

ACCOMMODATION IN THAILAND



WHAT IT COSTS AND WHERE TO LIVE

OCTOBER, 2013

Welcome to Thailand

Have you ever fallen in love with a place – say, Geneva – then found the cost of accommodation put it out of reach? In Thailand *good* accommodation is so cheap you'll chuckle. Whether renting or buying, a little homework will find a place that really suits you *and* your wallet. For example, my friend lives in a traditional Thai houses –constructed entirely of hand-carved teak and rose-wood – with a lawn, garage, 3 bedrooms and servant's quarters. It's on a quiet side street 5 minutes' walk from the university campus. His rent? 10,000 Baht (\$340)/month.

Buying vs. Renting

Modern condos like mine are constructed of reinforced concrete and tile. (Thais love tile for some reason). They're sturdy, cool, airy (3 meter ceilings are standard), and easy to clean. Electricity works – except during the spectacular electric storms – as does the plumbing, the traffic lights, road-cleaners, and everything else that's often absent or unreliable in emerging economies.

There is a fly in the ointment, however. Like many countries Thailand allows only Thais to own land. There are three ways to address this:

1. Marry a Thai and buy in their name. This will make them the owner but you can have what lawyers call 'usufruct', or use for life. (details in the book, below).
2. Become a Thai citizen. This is a slow process and requires you to know Thai fluently and contribute to the wellbeing of Thailand.
3. Buy a condo. Half the condos in Thailand, including all the new ones, are exempt from Thai-ownership rules and prices start at \$10,000. Yes, ten thousand dollars: you can get a pre-owned studio in a large, picturesque town like Chiang Rai for ten thousand smackers.

But despite the tempting prices I recommend waiting at least a year before buying property in Thailand. Renting is cheap and gives you time to investigate neighborhoods thoroughly. My apartment is in the *moobaan* in the picture on the right, below. It's on a quiet hillside street overlooking the university. It's brand new, air-conditioned, with a huge, white-tiled bathroom (see bathroom warning below), a study, bedroom, large living room, cable Internet, international TV, a broad balcony, and 24-hour security staff who will send out for pizza or arrange an early taxi to take you to the airport. My rent is \$240/mo. Whatever problems you might experience living in Thailand, accommodation cost and quality will not be among them.



Where I Swim Every Day



A Traditional House



My Moobaan

Moobaans – Townhouses with a Difference

A *moobaan* is a cross between a townhouse and a gated community with security guards. Older, Thai-style *moobaans* often have dark interiors and only the basic facilities, Thai-style bathrooms, and no kitchen. Modern *moobaans*, with Western-style amenities, offer a mix of apartments and small- or medium-sized townhouses or detached houses with one, two, or three bedrooms.

Thai neighbors love karaoke at 2 a.m. so I recommend a free-standing house to improve your chances of getting a good night's sleep. Of course, if you're a party person then a Thai *moobaan* is your idea of paradise.

We Westerners like to complain that we've become isolated from one another and that individualism has gone too far. Thailand has the antidote to that. Thais are very friendly and much more inquisitive than we are, so your Thai neighbors in a *moobaan* will be *much* more involved in your life than your neighbors back home. They'll always want to know where you've been or where you're going. They'll ask you where you went last night and you'll say, 'To a restaurant', but that's not enough. 'Alone, or with a friend?' they'll respond. They'll gossip about you if you do something that's not 'normal' in Thailand (pretty much everything) and they'll cheerfully 'borrow', use, and abuse your property as they would their own. Then, just as you're getting fed up, something goes wrong in your life and your *moobaan* neighbors swing into action: take you to the hospital, translate for you, fend off the cops, bring you food, and watch over you like protective parents. So chill out and enjoy your new culture.

Security: *Moobaans* usually have neatly-uniformed security guards manning the gate. This is comforting when you're new to a country. The guards walk the entire property every 10-20 minutes so you can leave your doors and windows open, which cuts down on a/c bills. Of course, when you go out, lock up just as you would at home.

