

PHOTOS BY KARLA HELD/SPECIAL TO THE EXPRESS-NEWS

Chinese architectural influence can be seen in this building on the way to the Yunnanese Chinese village.

## Pai has superb natural setting, cultural charms, outdoor fun

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tons screaming. Tires nearly slide off the edges of the road on 300-degree turns or come to a screeching halt to avoid cows roaming in herds. However, once you descend from the mountains and your stomach settles, you quickly come to say, "I love this place!"

Pai's main draw is its relaxed vibe and natural setting, and locals claim that this is why they, too, love their home. "It's a lovely town," local resident Aey boasts, and adds that the people are very friendly, "just like in the countryside."

Travelers agree. "This is an amazing place — it is totally eco around here," Israeli traveler Ed Aharoni said. "When you have nature around you, you clear your head and forget all the troubles back home."

Simply stated, Pai gives you the feeling that you just took a long, hard deep breath.

### Outdoor adventure

Pai appears as a tic-tac-toe of small streets on a map, each lined with outdoor adventure opportunities from river rafting and kayaking, to treks through hill tribe villages. Bakeries and restaurants offer international cuisine ranging from Mexican burritos to Indian samosas and back again to local northern Thai fare. Coffee shops host live music and Internet shops offer a chance to connect with those back home. Lisu tribeswomen line the streets dressed in traditional clothing, weaving handbags and belts in an assortment of vibrant colors.

At the corner of town is Pai's oldest resort, Rim-Pai Cottages, where I sat and spoke with the hotel manager, Rath, and cottage employee Aey, in their well manicured gardens. Aey began by telling me that in the last four or five years Pai has grown considerably with the influx of tourism, and it has brought with it both "some bad and some good." It has brought a lot of economic good to the area, and job diversity here has come a ways from simply "gardeners and farmers," Rath added. But, as land prices have risen, local ownership has declined. Pai residents own only 10 percent of the land inside the actual town; the rest is owned by businesses in Bangkok, or by foreigners.

Now with a new airport, Pai



A worker moves materials around tourist bungalows.



The friendly residents of Pai love their small town.

moves forward in developing its tourist infrastructure, though cautiously. The local government recently banned further construction along the river both to limit tourism as well as for safety reasons. Pai is still cleaning up after severe floods in '05. There is a "dramatic change" in the landscape — "the river is expanding and so, too, is the city," Rath said. Yet, even with the influx of tourism over the past two decades, this village remains steadfast in its limits on further growth in comparison to other popular tourist destinations.

"We don't want to be Pattaya, we don't want to be Samui, we want to be Pai!" Rath exclaimed.

On the village outskirts, outdoor adventure lurks around every corner. The natural beauty reaches a climax at Mor Paeng waterfall and Muang Pang hot springs. A variety of tour companies can arrange activities from elephant rides through the jungle to kayaking downriver. To best experience the area, I recommend renting a motorbike or bicycle and just set off with a map, as many hill tribe villages dot the area, including Lisu, Lahu and Yunnan, and the landscape is worth taking in with the wind in your face.

I rented a motorbike in town and drove west to the Yunnanese village, which was originally settled by members of the Kuomintang (KMT) army. Following the rise of Communist China in 1949, these mainly Yunnan KMT regiments fled to northern Burma (now Myanmar), unable to join others in Taiwan. In 1961 Burma's Yangon government forced them to leave, so they resettled in northern Thailand. Crossing into Thailand on pony caravan, the Yunnanese settled into mountain villages and re-created their societies, much

like those they had left behind in China.

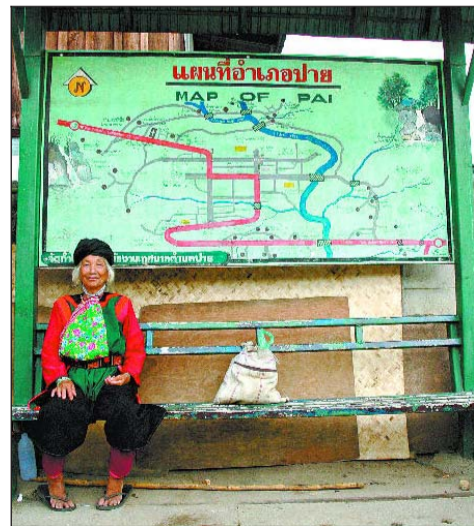
Upon arrival at the Chinese Yunnan Cultural Center, we were greeted by a round, jovial woman who served us warm green tea shots before joining us to explain the added health benefits of green tea. She delivered the tea to the table with a small shot glass turned upside down inside a small cup. As she lifted the shot glass, the green tea perfectly filled the cup. I was amazed when she then took the warm shot glass and put it up to her left eye, showing us that warm green tea serves multiple functions. As a tea lover and regardless of how silly I would look with a shot glass coming out of my eye, I tried it and was pleasantly surprised by the feeling it brought to my tired eyes.

