



OVERSEAS

Haven Report

Pai, Thailand:
Thailand's Artistic, Traquil Mountain Town...

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Live and Invest
OVERSEAS

Pai, Thailand



Pai: Small Town Living in Thailand's Northern Mountains

By Wendy Justice

The first time my husband and I visited Pai was in 2006, when we decided to take the renowned "Mae Hong Son Loop" that winds through the mountains of northwestern Thailand. We took a minivan from Chiang Mai – the starting point for most people who take this journey. Once we got off the main road and headed west, traffic decreased and we were soon surrounded by mountains, far from the hustle and bustle of Chiang Mai.

We were on a twisting mountain road with 10 percent grades, hairpin turns and nary a straight section of pavement. We had to brace ourselves while the bus swayed from side to side.

We passed signs for waterfalls, caves, and hot springs as we went deeper into the lushly forested hills. Exactly 762 curves and swerves later, our bus let us off in Pai, where we made our first stop.

...continued on page 7

We didn’t know it at the time, but we had arrived right after a devastating flood that had washed away a large part of the town. The businesses that had managed to sprout up in the few months after the flood were mostly scruffy backpacker bars and tattoo parlors. We didn’t like the town much and didn’t stay there very long. The surrounding area was beautiful and we spent quite a bit of time in this part of Thailand, but the town of Pai, as it was then, was not very appealing.

We were surprised when we passed through Pai a few years later and saw the enormous changes that had taken place. The main street was lively and diverse, with a pleasant mix of Thais and mostly younger Europeans. The grungy part of town seemed to have moved away from the main street, which was now full of book stores, cafes, and quirky handicraft and apparel shops. We didn’t linger in Pai this time either – it wasn’t part of our plan – but we decided to give it a couple more years and return.



Nestled up in the north of Thailand, Pai offers a quiet life

The third time we went to Pai, we stayed for a few weeks. The town held few traces of its post-flood recovery scars and had developed a very appealing identity of its own. New homes had been constructed and were painted in cheerful colors. Businesses had sprouted up offering services to people from all walks of life. A thriving night market in the center of town, filled with artisans, smiling cooks, and strolling, happy diners, had become the focus of the evening. Live music floated through the night air.

The foreign population had changed, as well. Although Pai was undoubtedly still a quirky, new-age sort of place, the crowds of dreadlocked 20-something backpackers had dwindled, and had been replaced by an older, more holistic and artistic population. Pai had also become a popular retreat



Visitors fall in love in Pai and with Pai

for foreigners, who had formed a small but comfortable community of permanent residents. More Americans than Europeans had settled in the region – an unusual thing to find in Southeast Asia. (More about residency on [page 14.](#))

Pai is in one of the prettiest valleys in all of Thailand. With a population that is still less than 5,000, it is a small town and it feels like it. Though Pai continues to develop, it is doing so in a controlled manner. It’s a laid-back place – most businesses don’t even open before 8 or 9 a.m. here.

If you’ve ever been to Big Sur or Carmel, California, Boulder, Colorado or any small, artist-oriented town, you’ll have a sense of what you’ll find in Pai. There are many art galleries in town, meditation and yoga are popular activities here, and locals are accepting towards people from all walks of life. Classes are offered in everything from martial arts to alternative healing. Community-minded Pai residents are involved in reforestation projects and helping disadvantaged minorities in the region.



Pai has plenty of alternative-lifestyle offerings

One of the attractions of Pai is that as a foreigner, it's possible to live a small town, Southeast Asian lifestyle without having to fully assimilate into Thai culture. English speakers will have few problems here, as many local Pai residents have learned the language and adapted graciously to the increase in tourism and foreign residents.

Pai's rural setting offers other advantages, as well. It's far enough away from any large city to provide peace and quiet and all the amenities that come with living in a small mountain town, but it's only a four-hour drive to Chiang Mai. Some of the best medical care in Asia is easily accessible from Pai, as well as an abundance of shopping, dining, and cultural opportunities.

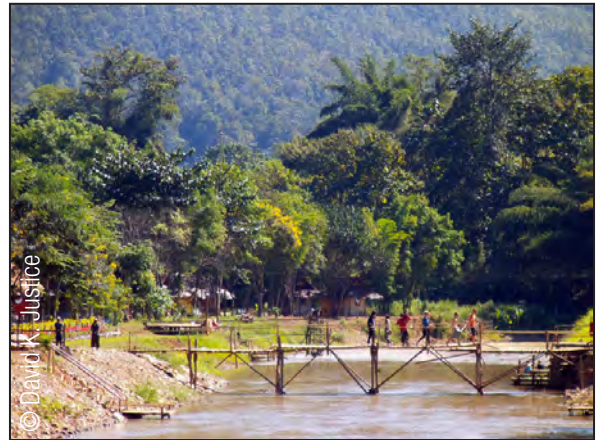
We were happy to see the changes in Pai compared to our first visit back in 2006. This was now a place worthy of calling home. With so much to do in and around town, living here would be peaceful, but it would not be boring. We liked the expats we met here, too – a welcoming group who were happy to talk to us and share their experiences of living in this small town in the heart of Thailand's northwestern mountains. You can read our interview with Dutch expat, and owner of [Pai Land and House](#), Mercel [here](#).

A Jewel in the Mountains

Pai is one of several small towns and villages scattered through the mountains of Mae Hong Son Province. This large, mostly rural province stretches from just west of Chiang Mai all the way to the Myanmar border. Pai is located in a fertile valley surrounded by some of the tallest mountains in Thailand. It is about 550 meters (1,805 ft.) above sea level, so the weather here tends to be cooler in the hot season than it is in the lowlands to the east. Pai is just 133 kilometers (83 miles) northwest of Chiang Mai, but with the winding, twisting roads, it feels quite removed.

