

ADVENTURE

# DOWN AND DIRTY

*Riding the dirt roads of Chiang Rai province has to be one of the most exciting options for any adventure traveler in Thailand. However, as **Scott Coates** explains, the true thrills of any journey through the mountains and valleys of Thailand's northernmost province lies in encounters with the locals.*





*Crossing a bamboo bridge outside Doi Mae Salong*



*Riding with Doi Chaang in the background*

**O**f Thailand's 76 provinces Chiang Rai has to be my favorite. For the mountains, the great outdoors and its myriad of cultures there's just no beating it. Nestled in the heart of the Golden Triangle with China to the north, Laos' to the east and Myanmar to the west it's often referred to as the Gateway to Indochina.

This area has always been one of myth and legend; of migrants crossing borders, trading goods and settling on new land. Thai, Ahka, Lisu, Lahu, Tai Yai, Muser, Karen and on it goes – people of different tribes living together, trading and intermingling to create a social landscape of friendly people. Travel 50km in any direction and faces change dramatically. Within the same town many ethnic groups of various religions live together without issue or conflict.

Food is a real highlight. Having only become a Thai province

in 1910, controlled by Burma on several occasions, and being on the Mekong River, it's always been a meeting point, not just for trade but cuisine as well. Whether dining in a proper restaurant or on a mat alongside a river, each and every meal is a treat that dazzles the senses.

Throw in an extensive network of footpaths which are perfect for mountain and dirt biking and it's obvious why I'm still in love after all these years.

Trails: paved, dirt, double track, single track, shale, mud, sand, I love finding, riding and exploring them. Nothing gets me jazzed quite like that. Head a few kms off the highway and you'll soon be on the dirt tracks that penetrate the wild.

Small villages, untainted by time and lit up with friendly smiles pepper a landscape of mountains and valleys. The villages are everywhere. Go by, take in the atmosphere, trade a smile, a gesture, a few words and you'll be the richer for it. This for me, is the basis of travel.

Being on a dirt bike is not only terribly exciting, but it gets you into the kind of remote places where world-class travel photos are shot.

You meet people who haven't been touched by tourism, who are legitimately as curious about you as you are about them. Smiles abound, reminding us that this is indeed The Land of Smiles and deservedly so.

Whether you stay in luxury or sleep in a hovel, remember one thing; the best memories and the true value of your experience lies in the exchanges with the locals. These are things that can't be bought. They can happen, take place, occur, be arranged, but they can't be bought.

Twenty villagers in costume waiting to perform traditional dances upon your arrival is hardly the same as the spontaneous smile of a stranger; or the kindness of a villager who hands out fresh fruit as you drive by; or a welcome that can be read in a glance - these are the real moments of value while riding the trails of Chiang Rai.

Chiang Rai is a treasure trove of exploration waiting to be opened.



*Blazing the trail*

People have traveled exclusively by foot until recent times, carving out an intricate network of paths from one end of the province to the other. The modern age of the truck has brought with it good and bad for dirt biking.

On the one hand there are some pretty fun, tough dirt tracks carved out into remote villages while on the other hand old tracks are being paved. But complaining would be thick as after all this time there's still a long list of paths I've been dreaming of heading down and still haven't had time to.

Though you wouldn't want to head off into the great unknown ill-prepared there's not too much to fear. With a good sense of direction, a detailed map, a riding partner and tools,

finding your way from here to there on dirt is very doable in Chiang Rai province. A number of decent maps exist and provide a good starting point.

Noting the name of villages you want to get to both in Roman characters and Thai will mean you can ask villagers the way as you go. But be prepared, many of them can't read Thai and are unfamiliar with maps. However, if you can say the name of the next village you'll more often than not end up there eventually. Trails come to an end, a track that was great a few months ago can get totally washed away with heavy rain while new trails are created, keeping the mix fresh.





# Recommended Routes

While finding new routes is fun, a number of tried and true ones keep me coming back time and time again. Here are a few that are well worth trying:

**Chiang Rai city to Geew Stye** (near the 3-way intersection to Doi Mae Salong from Route 1089)  
Riding out of the city towards Ban Ruammit elephant camp, continue onwards, the road turns to dirt, then is mostly nice cross country for about 30km. A number of streams provide fun crossings, stunning views of terraced rice fields abound and a final 5km steep climb is sure to keep you on your toes.

## Doi Mae Salong to Thoed Thai

Settled by Chinese from the Yunnan region back in the seventies, Doi Mae Salong is one of the kingdom's most scenic spots. Terraced tea fields, coffee plantations and hilltribe huts dot the landscape. Drive up towards the town's main temple, turn right before the entrance, follow the dirt road to Mae Ther, then continue onwards. You'll have to pick out small footpaths down, up and over mountains, but after 25km challenging kilometers you arrive in the far-flung outpost of Thoed Thai.

