

SHOOTERS' GUIDE

# Honeymoon in Chiang Mai

Golden temples and a rich culture of Buddhist tolerance come together in Thailand's northern capital to offer inspiration for newlyweds of all kinds – and for newly wedded photographers in particular. Words and pictures by **Ewen Bell**

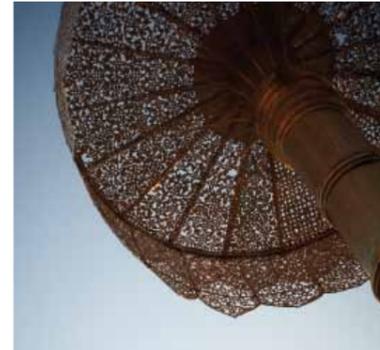
**Editor's advice**

"The best time to visit Doi Suthep is from mid-afternoon so you can shoot wide as the afternoon light dips lower."

**NIGHT MOVES**

Chiang Mai is famous for the night markets that spill into the edges of the old town. In truth the merchandise is pretty trashy these days, but it's cheap and cheerful trash and the streets buzz with people shopping for souvenirs or a cold beer. Where the night market runs into the old city walls, a small park greets visitors with lanterns, offering inspiration for night shots.

■ **Temple of groom**  
Chiang Mai provides endless temptation for honeymooning photographers



**R**esistance is futile  
Brides of a photographer already know that a holiday can provide as much inspiration as relaxation.

Far from taking a holiday from the camera, a trip overseas becomes a reason to tinker with some new gear or to pack a compact model with a big sensor. Chiang Mai is a short flight from top-notch wedding destinations on the southern beaches of Thailand, offering an abundance of temples for photographers and Asia's highest concentration of spa treatments.

A few days in Chiang Mai is cheap and charming, with street food and chic cafes offering excellent value. As you head up-market for accommodation, the value looks even better, with great deals on offer for the five-star options. Bangkok can be too busy to appeal to everybody's taste, but Chiang Mai offers a more gentle pace and easy immersion into the local culture.

**“What better blessing for the beginning of your marriage than to do something nice for a monk?”**



■ **Golden experience**  
Buddhas in dim interiors present a challenge



**Bells of Love**

Wat Prathat Doi Suthep is one of the most beautiful temples in Thailand, tucked away in the cool air of the hills just outside of Chiang Mai. Golden images of the Buddha crowd every corner and the sound of bells chiming in the wind drifts through the air. Lanna culture makes full use of small bells with prayers attached below, catching the breeze and sending a gentle note of goodwill out into the world.

You'll see it and hear the chime of tiny bells all over Chiang Mai, but Doi Suthep is elegantly crowded by them. Inside the main temple a picket fence painted gold runs around the central chedi, and hundreds of bells hang from the timber. You buy the bells from the market below, write your thoughts of kindness and add your charm alongside the others.

At dusk every night, the sky turns a deep blue against the brilliant gold of the temple.



■ **Ring the bells**  
Hear the chime of tiny bells in and around Doi Suthep

Floodlights boost the colours and at 6pm the monks begin chanting. The best time to visit Doi Suthep is from mid-afternoon so you have time to walk the grounds, get to know the images of Buddha and shoot wide as the afternoon light dips lower.

**Temple Town**

The inner walls of Chiang Mai are home to more than 100 temples, and yet it takes less than 30 minutes to walk from one corner of the walls to the other. With camera in hand, that 30-minute walk is likely to take all day though, as you get distracted by a dazzling array of temples. What makes Chiang Mai special is the variety of character on offer from these holy buildings. Most are hundreds of years old and each has their own story, but for photographers they also offer unique inspiration.

The biggest temple in town is Wat Chedi Luang and here you can find a reliable number of monks literally waiting for a chance to talk to travellers. Their interest is to practice a little English but they're happy to trade photo ops for conversation ops. Even better, with such good English skills you can usually get an email address and send them back the photos as a gesture of gratitude. What better blessing for the beginning of your marriage than to do something nice for a monk?

The monks loiter in the shady section of the temple between 9am and 5pm, so you even get some nice gentle light that works so well for portraits.

Other temples worth a closer look in and around the walled city include Wat Mahawan, Wat Chetawan, Wat Phra Singh and the ancient ground of Wat Chiang Man. Wat Bupparam is one of my favourites for its startling red arches, inside which images of the Buddha are coated in gold leaf. Wat Suan Dok, to the west of the city walls, presents a garden of white chedi in the grounds of the Lanna Royal Residence. Each chedi is dedicated to the ashes of a family member, making this a solemn but unique photographic setting. [chiangmai-maps.com](http://chiangmai-maps.com)



**WIDE AND WONDERFUL**

A lot of the temples in Chiang Mai are set into modest-sized blocks and are stuffed full of artefacts. A wide angle lens is frequently essential to get enough perspective on chedi and statues within tight confines. The average 18-55mm kit lens on an APS-C sized camera won't always be wide enough; we're talking a 10-24mm zoom instead.