The air is cleaner and fresher and the pace of life is much slower, with all the ambiance of a congenial, small mountain town. Myanmar is only 40 kilometers (25 miles) directly north of Pai, though you would have to travel much farther to get there by road. The provincial capital of Mae Hong Son, with a population of just over 6,000, is 108 kilometers (67 miles) west of town.

The pretty Pai River runs through town from the mountains of the Daen Lao Range, north of Pai. It winds its way through the rugged, remote mountain valleys of Mae Hong Son and into Myanmar, where it merges with the Salween River. During the wet season, the river flows quickly enough to attract white water rafters. If the season is wet enough, the Pai River will occasionally overflow its banks, though the recently improved dam upstream from Pai is expected to minimize the risk of flooding.



Bridge over the River Pai

Mountains and rivers make for beautiful scenery, and Pai is a jewel in the center of one of the most attractive landscapes in Thailand. Several waterfalls and natural hot springs are located just a few kilometers from town. There are some excellent primitive caves, camping and trekking opportunities, and a few elephant camps just a short drive away. Bicyclists can enjoy comfortable rides through the countryside, and motorcycle enthusiasts can pass endless hours of pleasure exploring the rural and mountainous roads which lead out of town in every direction.

The residents of Pai are mainly Thai, Shan (Thai Yai), Thai-Chinese, and foreigners. The outlying areas of the town are populated by ethnic minority "hill tribes," primarily the Lisu, Lahu, Hmong, and Karen.

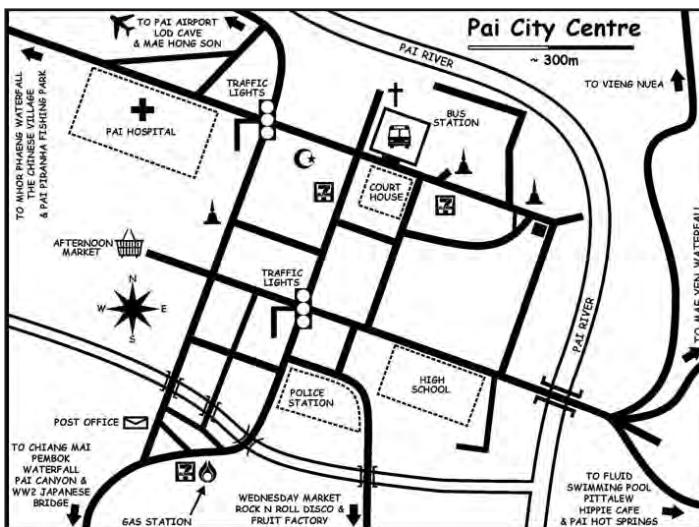
Many foreigners stay in Pai either as a destination in itself or as a stopping place along the way as they explore the Mae Hong Son Loop. The loop runs from Chiang Mai into the mountains and through Pai, continuing to Mae Hong Son and Mae Sariang before winding back east to Chiang Mai.

After the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami hit the southern beaches of the country, resulting in the loss of thousands of lives, superstitious Thais began avoiding the southern resorts, fearing contact with the ghosts of the deceased. Since that time, Pai has become the resort of choice for many Thai tourists – particularly those who want to experience cool winter weather. Even with the influx of Thai tourists, two traffic lights are all that is needed to manage the traffic in Pai – and even they aren't really needed outside of the high season, which runs from November through March.



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The Pai River has witnessed many changes



Pai has everything you need and just two traffic lights

Diversity through Wars and Immigration

Modern-day Pai and the surrounding area is still occupied by some of the descendents of its earliest settlers. The Lua (or Lawu) first came to the area more than 5,000 years ago. The Lua were known as great hunters and skilled artisans. Their burial sites have been found along the western slopes of many of the surrounding mountains.

The first recorded history of the Pai river valley was written in 1251 AD, when the settlement known as Ban Wiang Nua was founded near the site of present-day Pai. The early inhabitants were Shan (Thai Yai) immigrants who migrated to Mae Hong Son Province from northern Myanmar and, like the Lua, their descendents remained in the area. The Shan are ethnically distinct from individuals of Thai origin and constitute a significant minority in this part of north-western Thailand.

The Shan have integrated well into mainstream Thai society, but it wasn't always that way. In the 14th and 15th centuries, troops from the Lanna Kingdom, which encompassed nearby

Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai, fought with the Shan in a series of conflicts. A period of relative stability ensued, but in 1841, the Shan went to war again and were defeated by Lanna soldiers. They were permitted to remain in the region after their defeat, retaining some cultural and social autonomy. Far from being unified through the intervention of the Lanna Kingdom, Ban Wiang Nua became a divided village, separated into two parts by a wall, with the Shan living on one side and the Lanna on the other.

Conflict returned to Pai in the second half of the 19th century, as the area began to attract the interest of English and French would-be colonialists. The Lanna government, led by King Rama IV, encouraged Thais from nearby provinces to migrate to the Pai area in order to consolidate their influence and authority in the face of foreign incursion. However, the Shan did not want to be outnumbered by the influx of Thais, and fought another war against the Lanna Kingdom. In 1869, the Lanna Thai defeated the Shan – again in Ban Wiang Nua – but this time, the Thais burned down the entire village, leaving no building standing. All structures in the area today are the result of subsequent rebuilding by the villagers.

Ban Wiang Tai, which was later renamed Pai, was founded as a settlement along the road that connected Chiang Mai with a network of trails leading to the town of Mae Hong Son. In the early days, it would take up to a week to make the trip from Chiang Mai to the village by horse, ox-cart, or by walking. Pai soon became a center of trade in the region, with a large central marketplace that became a focal point for the people living in the hills and surrounding areas.

The road was improved when the Japanese occupied Thailand in 1943. Construction of a bridge to cross the Pai River was



A Shan-style stupa glows peacefully

begun, though it wasn't completed until after the end of the Second World War. The Japanese, with the help of some Northern Thai villagers, made improvements to the existing road. The road ultimately served them well as they hastily retreated from northern Thailand following two disastrous defeats in India at Imphal and Kohima during the Burma Campaign of the Second World War.



