

Chiang Mai to Pai by Motorbike

Getting to Chiang Mai

As you've probably heard, one of the great things about working for Super English is the large amount of time off you have to travel. Over our recent Christmas break at Thida, Eric and I decided to do some traveling around Chiang Mai, specifically the Mae Hong Son area northwest of Chiang Mai. In this article, I will share a piece of our adventure and some helpful tips for exploring the area of Mae Hong Son.

Why Chiang Mai?

Chiang Mai has a lot to offer. You can explore the old city center of Chiang Mai, visit numerous temples, trek to hill tribe villages, raft or kayak down rivers, see many beautiful caves, and much more. Specifically, we were interested in the vast mountainous area northwest of Chiang Mai, known as Mae Hong Son. December is an ideal time to visit this area because the temperatures are comfortable during the day, cool at night (actually cold at night in the mountains), and the air is clear. The weather was a nice relief from the Surat heat and the mountains were gorgeous.

Arriving in Chiang Mai

To get to Chiang Mai, the best options are flying or riding a train. While both have their pros and cons, we went with flying this time of round, mainly due to the fact that we only had 10 days to work with, and the trains, while cheaper, are much slower than flying.

Upon arriving in Chiang Mai, you will need to get from the airport to your hotel. We found that the best option was the taxi service from the airport, which has a set rate of around 100 baht per taxi to the city center (about a 15 minute drive). We only stayed in Chiang Mai one night at the beginning of our trip (long enough to find an excellent Tex-Mex restaurant, Miguel's, near the city center...yummm) and got up early Christmas morning to start our journey to the Mae Hong Son area.

Decisions, Decisions: Motorbike, Minivan, Minibus, Regular Bus, or Songthaew??

After Skyping with our family on Christmas morning, we hopped in a songthaew and rode over to the bus station. Our next destination was Soppong, near Pai, about 4 hours northwest of Chiang Mai. Originally, the first step of our plan was to take a minibus to Soppong. We had read all about the different transportation options here (<http://allaboutpai.com/transport/>), which even included riding in the back of a songthaew for 4 hours...no thanks!

Upon arriving at the bus station, we found out the minibuses were not operating that day, and the minivans were booked for the next several hours. We wanted to get on the road, so thoughts began to trickle into our minds about renting a motorbike. On a motorbike we could take the drive at our own pace, stop when we wanted to, and enjoy the fresh mountain air. At the same time, it sounded a little scary and we didn't have a clue how to make our way to Pai. The minivan would probably be faster and the driver would know where to go (we hoped), but we would probably be car sick (there are 762 curves on this road, people! More on that later...), we couldn't leave for several hours, and the trip would probably be equally as scary as on a motorbike.

Well, our sense of adventure kicked in and we figured, hey, who cares if we don't know where to go. They make maps for that sort of thing, right? We had heard the minivan ride can be pretty crazy, so we decided it would be more enjoyable to drive ourselves. We headed back into the old city center, and after poking in to several motorbike rental shops, we settled on a nice automatic Honda Click 125cc. For the bike, helmets, and insurance we ended up paying 200/baht per day. We were in a little bit of a hurry to get on the road (it was already after 12:00 and the journey would take at least 4 hours), but if you had more time to scope out bikes, you could probably find a better deal. We were happy because we ended up with a great, barely used bike for the long journey.

(Tip: Don't skimp on the motorbike! It is better to pay a little more and get a bike with good power (at least 125cc) than to end up with a bike that won't make it up the mountains. Plus, your back side will be thanking you if you get a bike with a comfortable seat.)



Eric with our rented motorbike, ready to hit the road!

Driving from Chiang Mai to Pai

Getting out of Chiang Mai is actually pretty easy. From the old city center, head to highway 107 on the north side of town. Once you get on 107 there are plenty of road signs in English directing you to Pai/Mae Hong Son/Mae Rim. Stay on 107 for about 45 minutes until you see a sign telling you to turn left towards Pai on highway 1095. From here it a piece of cake, as you stay on this road all the way to Pai.



One of many signs along the way. Just follow the signs!



On the road between Chiang Mai and Pai.

