

Why we love it

- 01 There's a confident art and live music scene you wouldn't expect from a provincial city.
- 02 Chiang Mai has dozens of gold-trimmed temples within the old city walls, all still active.
- 03 A three-bedroom house with a garden costs less than €400 a month to rent.
- 04 It's hard to have a bad meal in Chiang Mai – the street food is really that good.
- 05 The gracious locals haven't tired of tourists like some have in the south of the country.

What we'd fix: Strong laws are needed to control unchecked development and keep things low-rise.

CHIANG MAI

Preface

Chiang Mai seems to have the best of both worlds: a laidback approach to life combined with enough vim and vigour to allow for frenzied building work, academic advances and a lively music scene. However, is the city's poise suffering in the face of rapid progress?

There's an expression in Chiang Mai that people whisper, usually in jest, when some big shot from Bangkok opens a business in their city that fails: *muang prab sien* means that Chiang Mai is "the town that conquers know-it-alls". It's not that Chiang Mai thinks itself superior to its big sister in the south or doesn't welcome outsiders; rather that residents of this charming, tradition-bound city believe all newcomers would do better adapting to their easygoing way of life.

This is the kind of town, after all, where it's not uncommon to see people padding barefoot around their offices or in museums, their shoes discarded in jumbled piles outside the front door. Tarot-card readers by the Ping river tell fortunes beneath flame trees burning with blood-orange flowers, while vendors in Ton Lamyai flower market across the street doze amid sweet-smelling jasmine garlands. At lunchtime, office workers cram into roadside restaurants for steaming bowls of *khao soi*, a spicy coconut-based noodle soup that's the most beloved dish in a food-proud city.

Buddhism is vital to the cultural identity of this city of 250,000, which makes the place feel even more at peace. On the eve of Visakha Bucha – one of the holiest days on the Buddhist calendar – monks swathed in bright orange robes and thousands of candle-toting residents dressed in white bring traffic to a halt as they begin an 11km overnight pilgrimage to the top of Doi Suthep, a mountain outside town. The atmosphere has the festive feel of a marathon (albeit a very slow-moving one) with loud Thai music playing from pick-up trucks and

volunteers handing small cups of water to monks as they pass by. Such a scene would be impossible to replicate on Bangkok's chaotic thoroughfares.

Most new residents from southern Thailand or abroad quickly come around to the Chiang Mai lifestyle. Ask anyone why they've moved here and they'll tick off the same responses: there's no grid-lock the cost of living is low and weekend getaways to the mountains are less than an hour away. It's no wonder there are so many retirees; wealthy Bangkok movie producers, British academics and Korean golf enthusiasts all have second homes here.

But Chiang Mai isn't south Florida. In fact, strolling through the narrow lanes in the Nimmanhaemin district you get the feel of a youthful town with a bar and a band on every corner – something more akin to Austin, Texas. The university is partly responsible for this. Chang Mai is the largest city in northern Thailand, an ethnically and biologically diverse region with the Laos and Burma borders not far away. It means the city has long attracted an interesting mix of scientists and anthropologists, most connected with the university.

In recent years, a creative neighbourhood has sprung up next to the university around Nimmanhaemin Road, buzzing with artists, musicians and designers, many of whom teach at the school or are recent graduates. Trendy young Thais with ear studs pack venues such as Warm Up on weekends to sip whiskey and Cokes and listen to guys with mohawks play loud rock music. At a gallery in the next *soi*, a blind guitarist with long silver hair and his violin-playing daughter entertain a quieter crowd with Neil Young covers.

The latest arrivals to the neighbourhood are tech start-ups and digital design agencies run by German and Finnish expats who could base themselves anywhere but chose Chiang Mai for the lifestyle – and the tax benefits. Companies in certain industries can qualify for eight years of tax exemption in Thailand. Property prices are on the rise, but starting a

business is still remarkably cheap. Arnon Thitiprasert made his way to Nimmanhaemin after closing his coffee shop in Australia because of the money he could save in rent: AU\$9,000 (€6,700) a month versus just A\$800 (€600).

He tried living in Bangkok too but it wasn't for him. "The traffic just makes you crazy there," says Arnon, his hands stained brown from a day of grinding coffee beans at his new café, Ristr8to. "Chiang Mai is the best balance between the city life and a not-too-hectic place. You have the temple but you still have the nightclub; you have a coffee shop but you still have traditional food."

There are grumblings around town, however, that this careful balance may be under threat. Chiang Mai is experiencing rapid growth with little thought given to preserving the city's quiet character. Traffic, once unheard of, is becoming a constant source of irritation, partly because the city has no mass-transportation system save its polluting tuk-tuks. A new zoning law enacting height restrictions for buildings has been stalled; as a result, high-rise luxury condos are appearing all over town. There seem to be few restrictions on advertising hoardings: certain intersections are now as cluttered and ugly as the most charmless parts of Kuta in Bali.

"Chiang Mai is a great place to live in spite of the government," says Pim Kemasingki, a half-Thai, half-British magazine editor whose father is a retired honorary British consul to the city. Politically, residents have little power to influence policymaking because Chiang Mai's governor is appointed by Bangkok and decisions are handed down from the distant capital. Residents are trying to change this by advocating for greater autonomy and the right to elect their own governor but given the government's paranoia when it comes to decentralisation, the effort may prove fruitless.