Taking a break on the WWII Memorial Bridge

The bridge, which is misleadingly titled the "World War II Memorial Bridge," was completed and rebuilt after the war by the Thai government and still spans the river.

Although it no longer takes vehicular traffic, the bridge is a popular tourist spot. It's about 10 kilometers (six miles) east of Pai.

The road improvements made by the Japanese shortened the journey between Chiang Mai and Pai to about two days – a welcome improvement from the arduous week that it had taken prior to the war. It wasn't until the mid-1990s, however, that the road between Chiang Mai and Pai was paved and extended all the way to Mae Hong Son. The modern road between Chiang Mai and Pai, now known as Route 1095, officially has 762 curves, and driving the 130 kilometers (80 miles) between them still takes several hours.



762 curves...it's no place to have travel sickness!

The area around Pai is still quite ethnically diverse. In addition to the Lau, Shan and early Lanna immigrants, the area has attracted people from the Karen ethnic group of Burma, the Lisu and Lahu from southern China, Muslims from Chiang Mai, and Kuomintang refugees, who fled from China following Chiang Kai Shek's defeat by Mao Zedong and the People's Liberation Army in the early 1960s. More recently, the Burmese military junta's persecution of the Shan has resulted in hundreds of thousands of Shan refugees fleeing to northern Thailand, where they remain today.

The year 2005 was a disastrous year for Pai, when heavy rains and subsequent flooding in August and September resulted in widespread destruction in the town and outlying areas. Long-term locals say that a dam, meant to control annual flooding during the rainy season, had not been maintained properly, and when the dam failed due to the rains, huge amounts of water, mud, and debris cascaded into the town and nearby countryside. Almost everything within 100 meters of the Pai River, the Khong River, and the Mae Gawm Stream was destroyed. Some low-lying areas were so overwhelmed by mud that the elevation near parts of the Pai River is now several meters higher than it was before the floods. The dam has since been rebuilt – as well as most of the town – and the government states that the dam is now operating properly and the problems should never reoccur.



Beautiful, new custom-built homes are here to stay

A Small Town, But So Much to Do!

Small towns often have a reputation of offering little to do, but Pai is not your average small town. There are so many activities in this tight-knit community that even though life here can be lazy if you want, it will never be boring. Pai’s small population of expats tend to know each other by name and see each other when they want to, yet everyone seems to manage to respect each other’s privacy. There is a lot more to do here than simply watch the rice grow – though any local will tell you that watching the rice grow can be one of the best things about living here.

Cooking classes are popular – with the easy availability of fresh and organic produce and meat in Pai, it is easy to understand why. [Isara’s Garden Cookery School and Restaurant](#) offers Asian fusion organic cooking classes, giving students the knowledge and expertise to create authentic and healthy Asian



Not sure what to do? Wait here for inspiration...

meals at home. The Savoie, located right in town on the main “walking street” also offers cooking classes, as well as the [Pai Cookery School](#) and the [Charlie and Lek Health Restaurant](#).

The [Womb Meditation Center](#) has classes in meditation, personal growth workshops, retreats, and programs for self-exploration and creativity. The [Open Mind Center](#) also has meditation and spiritual retreats, classes and workshops, as well as playing host to various community events.



A plucky business catering to the western community

There are several places in Pai that offer healing arts classes, including the [Reiki Healing Pyramid](#), which also offers crystal chakra balancing and holistic spa treatments. [Bundhit Tongpen](#) has sessions and courses in Thai traditional massage, oil massage, and Thai therapeutic deep healing therapy. Mama Lon provides traditional Thai massage and has massage courses too.

You can cool down in the 25-meter public swimming pool at [Fluid](#), or take hatha yoga classes, have an herbal steam bath, play ping pong or work out in their gym.

[Xhale Yoga](#) also offers yoga classes, as well as meditation retreats.

Every evening at 6 p.m., there are free aerobics sessions at the City Hall District Office. Free guided meditation classes are held at Good Life every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday.

Pottery workshops and courses are held at the Pai Café.

If you are interested in the martial arts, [Sor Wisarut Muay Thai](#) offers training in Thai boxing for beginners to experts, as does the [Charn Chai Muay Thai Gym](#). If learning Kung Fu is more to your liking, you can check out the [Shaolin-style Kung Fu School](#). They also have courses in Tai Chi and Qi Gong.

There are plenty of opportunities to volunteer, too. The New Land Project is a reforestation project based on permaculture principles. You can learn about gardening, building, soil care, and water management while living on-site, then give your time and knowledge back to the community as you put your new skills to work. The [Banyan Center](#) is a non-profit Montessori and preschool that helps Burmese refugees in the area, and they are actively seeking volunteers. The [Pai Circus School](#) is a foundation set up to help children living in Pai have a better future. You can learn to juggle fire and other circus skills while volunteering your time with disadvantaged children.

Pai has an excellent selection of restaurants, including many specializing in vegetarian and organic cuisines. It is also the only place that we've found in all our years of living in Southeast Asia that has authentic, fresh-baked sourdough bread.



Cool jazz in a shady spot

There are several venues around town with live music every night, offering everything from jazz to Reggae, folk music, and rock n' roll. If you are a musician, there are plenty of

opportunities to sit in and play with others. Most bars and restaurants in Pai are very laid-back, and many locals will spend an afternoon or evening lingering over a cappuccino or a beer with friends. Restaurants will often have a small library of used books, which customers are welcome to read there or exchange for a book of their own. No one is ever in a hurry here. Life is slow and people are content.



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There's the opportunity to try out traditional instruments

The Great Outdoors

Living in Pai is well worth considering if you're the type of person who enjoys nature and engaging in outdoor activities. There is so much to do within a very short distance of town.

Pai is a very popular area for bicycling and it's a motorcyclist's dream come true. It's easy to find country roads with very little traffic, and the views – rice fields surrounded by mountains – are stunning. There are several minority villages, extensive caves, verdant jungle, and spectacular scenery throughout this area. Many people, including us, believe that this part of northern Thailand has the prettiest landscapes in the country.

