





ART AND INSPIRATION IN CHIANG RAI

A deep-dive guide to experiencing this thought-provoking northern city.

by Melissa Rayworth



White Temple

Two days in Singapore scarfing down satay and quickly glimpsing the graceful lion? Fun, but frantic. Three days in Hanoi trying to inhale as much of Vietnam's beauty, complexity and fragrant noodle soup as I could before it was time to fly? Delicious, but I needed a vacation after that vacation. It's true: I'm an expat who wants to see everything.

I tend to dash through fascinating places in a FOMO-fueled attempt to catch each stunning vista and experience every cultural highpoint. A recent visit to Chiang Rai rocketed by that same way. But this small northern city grabbed my attention in a way I didn't expect. It's got me hungry to return and wanting others to pause long enough to really let in its uniqueness, too.

Can you squeeze all of Chiang Rai's attractions and excursions into a few days of sightseeing? Yes. But you shouldn't. Instead, here's my prescription for a slow, exquisite weekend in Chiang Rai that will leave you feeling transported — rather than travel-worn.

FRIDAY

Fly out of Don Mueang International Airport in the afternoon and you'll be settled in Chiang Mai by dinnertime. It's just an 80-minute ride from DMK to Chiang Rai (CEI) and tickets are inexpensive. Flight costs average about 4,000 THB roundtrip on discount carriers like Air Asia.

Where to Stay

Chiang Rai Green Park Resort is spotlessly clean and very affordable. An outdoor playground area offers families with kids a place for relaxing, and the hotel's ample breakfast (including eggs made to order, soups and stir-fried dishes) will fuel you for the day ahead. See www.chiangraigreenpark.com for more.

Want something more upscale? If you'd prefer a 5-star experience, we've also checked out **Le Meridien's** Chiang Rai resort (www.lemeridienchiangrai.com) and loved the serenity, high ceilings in the rooms, and the rather fancy pool next to the Mekong River.

SATURDAY

After a leisurely breakfast, make your way to **Wat Rong Khun**, better-known as Chiang Rai's much-photographed

White Temple. Thai artist **Chalermchai Kositpipat** started creating this sprawling art installation in 1997. Two decades later, he's still at work on this stunning project and is training others to help realize his vision.

If you visited several years ago, it's worth coming back now to see how it continues to expand. If you've never been before — don't miss it. This temple, you may have heard, isn't Buddhist. In fact, it isn't really a temple at all. It's a social statement rendered through architecture, sculpture and mind-blowing painted murals.

Chalermchai grapples vividly with the horrors of the modern world by juxtaposing them with visions of heaven. The effect is deliberately immersive and disorienting. Joy and peace wage battle with commercialism and cruelty in a mashup of sacred and profane imagery unlike any you'd find elsewhere in Thailand.

But don't leave right after you've captured a few Insta-worthy images. Instead, stay a while. Whether or not you agree with Chalermchai's take on the ways modern society has gotten lost, take time to let his technicolor visions wash over you. Then step outside and consider the meticulous effort that's gone into encasing whole buildings in shimmering, bright-white, impossibly intricate flourishes. Even as the artist delves into painful themes, it's hard not to feel the joy and hope that his remarkable buildings convey.

Be sure to wander through trees hung with sculpted heads — many of which you'll likely recognize from Western and Japanese pop culture. And don't miss the gallery of the artist's other works. Finally, take a break to explore the arcade. You'll find a range of lunch spots and coffee places, plus local handicrafts for sale.

Just a short drive away, you'll find the **Baan Dam (Black House)**, a strange and unsettling counterpart to the glittering White Temple. Despite the images of luxury, there's little joy or hope to be found inside artist **Thawan Duchanee's** hyper-masculine art installation.

Animal skins and skulls adorn lavish dining tables and beds found in buildings around the property, while groupings of primitive chairs in small huts suggest some dark ceremony may imminently take place. Knives and phallic-shaped pipes are scattered about, as if you've stumbled upon the abandoned site of an S&M-themed vacation resort whose revelers are long since gone.



Baan Dam

There is beauty here, and yet you're made to consume it alongside a dose of ugliness. To make sense of it, move slowly through the complex, letting these strange rooms tell you their story. Only a few buildings on the property can be entered by visitors, but glass walls in most of the structures provide a literal window into the artist's vision.

Afterward, if you're in need of sustenance, a small cafe near Baan Dam's ticket office offers cool drinks and iced coffees to battle the afternoon heat.

Where to next?

Rather than racing to the **Golden Triangle** to catch the light for sunset photos, create a quiet space to seek the synthesis of everything you've seen today. Slowly head back to Chiang Rai's city center for a long massage and a satisfying dinner.

You can find both at **Baan Chonsuwana**, where a 90-minute foot massage with a moisturizing mud scrub takes reflexology to the next level. The spa's Thai massage and herbal ball massage are also excellent, and treatment rooms are softly lit and beautifully decorated. They accept walk-in customers, but it's wise to book ahead to ensure the treatment you want is available. Contact Baan Chonsuwana at 081-02 5-9566 or find them via Facebook.

SUNDAY

If you're staying another day, now it's time to explore the Golden Triangle or hire a driver for a jungle hike. (**Doi Luang** and **Lam Nam Kok** are popular destinations.) Bring your swimsuit because many trekking trails include cool waterfalls where you can take a refreshing dip. Tour guides can also direct you to hot mineral spring pools that will soothe your trek-tired muscles.

The **Choui Fong Tea Plantation**, located at 97 Moo 8 Pasang in the Mae Chan District, is also open to visitors. You won't learn a whole lot about tea there, but the plantation's sleek, open-air cafe rises up out of the landscape like a concrete-and-steel sculpture to offer sweeping views of terraced tea fields stretching out in all directions. It's the perfect spot for breathing deeply while indulging in green tea smoothies, matcha cakes and tea-flavored ice cream served over thick, buttery toast.



Tea Plantation