Facilities: There is hardly any inhabited area in Thailand that does not have a restaurant, especially since there are no zoning laws here. And the security guard will arrange free meal deliveries for you. Believe it or not, McDonalds delivers. Some *moobaans* have elaborate food facilities including coffee shops and bakeries, and sometimes gyms, so check around before you commit.

Cost: I have friends in *moobaans* who pay 2,100 Bt. (\$70) a month for a studio apartment and others who spend 65,000 Bt (\$2,200) for a 3+ bedroom luxury pad with a pool, gym, and all mod cons. Since most *moobaans* have 6-month leases you can bargain for 10–20% discounts for a longer lease and cash up front. Free internet and TV are common inducements.

Bathroom Alert

Remember how I said that Thais love tile? Well, they love it so much that they sometimes use *wall* tile on bathroom *floors*. When you wet high-gloss wall tile its coefficient of friction drops to zero, your feet go out from under you and you go crashing to the floor. For reasons I haven't yet figured out, Thais are as sure-footed as mountain goats and they have remarkable balance. So when checking out apartments, throw a bucket of water on the bathroom floor (Thais don't mind what you do with water) and try walking on it in bare feet. There are workarounds for slippery bathroom floors but remember that bathrooms are the most dangerous places in Thailand. Walking in back alleys late at night is much safer.

Location, Location

Condo? Apartment? House? Downtown or in the 'burbs? A studio or a lawn? There are so many more options that it's sometimes hard to choose. And your choices are further multiplied by regional variations: Bangkok, the beaches and islands, Chiang Mai, and rural Thailand. Bangkok is a mega-city and the beaches and islands range from tiny and isolated to large, touristy, and throbbing.

Apartment Choices

Thai apartments are rented fully furnished. Just bring a suitcase or backpack and move in. Thais prefer firm mattresses but a mattress topper takes care of that. There'll be at least one table and two chairs, a couch and a lounge chair and, usually, a flat screen TV.

Studios (one room) apartments range from 30 to 100 sq. m. (323 –1100 sq. ft.) and have a small balcony accessed through sliding glass windows and a bathroom with a shower. The "kitchen" – if there is one – is a microwave, a mini-fridge, and a sink in one corner of the room. Studios in newer buildings often have pools and fitness centers. Most have an electronic security system on the front door and a/c, with Wifi and cable TV available for \$30/month. There is parking available for most apartment. Studios start around 3,000Baht (\$100) a month. More for well maintained, modern buildings.

1–2 Bedroom Apartments. There are multi-room apartments available in Chiang Mai, but not nearly as many as studios. People who want larger places usually rent a small house, so the demand is not there. Some one bedroom apartments were larger studios that the owner simply put a wall in to make a separate bedroom. These multi-room apartments usually have the same Spartan kitchen as studios. Buildings designed primarily for Westerners have 1 and 2 bedroom

apartments and no studios. While the floorspace of these multi-room apartments is no greater than larger studios', the rents can be higher. Two bedroom apartments start at 12,000Baht (\$400 USD)/month.

The House Option

Chiang Mai house rentals are low but most are outside the downtown area and require you to have at least a motor scooter (see our *Getting Around Thailand* report). Suburban housing starts 12–20 km out of town. Houses are rented with the basic furniture, like beds and couches and tables and chairs.

Most newer houses are in *moobaans*. Security is not a big issue in Chiang Mai, and having the sole entrance and exit going past guards helps to ensure that. Within the *moobaan*, traffic is minimal since roads go past, but not through *moobaans*. It is safe for kids to play in the street and for people to park their cars out on the street in front of their house, though almost all houses have of-street parking. Most 'housing' *moobaans* have common areas with large community swimming pools, tennis courts and fitness centers. Some have a small convenience store or a restaurant. Those without common area extras have lower rents. Rents for small houses in a nice *moobaan* range from 10,000Baht (\$333 USD) for 2–3 bedrooms, up to about 25,000Baht (\$833 USD). There are also plenty of larger homes that are 3-4 bedrooms (with 2-3 bathrooms) that rent for 30,000Baht (\$1000 USD)/month. If single people can get along as roommates the individual rent for a nice house can be substantially less than in a studio apartment, and you will get much more. House tenants get water and electric bills without the landlord's markup.