The village of Santichon, just a short distance from Pai, is a busy little place, with traditional Chinese houses built of mud and straw, tea houses, horse-back riding and Chinese restaurants.



Relax...and watch the rice grow

The inhabitants of Santichon, who crossed into Thailand in the mid-20th century, were originally from Yunnan province in China. They had supported the Kuomintang (KMT) party, which was loyal to the government of Chiang Kai-shek. When the old government was defeated by the People’s Liberation Army, many former KMT supporters fled to northern Thailand, where they established new villages while maintaining their very traditional southern Chinese lifestyle. Today, Santichon can become quite inundated with tourists who come to enjoy the beautiful landscapes and relax over a cup of exotic tea.



The nearby Mo Paeng Waterfall and swimming hole

Several waterfalls are nearby, including the pretty, multilevel Mo Paeng waterfall. The falls, which are located just a short walk from a parking area, feature several natural swimming pools, making it a popular place to visit on a warm day. The Pam Bok Waterfall requires a short walk, and the falls are quite pretty as they cascade down 20-meter (65 foot) cliffs. Other waterfalls can be found in the area, though some require a hike of two or three hours to reach your reward.

Many other water activities are available around Pai besides exploring waterfalls. [Thai Adventure Rafting](#) offers whitewater rafting and trekking along the Pai River. You can also go tubing along the more tranquil parts of the river. There are several natural hot springs around Pai that are perfect for soaking on a cool day, including those in Hot Springs National Park, Tha Pai Sot Springs, and [Pai Hotspring Spa Resort](#). Most of the private hot spring resorts offer massage and other spa services. There is fishing in the Pai River as well as an unusual [Piranha Fishing Park](#) on the way to Santichon Village.

Three Distinct Seasons

Pai has three seasons: cool, hot and dry, and hot and rainy. This is a typical climate for northern Thailand. What sets the climate in Pai apart from other towns at this latitude, such as Chiang Mai, is its relatively high elevation of 550 meters (1,800 feet) and its mountainous setting. Because of this Pai tends to receive less rainfall, and during the hot and rainy season, the days will be warmer and the nights will be cooler than they are in Chiang Mai.

The cool season typically lasts from November to February. During this time, temperatures can be quite comfortable, with daytime highs of around 21 to 26C (70 to 80F). The evenings will be cool or even cold, with temperatures frequently dipping below 10C (50F). Although it doesn’t snow in Pai, on many evenings it will get cold enough to see your breath. This is the season when Pai receives the most visitors. Many Thais from Bangkok and elsewhere in the country come to Pai to experience the cooler weather and to their amusement, often need to wear a jacket or sweater for the very first time in their lives.

The cool season doesn’t last long though, and by late February or early March, temperatures will be much warmer. The hot and dry season lasts until June, with daytime temperatures ranging from 32 to 35C (90 to 95F), with occasional days



Bringing in the Pai Valley harvest

as hot as 38C (100F). It usually cools down to around 24C (75F) at night. The humidity during this season is relatively low, and though it may be hot, it is less sticky than it is in Chiang Mai or Bangkok.

Unfortunately, the hot, dry season also brings smoke and haze. This is the season when locals set fires in the surrounding mountains, and smoke from the blazes fills the entire Pai Valley. There are many opinions about why they do this. Some people say that the forests are burned to prevent out-of-control wild fires; others suggest that the fire stimulates the growth of teak trees, which are cultivated by the locals; still others say that it stimulates the growth of mushrooms, which can be sold. Whatever the reason, the smoke can be very heavy, obscuring the mountain views and causing eye and lung irritation for some people. Those sensitive to smoke may want to spend this season elsewhere; it is a good time of year to make that annual visit “back home,” or take a vacation to a less smoky area.

The last half of April typically marks the start of the hot and rainy season. The smoky season ends abruptly with the first few rainstorms. Suddenly, all the haze is out of the air, and a burst of growth turns the hills green within days. The rains start slowly in late April and increase through June, and the weather will be hot and humid. July marks the beginning of the full rainy season, when torrential rains and minor flooding frequently occur.

The rainy season is a good time to be in Pai, since the rain rarely lasts all day. A typical day during this time of year will start out clear and sunny, but by late morning or early afternoon, a hard rain will release a massive amount of water. The rain will then stop as abruptly as it began. Average temperatures during this

Entering and Staying in Thailand

When arriving by air at an international airport in Thailand, citizens of the U.S., Canada and the U.K. will be given a 30-day social visit stamp as they pass through customs and immigration. Applying for a single-entry or multiple-entry tourist visa prior to entering Thailand will allow you to stay in the country for 60 days. If you have a 60-day multiple-entry visa, you could re-enter the country for a second 60-day stay.

Long-Term Living In Thailand

Read all about visas, residency, and citizenship options in Thailand [here](#).

PASSPORT

season will average about 32C (90F) during the day, before cooling down to 24C (75F) at night. The weather will continue like this, gradually cooling as November approaches and the cool season begins again.

Finding Your New Home

With few exceptions, foreigners who move to Pai rent homes. In a town as affordable as Pai, there really aren't many advantages to buying a house; at least until you've decided that you want to remain in the area for many years.

When you first arrive in Pai, you will discover that it is easy to find a guesthouse offering weekly or monthly rates. This is a sensible way to secure temporary housing until you find the perfect nest. If you require little more than the basics, you can find a simple hut near the river for around 2,000 baht per month, though many retirees might find this type of lodging a bit too primitive for their tastes. Furnished air-conditioned rooms in local guesthouses start at around 6,000 baht per



An attractive house to rent in town

What’s Your Dollar Worth?

We’ve quoted all prices in this article in Thai baht. At the time of publication one US dollar was worth about 30 Thai baht. Many prices, including monthly rents, are in thousands of baht, so an easy reference point is 1,000 baht is worth about US\$30. Go to Oanda.com to check the current exchange rate.



