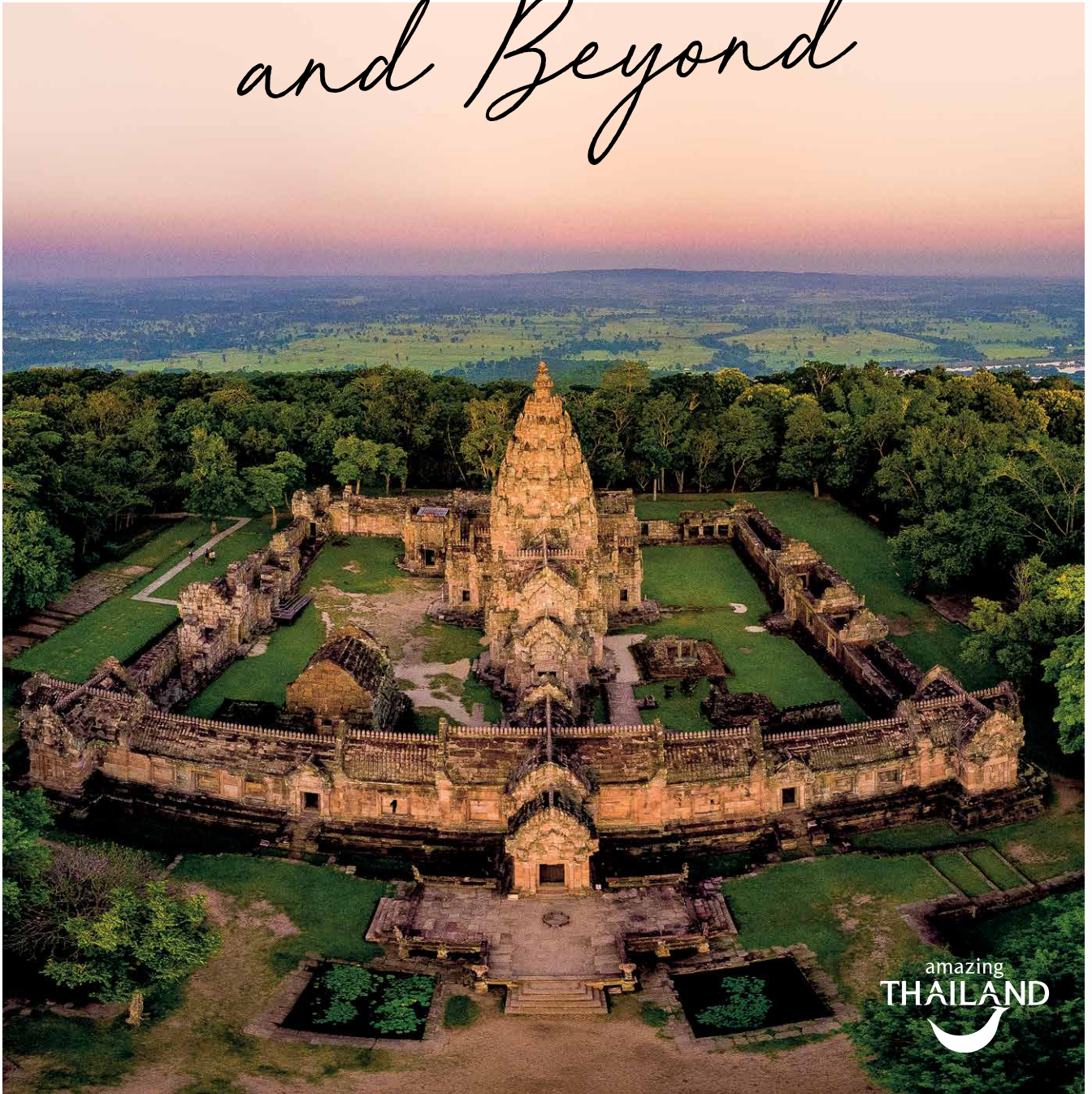
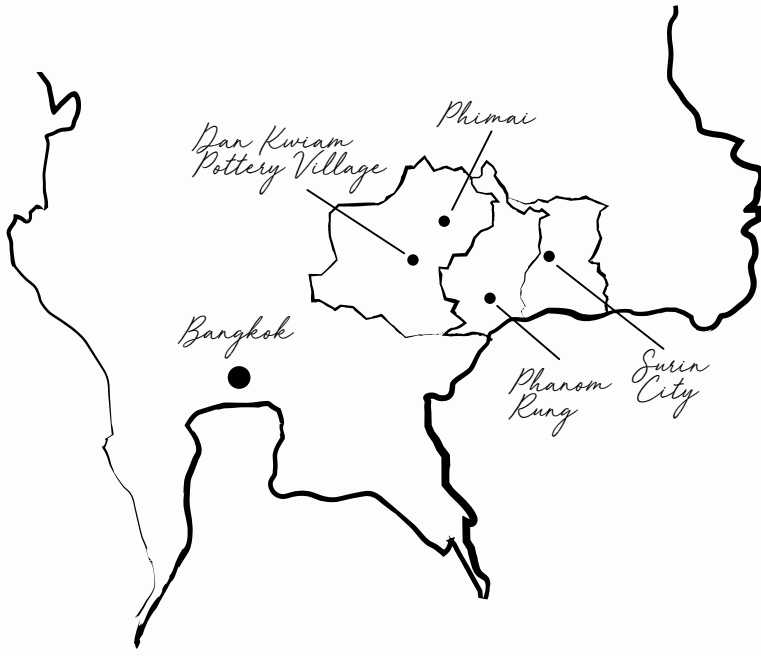