The infamous drug lord Khun Sa once commanded a force of 15,000 troops from here, but today it's a sleepy town with endless exploration opportunities.

## Chiang Rai city to Doi Chaang

A true classic with every kind of terrain thrown in, this is possibly my favorite ride. Head out of the city to Doi Hang and turn left into Soi 1. Follow the dirt road for 2km, turn right at a pond, then follow dirt tracks north through the rubber farm, along the edge of limestone mountains for 5km and you'll come to a Karen hilltribe village. Follow the dirt track up the hill and continue for 15km of thrilling track. After you hit the paved road that eventually arrives at Khun Korn waterfall, turn right, at the three-way go left, then keep an eye out for a track into the trees. This track gets steep, follow it for another 15km to the top of Doi Chaang. Perched at 1,500m, more than 1,000 Ahka hilltribe people farm world-class Arabica coffee on its slopes - a great treat after a challenging ride.

Dirt biking in Chiang Rai province is an experience tough to beat. Open, endless trails abound. Here's a bit of information to help you on your way:

## Where to Stay

### Le Meridien Chiang Rai

This famous brand has a very comfy property on the banks of the Mae Kok River.

Rooms from \$150US/night,  
Tel +66-53-603-333

[www.starwoodhotels.com/lemeridien](http://www.starwoodhotels.com/lemeridien)

### The Legend Resort & Spa

A local hotel that's very comfy, 4-star and situated along the Mae Kok River.

Rooms from \$90US/night,  
Tel +66-53-910-400

[www.thelegend-chiangrai.com](http://www.thelegend-chiangrai.com)

### Phu Chaisai Resort & Spa

A true gem located in the foothills of Doi Tung, about one-hour north of Chiang Rai city. Mud and bamboo bungalows with stunning views are a great place to relax and unwind.

Rooms from \$90US/night,  
Tel +66-53-910-500

[www.phu-chaisai.com](http://www.phu-chaisai.com)

### The Anantara

One of Thailand's top hotel brands has a gorgeous property right in the heart of the Golden Triangle. Enjoy views of Laos and Myanmar right from your room and they have an on-site elephant camp.

Rooms from \$175US/night  
Tel +66-53-784-084

<http://goldentriangle.anantara.com>

### Huai Khum Resort

A quirky gem located 80km east of Chiang Rai city along the Mae Kok River. Simple bamboo bungalows next to a Lahu hilltribe village, a swimming pool and kayaks make this an ideal place to really get away from it all.

Rooms from \$35US/night  
Tel +66-53-717-438

[www.huaikhum.com](http://www.huaikhum.com)



## Where to Rent Motorbikes

ST Motorcycle is THE motorbike shop in Chiang Rai. They have a good selection of Honda Degree and Honda Baja 250cc bikes from about \$25US/day.

## Where to Get Guides

Thai Rando has been around for a long time and has a great reputation. They know a wide range of trails and have good guides.

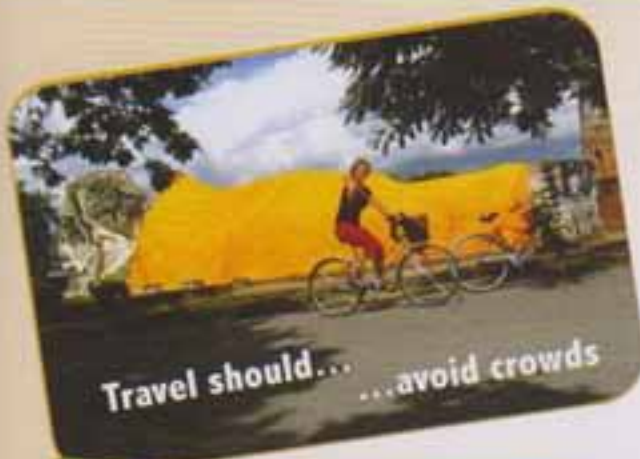
<http://www.thairando.net/frenchytrekkingbienvue/index.html>,  
Tel +66-53-759-270

Smiling Albino pioneered many of the routes in this province and knows it like the back of their hands. The owners ride as much as possible and love hosting guests on remote trails.

[www.smilingalbino.com](http://www.smilingalbino.com)  
Tel +66-2-718-9560

## Byline

Scott Coates is the co-founder of Smiling Albino ([www.smilingalbino.com](http://www.smilingalbino.com)) a bespoke travel company offering inventive experiences in Asia. Canadian, he has called Thailand home since 1999.



### Smiling Albino...

is a team of travel enthusiasts offering custom built experiences in Asia. Our adventures are the result of continuous travel, innovation and refinement. Trips combine multiple activities, charming venues, the finest regional cuisine and passionate hosts. You'll hit the highlights of course, but the real magic is in the hidden corners, insider sights and unique local characters. The signature of our adventures relies in the intimate relationships we've built with a network of people throughout the region. We don't just connect the dots...we create them...and deliver unforgettable travel experiences.



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