A peaceful café overlooking the Pai River makes a good place to network

month during the off-season. For around 8,000 to 10,000 baht per month, you should be able to find a guesthouse with a comfortable room that includes a refrigerator and perhaps a small stove for cooking.

A monthly budget for a couple owning a home, including costs for food, entertainment, and utilities is just under 17,000 baht and just over 23,000 baht if the property is rented. Go to the “[Pai Monthly Budget](#)” to read the full breakdown of monthly costs.

There are a few rental property management companies in the area, though they typically have only a limited selection of properties. Pai is a small town located in a sparsely populated part of the country and house-hunting here takes a decidedly small-town approach. Many property owners prefer to simply “put the word out” that they have a house for rent. There are several public notice billboards downtown, as well as advertisements posted on the walls in many local businesses. This and networking in the local cafes are some of the easiest ways to find rental homes.

You can rent a motorbike and spend a pleasant day or two looking for housing and explore the area on your own. It’s not uncommon for the owner of a house to be an English

speaker or even a foreigner who is married to a Thai. Language is seldom a barrier in Pai, and you’ll likely have no problems finding a bilingual Thai person to speak on your behalf if it is needed.

Pai is one of the most relaxed towns we’ve seen, and the rental market reflects this laid-back attitude. A rental agreement will generally not be based on a lease – instead, the terms are often agreed upon with nothing more than a handshake. The duration of the lease, if there is a lease at all, is usually for whatever length of time the renter requests – few owners in Pai will hold a renter to a rigid one-year commitment. Rent is usually paid in advance for the entire period of time that the renter agrees to stay, which can be a very good tool for negotiating a lower payment.

[Rent in Pai](#) has a furnished lakeside cottage for rent with an asking price of just 15,000 baht per month. The large kitchen includes an oven (a rarity in Asia) and all the furnishings you need – there’s even a waffle maker! The living room comes with a built-in flat-screen TV, DVD player and stereo system, and the sloped ceiling bedroom includes a queen-size teak bed. The owner has put in a playground for the kids and

says that the lake is stocked with fish and is clean enough for swimming. You can find out more about this property by clicking [here](#).

If you rent through a property management company, they will likely have formal paperwork, such as a lease, for you and the owner to sign. They will charge the owner for their services – an expense that is generally passed on to the person moving onto the property. The advantage of using a property management company in Pai is in having the security of a lease and having someone help you find properties to view. Most expatriates here say that they have had better success finding places on their own, through word-of-mouth, or by discovering places while they were exploring the area.

Pai is an inexpensive place to live, and the rental market here really reflects this. Furnished homes with western-style conveniences start at around 3,000 baht per month if you agree to a long-term stay, and furnished upscale homes rent for between 10,000 to 20,000 baht per month. If you rent something in the mid-range or high-end category, the rent will often include electricity, water, and Internet.

Most property management companies will ask for a damage deposit equal to one month's rent. If you rent a place directly from an owner and pay your rent in advance, a damage deposit is often not required. However, it's a good idea to make a list of any preexisting damages and take photos prior to moving into the residence, giving copies to the owner. This ensures that you won't be held responsible for any damages other than your own when it's time to vacate the premises.

If you see a place that interests you and negotiation requires dealing directly with a Thai owner, it could be advantageous have the assistance of a bilingual Thai person. Your Thai colleague can make arrangements for viewing the home and, if needed, accompany you as your translator. Having a Thai speak for you will generally mean that you'll be paying less than if you attempt to negotiate on your own.

You'll need to clarify who pays for repairs. Structural repairs, electrical and plumbing problems are generally paid for by the landlord. The tenants usually pay to keep the property clean and maintained, as well as being responsible for replacing light bulbs, fuses, fans, and any items that break during the tenancy.

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Few people purchase homes here for their investment potential. Most purchased places are occupied year-round by the owner and are held for many years. There are a couple of realtors in town who usually have a handful of listings, and they are happy to discuss the current real estate market with you. A foreigner in Thailand has the right to use land, but cannot own it. However, land can be acquired through leasehold for the purpose of building a home. Once you have leased the land, you are then free to construct a house on the property. Most foreigners who want to become property holders in Thailand do so through the purchase of a freehold condominium.

[Pai Land and House](#) has a beautiful house for sale located right in the heart of Pai. It is a two-story “Lanna Style” teak home with spacious sitting areas, a large attic, three large bedrooms, two bathrooms, two kitchens and two balconies with nice mountain views. It comes fully furnished and includes a color TV, library and WiFi. The listing price is 5,295,000 baht. You can view photos of this handsome traditional northern Thai house [here](#).

If you decide that you would like to purchase a home, see “[Owning Thai Property](#)” for all the official details. More samples of rental and sales listings can be viewed [here](#).

An Easy Town to Settle In

Pai may be a small and somewhat remote town, but it has all the services you need. Locals say that even with the slowest plan, Internet speeds are fast enough to stream movies and make VOIP phone calls. There are several banks in town, cable and satellite packages offer English channels, and telephone service is reliable.



Pai offers diversity yet remains gracious

[True Visions](#) is Thailand’s largest cable TV provider. They serve Pai, though their cable TV may not be available if you live outside of town. Packages, which include English-language channels such as HBO, Max and Fox Family Movies, BBC News, and ESPN, start at about 1,700 baht per month. Less expensive packages are available, but come with a limited selection of English channels.

If you live outside of True Vision’s coverage area, or just prefer other programming, there are several satellite TV providers. [PSI Satellite](#), [CTESat](#), and [D-TV](#) have packages that start at around 699 baht per month. However, to receive the signal you will need to purchase a satellite dish, which will cost 7,000 baht or more. True Vision also offers satellite TV subscriptions with fees that range between 900 and 2,000 baht per month.