BURIRAM

and Beyond



Home to uncrowded ancient sites, spellbinding cultural festivals, and one of Thailand's best-loved regional cuisines, Isan is ripe for discovery.



As an

American who has lived on-and-off in Bangkok the past three years, I'm sometimes struck by how much of Thailand I haven't yet seen. So when I recently got the chance to embark on a nine-day trip through Isan, that vast northeastern region overlooked by most foreign visitors, there was no way I could turn it down. The plan? After an hour-long domestic flight from Bangkok's Don Mueang Airport to Buriram, I would hail a taxi straight to Nang Rong, a small town close to Phanom Rung Historical Park, and spend two nights there to check out the Phanom Rung Festival. Then it was onto the city of Surin for another three nights, followed by two destinations in the nearby province of Nakhon Ratchasima. The first would be Phimai, where I had budgeted two nights to wander around and take in the town's impressive Khmer ruins, and the second, Dan Kwiam Pottery Village, done as an excursion from the provincial capital of Nakhon Ratchasima (a.k.a. Khorat). Since there aren't any flights between Nakhon Ratchasima and Bangkok, I would be taking an express train home.

PHANOM RUNG FESTIVAL

My first stop in Isan is Buriram, a province whose namesake capital has emerged in recent years as a sporting destination. The town is home to one of the best-performing football teams in the country, and its five-year-old Chang International Circuit will play host to Thailand's second MotoGP event this October. Phil Ramsey, a visitor who attended the inaugural races last year, recalled a "fun crowd" and touted it as a "brilliant first GP for the kingdom, with a very strong position to build into one of the best on the calendar." Another

reveler praised the e-tan, or farmers' trucks, used during the MotoGP as a shuttle service to and from the venue.

But now, in early April, all is quiet at Chang International Circuit and the grandstands are devoid of spectators. I've come to Buriram for something quite different: the Phanom Rung Festival, an extravaganza that takes place at an 800-year-old Khmer temple.

Phanom Rung may not have the global fame of Angkor Wat, but it should. The temple is exceptionally beautiful and boasts a dramatic location, sitting atop the forested slopes of





Several times a year, the rising and setting sun shines through all 15 portals along the central axis of Phnom Rung.

an extinct volcano surrounded by paddy fields. The alignment of it is such that several times a year, the rising and setting sun shines through all 15 portals along the central axis to create an arresting visual spectacle. It is indeed extraordinary how ancient peoples could build their monuments

with such accuracy, and there is a widely held belief in Isan that those who witness the fabled Phnom Rung sunrise will soon receive good luck. The three-day Phnom Rung Festival is a celebration of this solar phenomenon. In a way, it brings back a measure of the temple's heyday through much pageantry and a riot of color: there is a stunning procession to honor the gods, traditional dance performances, and the festival sees opening hours extended beyond the usual times so visitors can enjoy fireworks displays as well as sound and light shows.