■ Monks galore  
Stick to the shade for nice even light

**“A destination wedding offers a host of advantages for the bride and groom”**

**Jumbo Parade**

Elephants are big business in Northern Thailand. These majestic creatures once had gainful employment in the logging industry, but now they rely on tourism for their income.

I've seen a lot of elephant operations in Thailand and most of them are excellent. The ones that only do very short rides and don't have a good ratio of mahouts to animals should be avoided. If you're not happy with the treatment of elephants when you arrive at a facility, then move on. I can recommend two excellent operations within a short drive of Chiang Mai, the world famous Thai Elephant Conservation Centre in Lampang and the smaller but charming Elephant Training Centre in Chiang Dao.

Early mornings are the time to see the shows. Elephants have a little more energy, the light is gentle and the bath-time antics are just hilarious. A 70-200mm telephoto works wonders during these situations, unless you can get really close and work the 16-35mm range. Don't ignore the mahouts either; with their surly glances and relaxed demeanour they act like James Deans of the jungle.

Elephants hold a special place in the Lanna Kingdom culture of Northern Thailand. A white elephant was sent into the forests around Chiang Mai, carrying a precious Buddhist relic, and chose the site of Wat Doi Suthep. [chiangdaoelphancamp.com](http://chiangdaoelphancamp.com) [thailandelephant.org](http://thailandelephant.org) »



■ Bath-time behemoth  
The light is gentle and the bath-time antics are hilarious



■ Night and day  
Photo ops abound 24/7

## “Rent a private villa for a week and use the property for entertaining your entourage”



### STARS AND PILLOWS

For the cost of a luxury hotel room in Sydney, you can get a palatial villa at a five-star resort in Thailand. Checkout [Agoda.com](http://Agoda.com) for hot deals.

### Fancy Fans

The nearby villages of San Kamphaeng and Bo Sang are famous for pottery and parasols. Even though the urban expansion of Chiang Mai has brought the city to the country, these villages are still worth a visit. Colour, craft and tradition remain evident in the parasol workshops and provide plenty of fascination for the lens. The pottery factories fall into two categories, the fine pottery finished with Celadon glaze and the traditional black clay wares that sell on the streets. Celadon shops are shy of the cameras but the craftsmen behind the black and brown pottery are more inclined to share a smile.

Before the urban expansion reached these villages a large section of rice fields were bought up by a wealthy



■ **Big fan**  
San Kamphaeng and Bo Sang are highlights



■ **Parasol workshops**  
Plenty of fascination for the lens

■ **Subdued light**  
Fast glass and a steady hand required



investor who built the Dhara Devi resort. The levels of luxury are appropriate for a Mandarin Oriental hotel, but the real charm here is the dedicated theme of replicating a

classic Lanna city. There's an outer moat, outer walls, temples and rice field, an inner moat and more walls, and finally a small city at the very core of the property. Beautiful Lanna architecture features everywhere, and even the spa centre looks like a Lanna temple.

The Dhara Devi has “honeymoon” written all over it, but the more time you spend taking photos of the grounds the more money your partner will spend at the spa centre. Even if you can't afford a few nights at the Dhara Devi, you can afford to dine at their superb Thai restaurant. The Grand Lanna delivers some of the best Thai and Lanna style cooking you'll find anywhere in the country, in a setting of inspired gardens and traditional timber, and for no more than you pay at home. [mandarinoriental.com/chiangmaiturismothailand.org](http://mandarinoriental.com/chiangmaiturismothailand.org)

**For more of Ewen's adventures abroad (marital and otherwise), check out [Photographyfortravellers.com](http://Photographyfortravellers.com)**



### Week-long destination wedding

At the risk of upsetting your mother-in-law to be, and 30 years of planning for her daughter's marriage, a destination wedding offers a host of advantages for the bride and groom. In Thailand the process is especially rewarding and memorable. Imagine 40 of your best friends and family standing on a beach at sunset, with monks and music to welcome the union of man and wife.

Hiring a professional team to manage your wedding in Thailand is cheaper than getting married at home and takes a lot of the burden off the shoulders of the couple. It proves more expensive for your guests, however, but hotel and flight packages to islands such as Phuket and Koh Samui are excellent value.

Most resorts will offer an integrated package for wedding events, but think about renting a private villa for a week and using the property for entertaining your entourage. The best thing about the destination wedding is having an entire week's worth of enjoyment with your friends and family before the big day arrives. Snorkelling trips and elephant rides help turn strangers into friends and create a more festive feeling among your guests when the big day arrives.



### COOK AND CLICK

Cooking classes are a dime a dozen in Chiang Mai, so while one of you can learn some new dishes to last a lifetime of marriage, the other can be taking photos of the culinary creations. [alotofthai.com](http://alotofthai.com)