Thailand is still a developing country, but they are surprisingly sophisticated when it comes to telecommunications. Cell phone coverage throughout the country is excellent, and reliable wireless Internet is available in even the most remote areas, including Pai and the other towns and villages of Mae Hong Son Province. [DTAC](#) is one of several companies that offer cell phone packages that include a data plan. Postpaid plans, with 150 minutes of calling or 100 minutes of voice calls and 20 hours of Internet, cost just 149 baht per month. Their coverage is good in Pai and the surrounding area. [AIS](#), [True Move](#), [TOT](#) and [3BB](#) all offer similar plans starting at about 99 baht per month.

For your desktop or laptop computer, Internet packages with unlimited access run about 600 baht per month. TOT, whose offices are conveniently located across the street from the hospital, also offers land-line telephone service.

You’ll have no problem getting water and electric service. If you have a Thai bank account, the monthly charges can even be automatically deducted through direct debit. When it rains or during severe weather, the electricity may go out, though it’s usually back on within an hour or two.

If you come to Thailand with a long-term retirement visa and plan to keep the required 800,000 baht on deposit, you will need to open a Thai bank account. This is not a requirement if your visa qualification is based upon your pension, but having a local bank account can still be useful. Banks in Thailand are very stable and opening an account is easy when you have a residency visa. There are several banks in

Pai, including [Kasikorn Bank](#) and [Bangkok Bank](#). Read more about the qualifications for the Non-Immigrant “O-A” visa in [“Visas – The Red Tape.”](#)

There are numerous ATMs in town. Most ATMs will assess a fee of 150 baht for non-bank customers who make cash withdrawals on their machines. If you are from the United States and have a brokerage-based debit card, you may be able to get this fee reimbursed. Most purchases that you’ll make will be in cash, as few places in Pai accept credit cards.

Shopping –Just the Right Amount

Since Pai is a small town, so there aren’t any large supermarkets nearby. However, it is possible to do the majority of your everyday shopping here without having to make the trip down the highway into Mae Rim or Chiang Mai.

Here’s an extract from a shopping cart from stores in Pai. A more complete shopping cart of items can be viewed [here](#).

Grocery Item	Quantity	Price in baht
Butter, imported	227 grams	85 baht
Milk	1 liter	45 baht
Orange juice	1 liter	60 baht
Pepsi	1.5 liter	29 baht
Wine, Mont Clair red	750 ml.	595 baht
Ham, sliced, local brand	200 grams	80 baht
Chicken quarters	1 kg.	75 baht
Beef, strip loin	1 kg.	320 baht
Bananas	1 kg.	20 baht
Onions, yellow	1 kg.	20 baht
Potatoes, white	1 kg.	30 baht
Tomatoes	250 grams	20 baht
Ketchup, local brand	200 grams	25 baht
Peanut butter, Jif	510 grams	178 baht
Bread, sliced white	1 loaf	38 baht
Toothpaste, Colgate	100 grams	25 baht
Laundry soap, local brand	2 kg.	95 baht

There are several small grocery stores scattered around town. Some of these specialize in certain items, such as the Freshmart that sells frozen meat and fish. The 9-7, which is located across the street from the post office, is a small, well-stocked store with a good selection of local and imported foods, as well as some household items. They have fresh and frozen meats and several aisles of canned and dry goods, as well as a good selection of imported beer and wine. Nearby is Smile Pai, which is located on the southernmost block of Walking Street. Smile Pai is a friendly grocery, very similar to the 9-7, that offers a broad range of local and imported items. Expats speak highly of both of these food stores, saying that there is little need to buy groceries elsewhere.



Local rice is nice

There are two large daily local markets that serve the town. Early risers may want to visit the “Morning Market,” located just a few steps south of Walking Street. This is a good market for buying fresh meats and produce, which are at their peak of freshness in the morning. There is also a good outdoor “Afternoon Market” located near the municipal offices, within an easy walk of downtown. These local markets are the places to pick up your daily vegetables, fish, and meat, as well as being a good source for many staple goods.

Bargaining, if it is necessary at all, is very low-key in Pai. The prices on many items are clearly marked, and vendors usually won’t overcharge foreigners on unmarked items. Locally grown fruits and vegetables are brought to the market every day. Pai, being the quirky town that it is, has more organically grown food available than typically found elsewhere in Asia, and prices are very reasonable.

For an even larger selection of goods, the “Wednesday Market” attracts caravans of vendors coming from Chiang Mai,



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A wide selection of produce is available at the Afternoon Market

who load up their pick-up trucks with all sorts of groceries, prepared foods, spices, housewares, DVDs, and clothing, and set up their displays under temporary canvas roofs behind the town's police station. There is very little overhead for these merchants, so prices can be incredibly low. Bargaining is rarely required and prices are usually marked, though shoppers should have a sense of how much the item costs elsewhere before assuming that it is a good value.



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Fresh, organic produce at the Afternoon Market

There is one additional market that should not be missed, as it is one of the town's major attractions. Pai is a sleepy town during the day, but in the evening, it really comes alive.

This is mainly due to the large and vibrant Night Market, which happens every evening along Walking Street. Vendors set up stalls and sell a huge range of products: t-shirts, scarves, hats, art, jewelry and handicrafts for tourists, fresh fruit and produce for locals, and dozens of options for a quick meal prepared while you wait.

Whether you have a taste for fresh sushi or cooked-to-order waffles, pad Thai or a stir-fry, fish and chips or fried chicken, you can easily find it for sale at more than affordable prices.

For organic food, baked goods and homemade items don't miss the farmer's market, held every Sunday morning at the Ing Doi Guesthouse. There are also several bakeries around town that sell fresh-baked breads, bagels, cakes, and small selections of local and Western foods.



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A groovy vintage microbus at the Night Market

There is a large Makro Cash & Carry in Mae Rim, located about 90 minutes east of Pai in the direction of Chiang Mai. This hypermarket carries a full range of groceries and household items. If you don't want to drive, the minibus can drop you off there on its way to the city, and it's easy to get a ride on any bus heading west for the return trip.