Renting a motorbike and driving to Pai seriously turned out to be a great decision. The drive is gorgeous, and the first part of the drive is pretty easy. The tall buildings and loud noises of Chiang Mai quickly turn in to lush jungle and the sounds of nature. On the first half of the drive on 1095, there are tons of little coffee shops to stop at if you get tired or whenever your bum starts to hurt (and it definitely will). As the road starts to get windier, the coffee shops disappear, and you begin climbing into the mountains. We found out that the drive from Chiang Mai to Pai is actually pretty well known. Before we left Chiang Mai at least 3 people told us, "Oh! Drive to Pai! 762 curves!" It turns out, there really are 762 curves! After a few hundred, I was happy we rented a motorbike, as I would probably be sick in the back of a minivan at this point.



Welcome to Mae Hong Son!

The whole drive probably took about 4 hours, including a few stops for lunch, gas, taking pictures, and of course to stretch/keep our butts from going numb. You could probably make the drive a little faster, but it's better to play it safe. We didn't want to end up in a motorbike crash on one of those 762 curves. There was barely any traffic, so we felt comfortable the whole time and the ride was very enjoyable.

Driving from Pai to Soppong

We arrived in Pai around 4:30 in the afternoon, and quickly had to make a decision as to whether we would stay the night in Pai, or go on to our final destination of Soppong, where we had a reservation at a place called Cave Lodge. We called the lodge, and they told us we had plenty of time to make it to Soppong before dark, and that we should definitely come tonight because they were having a huge Christmas dinner! Even though our butts were n-u-m-b at this point, we hopped on our trusty bike and waved goodbye to Pai.

Driving to Soppong that night turned out to be the best decision on the trip. The hour long drive basically entails a windy climb up a mountain, and then back down. This drive is incredible and I highly recommend it. Even if you take a minibus or minivan to Pai, you can still rent a motorbike in Pai and drive to Soppong. The best part of the trip was ending up at an overlook on top of the mountain for a gorgeous sunset! We could see forever and the whole sky was a swirl of orange and pink. After stopping for a few minutes, we headed on and enjoyed even more breathtaking views as we made our way down the mountain and towards Soppong.



The beautiful sunset seen from the mountain between Pai and Soppong.

We made it into Soppong right at dusk, and found the road for Cave Lodge, where we traveled another 8 km or so to the lodge. We were welcomed, shown around the lodge, found our beds in the dorm room, and sat down to enjoy a scrumptious Christmas dinner.

Staying at Cave Lodge (near Soppong)

If you drive the Mae Hong Son loop, you need to stay at Cave Lodge! This place is really cool. The common area/restaurant centers around a large fire pit and includes an assortment of large wood tables where all the guests gather at night to tell stories from their travels over a beer or a warm meal. The accommodations are cheap (especially if you stay in the dorm) and there is SO much to do in the area. You can hike, do overnight treks, explore caves, kayak, or just relax at the lodge and read in a hammock.



The "front porch" at the Cave Lodge restaurant.



The restaurant/common area at Cave Lodge.

The Big Tips

Well folks, that's about it. I'll leave you with a few key tips that will hopefully help you have a nice journey if you decide to rent a motorbike to drive around Mae Hong Son.

- Allow plenty of time for the drive. For the leg from Chiang Mai to Pai allow 4 hours (plus stops), and for Pai to Soppong allow 1-1&1/2 hours (plus stops).
- Stop along the way! There are wildlife sanctuaries, waterfalls, hot springs, a geyser, and tons of great photo ops on this drive. Enjoy the journey!
- **Be careful!** Always wear your helmet. Look out for gravel and loose dirt. Remember those 762 curves? A lot of them have potholes, loose gravel, and dirt. You don't want to end up wiped out on the side of one of those curves.
- Wear sunscreen, bring plenty of water, and bring layers. If you are driving around sunset you will probably get cold. Yes, cold! We stopped to replace our shorts and t-shirts with jeans and sweatshirts.

We had a great time exploring Chiang Mai and the Mae Hong Son area. If you get the chance, you should definitely rent a bike and explore the area. You won't be disappointed!