road, Tel: 66 53 81 4548) is a fabulous restaurant

serving authentic northern Thai food in an antique-furnished house, while Huan Soontaree Vechanont (46/1 Wang Singkhum Road, Tel: 66 53 25 2445) dishes up local favourites like gang hang lay, a classic northern Thai pork curry, and boneless grilled snakehead fish.

3 GET A NIGHTLIFE My favourite live music spots are Sudsanani (30 Huay

Kaew Road, Tel: 66 53 21 0614) for Thai folk songs and Guitar Man (68/5-6 Loy Kroh Road, Tel: 66 53 81 8110) for its wide range of musical styles like rock 'n' roll and pop.

4 TAKE FLIGHT Ride zip lines at the upper canopy levels of the rainforest at Flight of the Gibbon (treetopasia.com) in the Mae Kampong area. Talk about an adrenaline rush!



AD

Hit the trek

For one of Thailand's toughest but most rewarding treks, head northwards to Doi Luang Chiang Dao, a monstrous limestone ridge towering out of the valley mist. While Chiang Dao is the country's third highest peak and not as well known as its highest summit Doi Inthanon, the rugged terrain and subalpine ecosystem here make it a hit with nature lovers. The mountain rises dramatically from the plains of the scenic Mae Taeng Valley, and as a wildlife sanctuary, is open only from November to March. The slopes of the range are home to the endangered Hume's Pheasant, along with some 206 other bird species such as giant nuthatches, plus 134 animal species including tupaia (tree shrews), wild boars and clouded leopards. Additionally, rare plant species like the *Sirindhornia pulchella* orchid can be found here.

The climb to the 2,195m-high Chiang Dao summit is a steep slog through a dense jungle of bamboo thickets and large ferns. While the supremely fit can pull off the ascent in a day, mere mortals can expect the journey to the top and back to take two or three days. Doing a more leisurely ascent allows you to camp near the ridge, making it easier to summit during the morning hours when visibility is clear and the valley below is shrouded in a dramatic sea of fog. Even though the winter months can see downright freezing temperatures on the summit plateau, the humidity below and steep ascent can sap most trekkers, who might find it a good idea to have guides and porters help with their camping gear, food and other belongings. One outfit that offers such arrangements is Chiang Dao Nest (nest.chiangdao.com), a charming resort with 20 cosy cabins that sits at the base of the mountain. ►

FROM TOP: Scale the rugged terrain of the 2,195m-tall Chiang Dao, one of the most challenging treks in Thailand; get a snapshot of the daily life of locals as you trek up Chiang Dao summit.



Rest your feet

Known for its quiet location and spectacular views, Chiang Dao Nest boasts an excellent restaurant that's run by owner and Europe-trained Thai head chef Wicha. It offers gourmet European dishes at lunch and dinner, as well as an extensive a la carte breakfast and lunch menu. Expect dishes like buffalo fillet with cracked peppercorn and red wine sauce, and herb potato pancakes served with pumpkin and parmesan cheese shavings, alongside desserts like creme brulee.

What's amazing about northern Thailand is that one can be grunting up the mountain slopes one minute, and be back in the outskirts of Chiang Mai in an hour, surrendering to the ultra luxe services and surrounds of five-star stays like Mandarin Oriental Dhara Dhevi (mandarinoriental.com/chiangmai). Set amid a 24ha hideaway just 10 minutes from downtown Chiang Mai, the resort boasts 123 luxury villas, colonial suites and residences with a traditional feel. Think Burmese chedis (or stupas), teak villas and tropical greenery spread out among working rice paddies; they also house features like luxurious swimming pools, horse-drawn carriages for guests, bars and restaurants, and the 3,100 sq m Dheva Spa.

If you'd like to spend a night in the heart of the city, check into the Rachamankha (rachamankha.com). The Relais & Chateaux property has been voted Thailand's best boutique hotel for its architecture and culture. Its brilliant Thai-Burmese fusion restaurant has received accolades for its haute cuisine. Try the gaeng hang lay (beef curry), pla la chong (dried shrimp and garlic relish) and yam pak kat awm (mustard leaf and peanut salad).

Now, if only all adventure travel was this rewarding and luxurious. ■



fast facts

CURRENCY

Thai Baht
US\$1= 31.5 THB

VISA

Requirements vary. Visit www.mfa.go.th for details.

BEST TIME TO VISIT

November to February has highs of 25°C to 30°C in the day, with

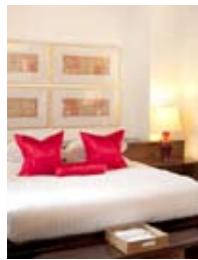
temperatures dipping slightly at night so bring along a sweater.

HOW TO GET THERE

Singapore Airlines' regional carrier SilkAir flies 4 times weekly from Singapore to Chiang Mai.

MORE INFORMATION

tourismthailand.org



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: The perfect retreat after a day of activity, the luxe boutique hotel Rachamankha; homemade pate with organic pea shoots at Chiang Dao Nest's restaurant; treat yourself to a taste of luxury at the Mandarin Oriental Dhara Dhevi's restaurant.



PHOTOS DAVID HAGERMAN / GETTY IMAGES / COURTESY MANDARIN ORIENTAL DHARA DHEVI