Since Pai attracts quite a few foreign tourists, there are often items available here that you would expect to find only in a much larger city. There are several stores along the Walking Street near the bus station that sell new and used books, including some hard-to-find titles. This is also a good part of town to shop for clothing. There are several good restaurants in the center of town, as well, that serve up tasty Thai and Western food in settings ranging from elegant fine dining establishments to casual sidewalk outfits furnished with outdoor plastic tables.



Yes we have books

No Car Required (But a Bike Would be Nice)

If you live in the town of Pai, there will be little need to have a vehicle of your own. It takes less than half an hour to walk from one end of town to the other. Of course, one of the reasons to live here is to have easy access to the beautiful surrounding countryside, which is why most people choose to own a motorbike or a bicycle.

Until you've made the decision to live here, you may prefer to rent a vehicle. A small motorbike – typically 110cc or 125cc – costs less than 200 baht per day, including insurance and a helmet. Bicycles rent for less than 100 baht per day. Lower rates are available for long-term rentals.



There's no shortage of bicycles or places to repair them

Most roads in the countryside around Pai receive little traffic, and driving a motorcycle here has fewer risks than it does in the more populated parts of Thailand. However, roads can be steep and they are almost always twisty, so you'll want to develop some proficiency before engaging in any epic touring.

If you want to drive a motorbike or car, you'll need to have a driver's license. Thailand recognizes international driver's licenses, so plan to have one issued in your home country. Once you have residency status, you can apply for a Thai license.

There are some taxis available for hire in Pai, though there would be few occasions when you would need one.

For trips farther afield, many locals utilize the services of one of the local minivans that run east between Pai and Chiang Mai, and west all the way to Mae Hong Son. Minibuses depart throughout the day from Pai and are a safe and inexpensive way to travel. Some foreigners living in Pai choose to own two vehicles – one for their Pai home and another one that they keep for their use when they are in Chiang Mai. This really isn't necessary, though, as it is easy to rent a car, motorbike, or bicycle in Chiang Mai.



There are dream roads for the motorcyclist

Good Healthcare Available

The little government-run Pai Hospital is the only hospital in town. They have an emergency room, an operating room and surgical suite, and enough medical equipment to perform x-rays and basic diagnostic tests. They have an ambulance and an emergency medical technician to staff it. A visit to the doctor here costs 200 baht (about six dollars). However, this is a small hospital and not designed to meet the health care needs of someone with a serious medical condition. Locals here say that the hospital can stabilize someone in case of emergency and help arrange for ground or air transfer to Chiang Mai, where excellent healthcare abounds. But for basic health care needs, the service provided at Pai Hospital is adequate, and doctors working here do speak some English.



Adequate healthcare for anything but serious conditions

There are a couple of medical clinics in town that are not affiliated with the hospital, though they charge similar fees – about 200 baht for a doctor’s visit.

There are several well-stocked pharmacies in Pai, so getting medications will not require a trip “down the hill” as locals describe the journey to Chiang Mai. Most drugs that would require a prescription in western countries are available over the counter in Thailand. Medications are generally produced by the same manufacturers and under the same quality guidelines as those sold in the U. S. or Europe, yet they generally cost just a fraction of the price. A five-day course of the popular antibiotic Zithromax, for example, can cost around US\$200 in the U.S., yet that same medication, manufactured and distributed by Pfizer, costs less than US\$20 in Thailand.

If you decide to have your healthcare needs met in Chiang Mai, the massive, internationally accredited [Chiang Mai Ram Hospital](#) has state-of-the-art equipment and English-speaking doctors and nurses. They also have an excellent dental department that can handle anything from a check up to a complicated crown or implant. The Lanna Hospital also employs an English-speaking staff and has a good reputation for medical care.

Local expats we’ve spoken with say that the dental care in Pai is quite good and no one seems to feel the need to travel to Chiang Mai for a dentist. The Dental Home Clinic charges just 500 baht for a check-up and cleaning, and can perform procedures such as crowns and root canals. Smile Pai is another popular dental clinic located in the downtown area. Pai Hospital has recently renovated their dental clinic, and locals say that the care provided here is good.

Few Language Barriers

English is a required class for all Thai school children, as well as for anyone attending a university. For this reason, the majority of younger people speak at least some English. Since Pai – along with the rest of Mae Hong Son Province – has been such a popular destination with foreign visitors for so many years, not knowing the language really isn’t a barrier to enjoying life here.



Send it with love from Pai

Thai is considered to be a difficult language to learn. It is intelligible if you speak Laotian, but otherwise, it is unrelated to any other modern language. Unlike English, Thai is a tonal language, and many words will have different meanings depending on how you pronounce them.

Although speaking Thai really isn’t necessary in Pai, learning a few polite terms and having a working knowledge of numbers will make life easier and earn a few Thai smiles, as well. Most seasoned expats would agree that having a Thai vocabulary of about 100 words is sufficient to communicate most of your needs to non-English speakers.

The few street signs that exist in Pai are lettered in both Thai and English. When shopping at a grocery store, most items are also labeled in both Thai and English, and several supermarkets and mini-marts sell primarily to foreigners. Although Thai does not use the same alphabet as we use, in reality, it really doesn’t make life that difficult if you don’t read the language.

There are occasions when it may be helpful to have a Thai speaker with you, though, such as when renting a house, opening a bank account or getting a Thai drivers license –



A tasty treat in any language

but even this may be unnecessary in Pai. During our entire stay in Pai, we did not meet anyone who couldn’t speak and understand at least a few words of English. It makes sense, as during certain times of the year tourists and foreigners outnumber local Thais by a wide margin.

There are a couple of options available in Pai if you’d like to learn to speak some Thai. The English-speaking instructor at Learn Thai @ Baan Phasa, located just down the street from the Boomelicious Restaurant, offers private lessons and translation services to foreigners. You can also purchase the [Thai Language Course DVD](#) either in Pai or through the Internet. This DVD has been produced by a local Thai resident and comes highly recommended by several Pai establishments. There are no formal language schools in Pai – the nearest ones would be in Chiang Mai.