Houses have full kitchens but rarely an oven because ovens are not part of Thai cooking. You can buy counter-top ovens, however. Every house has a yard and most yards are completely fenced or walled. Most houses in Chiang Mai have good gardens with lots of fruit trees.

Serviced Apartments

If you're coming for an extended stay – to check Thailand out as a place to live – I recommend a serviced apartment instead of a hotel. Serviced apartments are a home away from the crowds of tourists. You can stretch out, relax, cook a meal, and put your feet up. Most larger towns have plenty and prices are extremely competitive.

Extras

Electricity is not cheap in Thailand, and AC eats up a lot of power, so if you're addicted to it you will pay for it. In Chiang Mai, much of the year is cool enough to sleep without it, and you should learn to do so. Sometimes a studio apartment that uses a lot of AC can end up with a charge of 2000Baht (\$70 USD)/mo. The owner gets a bill for the whole building then adds a percentage; just how much marks the difference between a good landlord and a greedy one. Most landlords will tell you their formula for determining the electric bill when you negotiate the rent.

Some apartments will have a water charge which the landlord calculates similarly. Fortunately, water here is pretty cheap. (During the monsoon we get more of it than we can handle!) Some apartments may have a telephone in the unit, and you pay 5 or 10 Baht for each call out. There is almost always Wifi and the cost usually runs around 150-300 Baht/month. It won't be as fast as typical internet back home, but usable. Sometimes a TV basic cable is available at no cost, but that means Thai stations only. For a charge you can get a full international channel lineup. Because you don't have much of a kitchen, expect to eat out a lot or at least have take-out food. Fortunately, that's pretty cheap in Chiang Mai, and will likely be much less than 100 Baht per meal. Sometimes much less.

Higher is Better

Rent on the sixth floor or higher. This puts you out of range of the local insects and far above the range of *aedes aegypti*, the dengue fever mosquito, which is a very weak flyer with a very dangerous bite. *And* you get a view!

Real Estate Agents

In most Western countries real estate agents are highly regulated but not in Thailand. In fact most things in Thailand aren't regulated so it's important to find an agent with a good reputation. Often real estate agents will mark up the rents from what the landlord is asking so you can get a better price dealing directly with the property owner. Some agents charge 1,000 Baht to take you out to show properties then, if you rent a place, they credit that back to you but they want to have their costs covered in case you do not. They may have other schemes to extract a few Baht from you, so keep your eyes open.

Making Money in Thailand.

If you want to live in Thailand and have failed to inherit money you'll be pleased to hear that making money here is quite easy. Even legal. I do it and so do my friends here. Because so many people asked me for help I wrote a book, *Making Money in Thailand*.

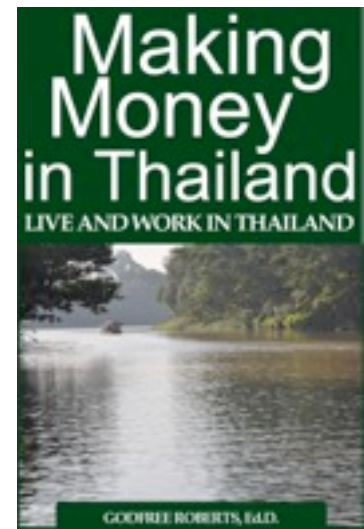
It's the complete guide to living in Thailand and the 18 (legal) ways to make a comfortable living. Take a look through the table of contents then....download it from Amazon!

MAKING MONEY IN THAILAND

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