The excitement is palpable in the air as I take my place beside Phnom Rung's wide ceremonial pathway in anticipation of the proceedings. To a soundtrack of traditional folk music, mostly string instruments and drums played over speakers, the procession finally begins with eight men carrying a float adorned with the image of the Thai

A spectacular sunrise at Phnom Rung temple. Below: Buriram's Chang International Circuit. Opposite, from top: Shuttle services on e-tan, local farmers' trucks, are provided at the MotoGP; the procession at the Phnom Rung Festival.

king. Another 20 men bearing yellow and red banners follow, as do several groups of women in finely embroidered dresses wearing intricate crowns atop their perfectly coifed heads. Once the women have passed, a collection of muscular men styled as ancient warriors appear on the hilltop and blow horns as fireworks explode on the impressive ceremonial pathway.

One by one, groups from different regions parade by, each one carrying a different statue. The first group carries an elephant so unwieldy it requires a dozen sturdy men to lift it. They are accompanied by bare-chested men hoisting more colorful banners and women holding golden cups filled with flowers. Once all the statues have been taken into the main temple, the participants spread out in formation along the ruins and perform a captivating dance sequence. I feel as though I've stumbled onto a movie set.

The end of the dance signals that the fun is just getting started. Hungry



from parading or parade-watching, everyone mobs the nearby food stalls. I eagerly join them. At sunset, as the sky fades to a pale orange, the main temple is illuminated with psychedelic lights during the booming sound and light show, which features a play recounting the history of Phanom Rung. I leave the festival 14 hours after arriving, utterly exhausted but happy, already making plans to return the next year.

SURIN

From Nang Rong, I travel 1.5 hours by taxi east to Surin, a city of about 40,000 people. In a strange way, Isan reminds me a lot of my native Oklahoma. It's the flat landscape and endless tracts of farmland, the slow pace of life, the towns full of religious buildings, and of course, a populace that is friendly and hospitable to a fault. Everywhere I go, especially in Surin, curious local residents often stop to chat with me. Most are genuinely surprised to see a Western tourist.

That evening, dinner awaits at Surin's bustling night market, where I am practically bathed in the mouth-watering aroma of frying garlic and grilled meats as vendors cook up pad thai in massive woks, roast chicken on skewers, and deep-fry tasty looking desserts. I wander the stalls paralyzed by indecision, unsure of what to eat

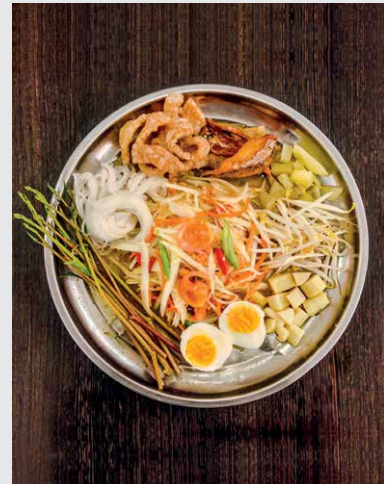
amid the cornucopia of street food. As hunger looms, I have an epiphany – I'll do as the Thais and eat a little bit of everything!

My chosen appetizer is skewered *sai krok Isan*, or Isan sausage, which proves to be a quasi-religious experience from the first bite. The regional specialty is made from fermented pork, sticky rice, and bits of garlic: a simple yet tantalizing symphony of flavors. Next, I have *krapow moo*, minced pork stir-fried with chilies and basil, which leaves my mouth happily burning with spiciness. And for dessert? I end up devouring a coconut pancake. Afterward, I find a pedal taxi to drive me back to my lodgings because I am simply too full to walk.

The next morning, the ever-helpful owner of my guesthouse recommends a visit to the Surin National Museum and loans me his personal bike for the day. Apart from Khmer artifacts, the museum also reveals insights about the various ethnic groups in the region. Surin has more domesticated elephants than anywhere else in the world and one



Left: An exquisite brocade being made in Ban Tha Sawang silk weaving village. Above: Isan sausages for sale at Surin's buzzing night market.



WHAT TO EAT

Isan fare is beloved all over Thailand, thanks to its bold combination of spicy, sour, savory, and pungent flavors. Here are a few must-try dishes to consider on your trip.

Som Tam

An authentic Isan-style green papaya salad should pack a punch; it's best eaten with sticky rice that has been rolled into a ball and dipped into the fiery sauce.