One Road In, One Road Out

Most people coming to Pai will start their trip from Chiang Mai, Thailand’s second largest city. Chiang Mai is about 135 kilometers (84 miles) from Pai – though with 762 curves to navigate along the way, the trip takes more than three hours. Five minivans a day make the trip from Chiang Mai to Pai and back again. There are also slower public buses that take this route, but the minivans are definitely far more comfortable.

The only other major town in the vicinity is the provincial capital of Mae Hong Son – a mere 50 kilometers (30 miles) away as the crow flies, but a 110 kilometer (68 miles) trip if you take the highway. Due to the nature of the mountainous terrain and 1,100 more curves, the trip from Pai to Mae Hong Son takes about three hours by private car or more than four hours by public bus. The scenery along the way – rugged, unpopulated

mountains, alluring waterfalls, tranquil fields of rice, and diverse tropical forest – is some of the finest to be found anywhere in Thailand.

Whether coming from Chiang Mai or Mae Hong Son, you’ll be traveling along Route 1095. This is a paved road that is kept in reasonably good repair. However, there is barely a straight section along its entire length. This makes for fun motor biking but it’s not so fun in a bus or automobile if you (or your fellow passengers) suffer from motion sickness. Fortunately, there are several places where you can take a break, stop at a coffee shop or visit a waterfall along the way until you regain your equilibrium.



Everything’s cute in Pai, even the airport

[Kan Airlines](#) is the only air carrier serving Pai’s little airport. Flights leave daily during the week and twice daily on weekends to and from Chiang Mai. The 25-minute flight costs 1,900 baht. The Pai Airport (airport code: PYY) is just a couple of kilometers outside of the town center.

Laid-Back Pai

Not everyone likes living in large urban areas, yet small towns in foreign countries can be difficult places to live. The accepting residents of small-town Pai happily welcome newcomers, providing an easy transition for foreigners who prefer a quiet community to call home. LGBT retirees may not find any real “gay scene” in Pai, but they won’t find any hostility, either – and for a night out on the town, the LGBT community in Chiang Mai is thriving. Retirees with physical disabilities won’t find much in the way of accommodation, but most streets are quite level and finding a parking space is easy here.



Pai doesn't take itself too seriously



The scene is very mellow

There are some limitations that come with small town living, and Pai is no exception. There aren't any English-language church services here, for example. If attending a weekly church service is important for you, a trip into Chiang Mai may be your only option. Going to the cinema or on a major shopping excursion will also require a trip “down the hill.” If you have a chronic or serious medical condition that requires state of the art care, Pai may not be the place for you – the closest international standard hospitals are in Chiang Mai.

Other than the Montessori School, there are no international schools in this area and families with school-age children who want more than the local Thai school system can provide, will either need to home-school or live elsewhere. You can read my [conversation with Dutch expat Peer](#) who has lived in Pai for 13 years with his wife and two school-age children. He explains how much he loves Pai but is moving to Chiang Mai for better schooling options.

If you envision a retirement with plenty of opportunities for outdoor recreation and beautiful landscapes, Pai is well worth considering. If you are an open-minded person who is comfortable with a good helping of alternative lifestyles, you'll enjoy living here. If that doesn't appeal to you, the countryside and small villages in the immediate area also offer quiet, low-stress living – and provide the same spectacular scenery as you'll find living in Pai. You won't find any cosmopolitan hustle-and-bustle here. Pai is mellow.

The cost of living in Pai is very low--less than US\$800 per month for a couple--and those relying on a small pension or social security income will find that they can live very comfortably in Pai. It's a very good place to enjoy an easy and relaxed lifestyle without straining the budget.

With so much to offer, it's worth a trip to Pai. We think that northwest Thailand is one of the prettiest, off-the-beaten-track places in all of Thailand – so very different from Bangkok, Phuket, and Chiang Mai. There aren't any sparkling shopping malls here, full-moon parties, or raunchy bars. There's just a pretty little mountain town with laid-back, welcoming residents and some of the finest scenery to be found anywhere in Southeast Asia.

Overseas Living Letter Online Resources

[Pai - Rolodex](#)

[Pai - Monthly Budget](#)

[Pai - Sample Rental and Real Estate Listings](#)

[Pai - Shopping Cart](#)

[Pai - Interview with an Expat – Mercel](#)

[Pai - Interview with an Expat - Peer](#)

[Thailand - Owning Thai Property](#)

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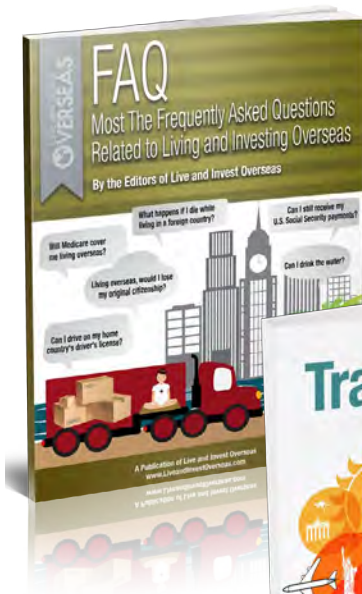


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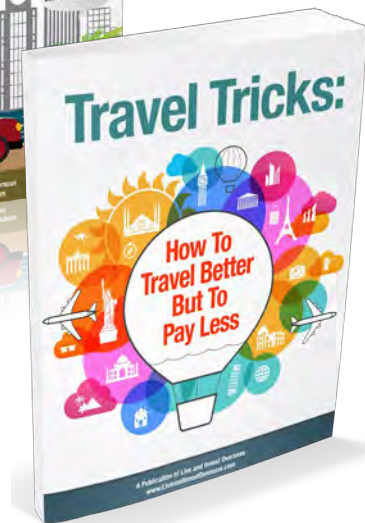


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