If so, Chiang Mai's creative denizens will need to find another way forward. Otherwise, the unthinkable could happen: those know-it-all bureaucrats from Bangkok might take over this serene city for good. — (M)



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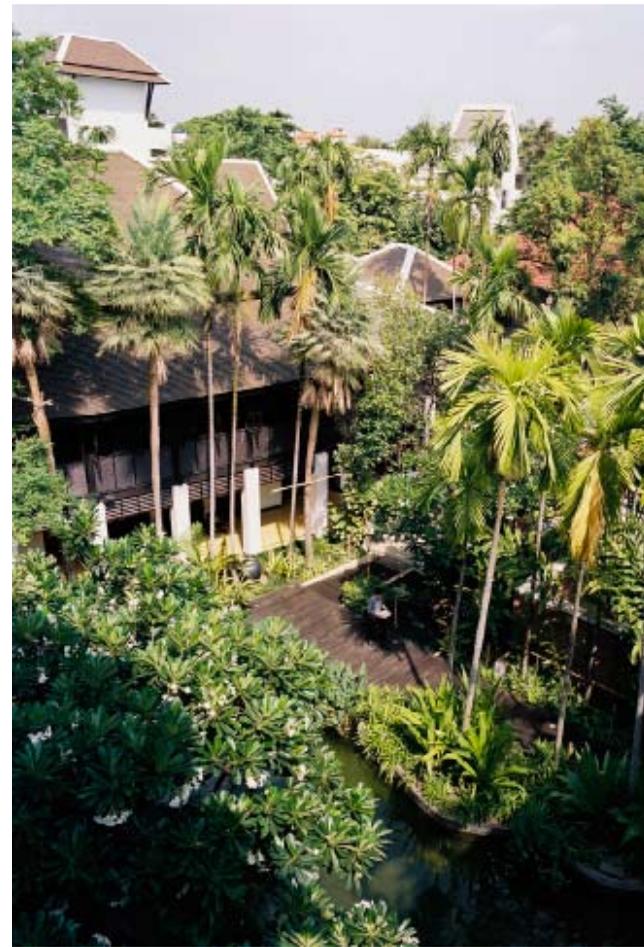
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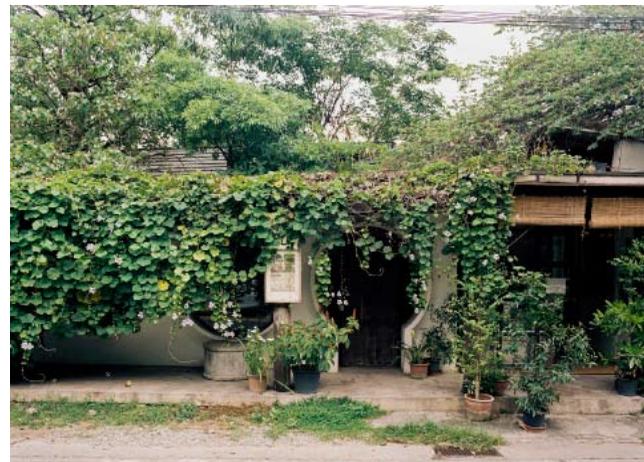
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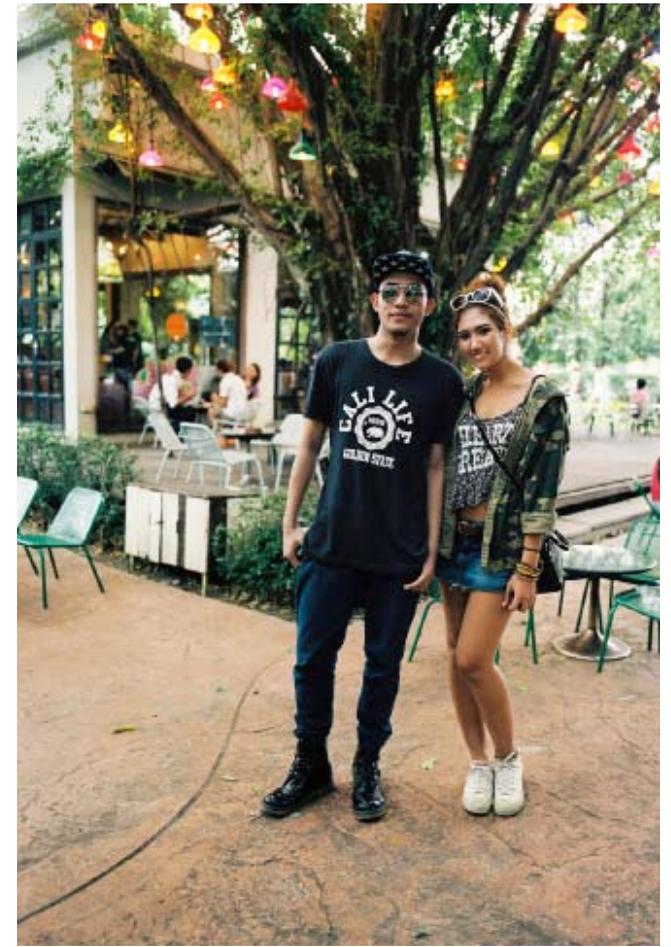
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