Sai Krok Isan

Juicy sausages stuffed with fermented pork and glass noodles, accompanied by bird's-eye chilies, fresh cabbage leaves, and slices of ginger to cut through the fattiness.

Larb

A popular version of this "salad," uses stir-fried minced beef or pork with chili, shallots, coriander, and mint. Fish sauce and lime juice add even more flavor to the mix.

Kang Kua Hoykhom

Shelled freshwater snails and spinach in a rich, peach-colored coconut-milk curry.

Gungjom Songkreung

A tart mixture of fermented shrimp fried with pieces of pork chop and chili, eaten with an assortment of fresh vegetables.

Hor Mok

Mousse-like curry "cakes" steamed in small packets of banana leaf that usually feature fish or minced pork.

Kor Moo Yang

Tender pork neck that is barbecued, sliced, and served with *nam jim jaew*, a spicy dipping sauce.





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THAILAND



Surin's most famous temple, Wat Burapharam. Below: Decorated earthenware jars on display in Dan Kwian Pottery Village.

wing of the museum educates visitors on the area's longstanding elephant culture. While perusing the elephant section, a security guard makes sure I get to watch an informative video presentation. I leave the museum duly impressed.

I then ride my bike to a hole-in-the-wall eatery recommended by Lonely Planet, and although there is no English menu, I have no trouble ordering since everything is cooked in an open kitchen on the street. Naturally, I opt for a hearty Isan lunch: grilled, marinated chicken (*gai yang*) garnished with Thai basil, sticky rice served in a small rattan basket, and *som tam* – the classic green papaya salad that is served at practically every meal in Thailand. This one features sliced fresh tomatoes and green beans mixed in with peanuts, bits of garlic, palm sugar, pungent fish sauce, and lava-hot chili peppers.

The Surin countryside is also

dotted with enough minor Khmer temples to satisfy any enthusiast of ancient architecture. Perhaps the most significant of these is Prasat Sikhoramphum, located a 40-minute drive east of town. Prasat Sikhoramphum was built by Suryavarman II, the same 12th-century Khmer king who commissioned Angkor Wat, as a Hindu temple to the deity Shiva. The sanctuary's five brick-and-sandstone towers sport exquisite bas-reliefs; look out for the well-preserved lintel depicting a dancing, ten-armed Shiva.

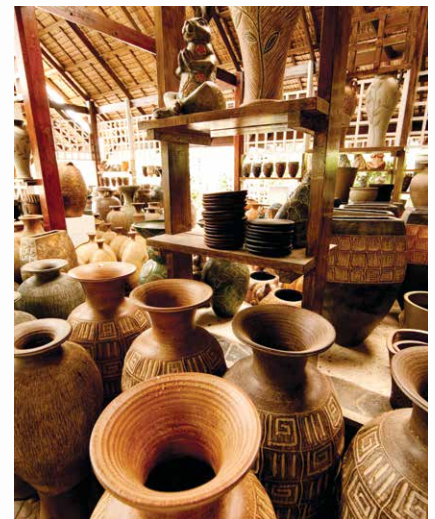
Less than 10 kilometers outside of Surin City in the other direction, and accessible by tuk-tuk, the silk weaving village of Ban Tha Sawang is well worth a visit for its open-air wooden buildings with giant traditional looms, where you can observe elderly women at work. Demonstrations of the weaving and silk-dyeing process are usually held around 1 p.m. each day. Also located in Ban

Tha Sawang is the family-run business Chansoma, whose gorgeous, intricately woven brocade fabrics are made with threads using real gold and silver. The finished products often make their way into the royal Thai court.

PHIMAI

Departing Surin by taxi, I head west, traveling back through Buriram, en route to Phimai in Nakhon Ratchasima province. Its star attraction, a stunning 12th-century Khmer temple, sits right in the middle of town. Joined by two stupas in different states of preservation and surrounded by an enormous brick wall, the main compound boasts a 30-meter central tower, whose statue-encrusted sandstone form is believed to be the model for the spires of Angkor Wat. Exploring the park-like grounds, as koels sing in the branches of huge trees that appear to be as old as the ruins themselves, I wonder what the temple must have been like in its heyday.

