

Chiang Mai charm

Life inside the moat

Ask 10 people who know about Thailand what they think of Chiang Mai as a destination and you are likely to hear words like “sleepy”, “laid back” and downright “boring”. To be sure, Chiang Mai doesn’t have the frenetic energy of Bangkok, glitz and glamour of Pattaya or tropical flavour of Phuket. What it does have is a true sense of native Thai charm that cannot be denied.

In reality, there are a wide variety of things to do in and around Chiang Mai. Elephant trekking, river rafting, zoos, rainforests and too many glistening temples to count make Chiang Mai anything but boring.

Ancient capital

But as a Bangkok weekend traveller, I find the most rewarding facet of this ancient capital is the area inside the square moat known as “the old city”.

When people ask me what to do in Chiang Mai, I always tell them to stay in one of the dozens of funky guesthouses in the old city. Staying at a five star hotel like The Chedi or Le Meridien is

pretty much the same anywhere you go. But choosing a place with character and charm will make your stay unique and memorable. These little hotels are an attraction in themselves. In fact a walking tour of the main streets these quaint abodes are located is available.

There are many to choose from, but here are some of my favourites:

Seven Suns Residence on Rachamanka Road (for more info visit www.oldcitychiangmai.net)

This newly renovated four-storey guest house only has seven rooms, but they are spectacular. Each room is a 40+ sqm suite decorated with comfortable Northern Thai flair.

Owned by an expat couple, Seven Suns is what Chiang Mai is all about. Dine al fresco in their indoor/outdoor garden restaurant and enjoy healthy options like the whole wheat waffle topped with tropical fruit and honey. Or sip on a glass of Shiraz or cold Beer Lao while listening to some tasty old blues at the bar. Lester and Sahn at Seven Suns always make me feel like family.



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Boutique House on Ratchapakinai Road (for more info visit www.chiangmaiboutiquehouse.com)

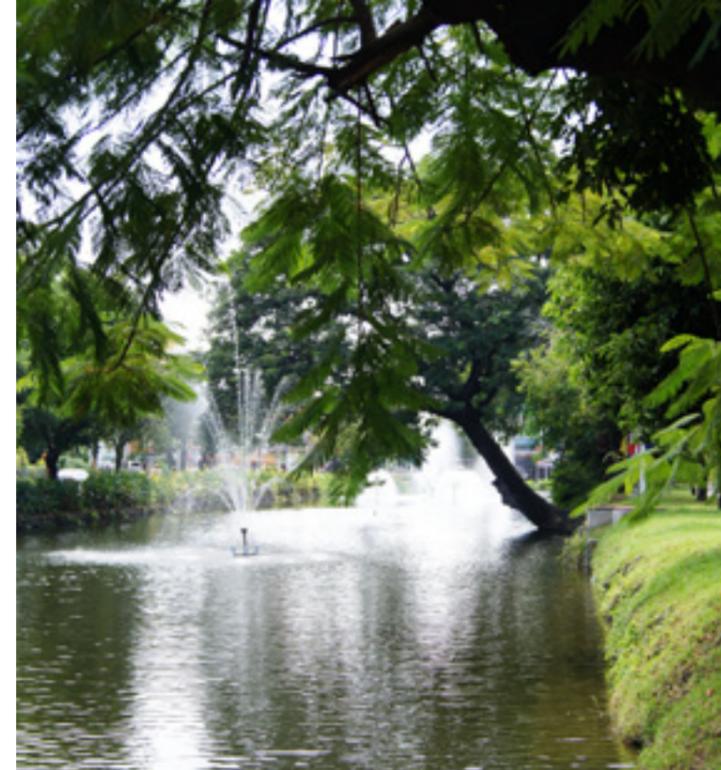
Even though this place is tucked down a quiet street, it is hard to miss with its brilliant saffron color. There are three reasons to stay at Boutique House. Close to Pratu Chiang Mai Market, guests have access to an authentic Thai “wet market” as well as the Saturday Walking Street Market known for fine Chiang Mai silver.

The rooms are the most well executed examples of modern Lanna style I’ve seen in Northern Thailand. And, this is probably one of the only small guest houses you’ll see with a swimming pool.

Popular temple

3 Sis Bed and Breakfast on Phrapokklao Road (for more info visit www.3sisbedandbreakfast.com)

It is ideally located directly across from Wat Chediluang, perhaps the most popular temple complex in Chiang Mai. This area is alive with action all day and half the night. 3 Sis’ expansive indoor/outdoor coffee shop and restaurant



is always teeming with activity and the Pad Thai is to die for. 24 rooms all tastefully adorned in the Thai Lanna style set right in the middle of Old City action; it doesn’t get more Chiang Mai than 3 Sis.

Perhaps the best thing about taking in the Old City is that you don’t need a plan; you just start walking around. Using the big square moat that surrounds the Old City as a reference, choose a thoroughfare to explore and keep your eyes open. You’ll see one little bistro and coffee shop after another.

Chiang Mai’s tourism, and for the most part its expat community, grew out

of backpacker roots and has a decidedly tree-hugger/hippie vibe. The good news is that many of the cafes and restaurants are health-centric and lean towards organic cuisine.

Organic food

One of my favorite hole-in-the-wall venues is Juicy 4 U on the North end of Rachamanka near the moat. It’s a nano-size little organic food joint with the most extensive menu of fresh juices, smoothies and lassis imaginable. Pop in and try the veggie-burger or homemade peanut butter toastie.

My pick for breakfast is Good



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Morning Chiang Mai on Rachamanka Soi 6. GMCM as it is known by local hipsters, is set in an old Northern Thai style house surrounded by a lush garden. Everything about this place is cool including the live jazz some Saturdays. Go for the giant cappuccino and whole wheat pancakes; good fuel for temple trekking.

Handmade jewelry shops, clothing stores, second hand book shops, mini-art galleries and music pubs make the old city a village within a city. Come to Chiang Mai, give in to the funky vibe and get yourself lost in the Old City ... you don’t need a plan.

