

# WORD OF MOUTH

NEW AND GROUND-BREAKING TRAVEL UPDATES. EDITED BY FIONA KERR AND ERIN FLORIO

## LIFTING ROOTS

THE CITY RESHAPING THAI TRADITION

Chiang Mai's golden temples and thriving markets, known for their hill-tribe crafts and richly embroidered fabrics, have been drawing travellers in for years. But now a crew of creatives have started something new among the attractions in Thailand's cultural capital. Inspired by the northern city's rural backdrop and local produce, rustic dens have been transformed into laid-back, forest-fringed hangouts, serving up herbal rice drinks and farm-to-table feasts. ➤

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BAD BOY VALLEY



VILLA MAHABHIROM



KHAGEE



BAD BOY VALLEY



VILLA MAHABHIROM



THE BARISTRO



VILLA MAHABHIROM



MEENA



VILLA MAHABHIROM

PHOTOGRAPHY: CHRIS SCHALKX, SOREN EGE BERG/STOCKXY



## THE CHIANG MAI LOWDOWN

### THE COFFEE STOPS

With its proximity to Thailand's bean plantations and fondness for the slow life, it's no surprise that Chiang Mai has become one of Asia's coolest coffee hubs over the past few years. Today, the city is packed with cafés, such as pared-back Khagee in the leafy Wat Ket subdistrict. Run by a Thai-Japanese couple, this Kirfink-esque spot pairs its baked goods (blueberry bagels; green-tea muffins) with a caffeine hit. Set above an unassuming shop near the Tha Pae Gate landmark, Gateway Coffee Roasters is similarly stripped back with concrete walls and salvaged furniture. Native beans are used for the perfect pour-overs and cold brews. Further north, The Baristro at Ping River offers sun-dappled tables on the banks and creative concoctions such as coconut-water espressos and drinks spiked with cinnamon and rosemary.

### THE LUNCH JOINT

The clue is in the name at Meena Rice Based Cuisine, where almost every dish is based on the staple, from herbal drinks to crusted shrimp. With its wooden beams and slanted roofs, this waterside barn takes its cue from the traditional architecture of northern Thailand's former Lanna kingdom. The rustic restaurant champions local produce with innovative takes on Thai classics. Must-tries include the colourful onigiri-like triangles dyed with butterfly pea and safflower, and the roasted sticky skewers with garlic pork. After lunch, browse the gift shop for bamboo bags and organic soaps.

### THE ARTIST RETREAT

It's not just image-hungry Instagrammers who make the trek to Thongma Studio in rural Mae Rim every weekend, where sculptor Charnian Thongma welcomes visitors to his cactus-filled hideout. Dotted with his signature rugged busts and ceramic plates, this place is as much a gallery as it is a foodie stop: the kitchen dishes up comfort classics including tropical-fruit-topped French toast and chilli-bacon spaghetti.

### THE JUNGLE SUPPER CLUB

A patch of bamboo forest about an hour's drive from Chiang Mai conceals one of the area's most sought-after restaurants: Bad Boy Valley. Seated between taxidermy animals and lavish floral arrangements, only a handful of guests at a time are served a seven-course Thai-inspired menu. Dishes change daily, using seasonal ingredients, edible flowers and the chef's finds from abroad (Chinese spices; Japanese fruits), and could include vegetable-packed summer rolls or rice-field crabs. Afterwards, the lucky few might be invited next door for a tour of the owners' home – a cabinet of curiosities with everything from antique chinoiserie to Yayoi Kusama pumpkins.

### THE HOTEL ARRIVAL

Riverside Raya Heritage takes a fresh approach, ditching the ornate Lanna style for a minimal, white-washed look, with typical crafts (cotton cushions; mulberry-paper screens) in a starring contemporary role. Ground-floor rooms have indigo fabrics and terraces with pools large enough for laps, while others come with balconies and furniture covered with handwoven textiles. Its Khu Khao restaurant is where a variety of regional cooking and bold flavours meet, with dishes such as tangy *mohinga* (Burmese noodle soup), *amok trey* (Cambodian steamed fish) and fiery *kaeng pa* (Thai jungle curry). [rayaheritage.com](http://rayaheritage.com). Doubles from about £300

### THE INSIDER RECOMMENDATIONS

When antique dealers-turned-epicures Vradha 'Kui' Jroenkavadhana and Thanayot 'Yot' Kochakong are not busy running Bad Boy Valley, they explore Chiang Mai's creative spaces. 'Thanks to its temples and cultural roots, it has always been a city where religion and business, old and new, mix together,' says Kui. 'On weekends, we rummage through antiques from Myanmar, India and China at De Siam in the Hang Dong district. Then we stop for a classic northern supper at Huen Jai Yong – for something more sophisticated, try Villa Mahabhirom's restaurant – and head to Caravan Bar in the hip Nimmanhaemin area for evening drinks.' CHRIS SCHALKX