Outside the compound, I discover that the rest of Phimai is just as alluring. Bordered on the north by the



meandering Mun River and on the west by a large canal, the verdant, laid-back town has four impressive wats, remnants of the old city wall, an eerily beautiful banyan tree forest, a lively night market, and dozens of places to eat. There's also the Phimai National Museum, which houses a substantial collection of Khmer-period carvings, statues, and other artworks. Displays in both Thai and English narrate the story not only of Phimai, but also other ancient settlements in the region.

After exploring the museum, in an effort to avoid the midday heat for a little longer, I do the only sensible thing – ducking into a simple place with three mats on the floor for a no-frills Thai massage. The masseuse asks where it hurts. “Everywhere,” I say. I have been traveling all over Isan for more than a week and am a little sore and tired. She accepts the challenge, rubbing my back with lotion and tiger balm – which yields the fragrant aroma of menthol and camphor – before proceeding to crush every knot out of my body. It is the best massage of my life. The total price? 150 baht, or five U.S. dollars.

DAN KWIAN POTTERY VILLAGE

My last stop in Isan is the Dan Kwian Pottery Village, a half-hour taxi ride from Nakhon Ratchasima's eponymous capital (commonly known as Khorat). There are hundreds of shops in Dan Kwian that sell everything from earthenware pots and ceramic figurines to massive statues fit for a Buddhist temple. It is utterly fascinating that all the pottery is made, fired in kilns, and sold in the same place. I enter a shop and see three generations working side by side completing various stages of the production process: a man works a pottery wheel while his mother polishes recently fired bowls as his daughter paints vases. Next, I visit a studio specializing in massive statues and see men welding frames and women on scaffolds applying clay to metal skeletons. I ponder buying a huge ceramic statue but decide on a small vase after considering the logistics of getting it home.

Isan is an unsung part of Thailand with a great deal of charm, ancient Khmer ruins, and magical festivals.

I go to the railway station in Nakhon Ratchasima thinking my trip is over, but there's one last treat in store: the five-hour journey to Bangkok aboard the No. 72 express train. While many types of train ply the route, including some with air-conditioned carriages, the fan-cooled one I choose is pleasant and comfortable; the open windows allow

breezes to flow through while affording views of the passing scenery.

We trundle through small villages and rice fields dotted with grazing water buffalo, then, on the descent from Isan's Khorat plateau, a forested mountain range. Closer to Bangkok, the ruined temples of Ayutthaya are my final glimpse of ancient Siam before entering the dense urban core of the capital city, with its ever-growing skyline of glassy, futuristic towers.

At Hua Lamphong Railway Station, I encounter a large number of foreign tourists waiting for trains to Chiang Mai or the southern beaches, worthy destinations for sure, but I feel like I have been let in on a secret. Isan is an unsung part of Thailand with a great deal of charm, ancient Khmer ruins, magical festivals, and 150-baht massages. I hope the word gets out and more visitors go to the northeast, but for now, I am happy to have been there first.

GETTING THERE

Buriram Airport is the gateway to Thailand's lower northeast region, with 50-minute domestic flights connecting it with Bangkok's Don Mueang International Airport. Together, budget carriers **Thai AirAsia** (airasia.com) and **Nok Air** (nokair.com) fly the route five times a day. Hour-long transfers to nearby Surin by air-conditioned coach or van can be arranged through either airline. For those who prefer to travel overland, Nakhon Ratchasima (Khorat) is a five-hour train ride from Bangkok. Timetables and fares are posted on the website of the **State Railway of Thailand** (railway.co.th).

GETTING AROUND

Taxis are probably the quickest and most convenient way to travel between points of interest. Buriram is well positioned as a hub for explorations of the countryside and neighboring provinces; both Phanom Rung and Surin are just an hour's drive from town, Phimai is 1.5 hours down the road, and Nakhon Ratchasima is about two hours away by train.



WHEN TO GO

The **Phanom Rung Festival** takes place in April and October, typically on the first or second weekend of those months. Motorsport enthusiasts should not miss the **PTT Thailand Grand Prix** (motogp.com) at Buriram's Chang International Circuit from October 4–6. Promising to be bigger and even better than last year's inaugural run, which marked the first time the MotoGP held a race in Thailand, the event will see Spanish star rider Marc Márquez defending his title against the likes of Valentino Rossi and up-and-coming figures such as Fabio Quartararo.