As night falls upon Pai, jazz and blues come alive at BeBop Café, and live guitarists strum their strings at *shisha* bars in between puffs of flavored hookah. My favorite night was spent over the barbecue pit at our backpackers' village — a community feast organized by Israelis, with fresh meats and vegetables, whiskey and beer. The chatter of many languages filled the air as we feasted. It felt like living on a kibbutz, but then I was reminded that I was in Pai — a village with a community feeling.

Truth be told, a slice of Pai is like a piece of heaven. With an idyllic natural setting, it is worth a trek up to the north to experience a different Thailand. It's no wonder Pai has grown — more and more people have come to this enchanting village in the mountains to experience its spirit first hand. Its pleasant mixture of cultures is testament to just how many people have come to stay for a while and have made it home.

*Southern California native Lisa Ashley Warshaw has lived from Spain to Costa Rica to Thailand. She recently served as a World Partners Fellow for American Jewish World Service working with Thailand's foremost alternative media organization in Chiang Mai. She is currently journeying through Southeast Asia.*

*Houston native Karla Held recently completed an odyssey that took her through Africa as well as Central and Southeast Asia. See MySA.com. Keyword: Travel, for her photo essay and slide show on the Voodoo Festival of Benin.*



Between the well marked maps and the local women's helpful advice, it's hard to get lost in downtown Pai.

### IF YOU GO

Our suggestion is to stay in town on the river. There are a bunch of places just outside in the hills.

#### In town options

■ Rim-Pai Cottages (66) 053-699-133  
www.rimpaicottages.com  
Riverside suite sleeps two, from 2,000 THB to 3,200 THB (\$60 to \$97), depending on season  
■ Villa de Pai (66) 053-699-109  
www.villadepai.com  
Riverside bungalows, sleeps two,

starts at 350 THB (\$10.50) in the off season

#### How to get there

From Chiang Mai, buses leave from the Arcade Bus Station. Tickets cost 80 THB (\$2.40) one way; some have air conditioning, and others don't — air 100 THB (\$3) — five hours. Many companies have chartered minivans, a much better option while braving the roads. Tickets cost 150 THB (\$4.50), with air conditioning. We recommend Aya

Service, with five daily departures. (66) 053-699-940, e-mail: ayaservice1999@yahoo.com

#### Getting around

Pai is small enough to get by on foot, but for day trips we recommend renting transport. Aya rents motorbikes starting at 100 THB per day (\$3) — 100cc, with an option to return it in Chiang Mai. Along the same road as the bus station are numerous places to rent bicycles for 30 THB (90 cents) per day.

## Wildflowers strewn color along Texas roadsides

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because rain patterns are spotty around central Texas," Simmons says. "The Hill Country tends to be the best."

Savvy flower aficionados already know to head to the Hill Country. To help narrow your search, the Texas Department of Transportation runs a toll-free hot line that offers information on particularly lush wildflower areas on any given day, as well as highway conditions. The number is (800) 452-9292.

#### Timing your trip

Anytime from mid-March into May holds the promise of good wildflower sightings. Pick a weekend when you can roll the windows down on the car.

One indicator that the countryside around your community might be particularly flush is, no big surprise here, the lawns at and around your home.

"It's warmer in town, since the buildings and concrete tend to hold a lot of heat," Price says. That means, generally speaking, that wildflowers bloom first in town. So if you see a few poking up through the grass in the corner lot, odds are they'll be coming up in spades just outside the city limit about a week later.

"That's our peak season: Spring Break into early April," Price says.

#### Around the state

Predicting wildflowers is a lot like predicting the weather: It's best not to get too specific. "There's always a lot of 'crystal ball' to this," Price cautions.

It doesn't take a degree in Harry Potter to know that, no matter how the roadsides actually look this year, communities across the state will be putting on the ritz for a variety of festivals. There are at least three bluebonnet festivals scheduled for the same weekend in April, with the towns and events billing themselves as "The Official Bluebonnet Capital of Texas," "The Official Bluebonnet City" and "The Official Bluebonnet Festival."

That's a lot of "official" flowers for one weekend (April 14-15). The good news? Lots of choices for your bluebonnet photos.

Burnet, the "Official Bluebonnet Capital of Texas," according to the Texas Legislature, will host the 24th Annual Bluebonnet



The giant spiderwort (*Tradescantia gigantea*) sports pretty purple and lilac flowers on long stems.

COURTESY PHOTOS

### BLUEBONNETS PLUS

Yes, bluebonnets are Texas' bread-and-butter bloom, but don't forget the less-revered but equally vibrant flowers that line the roadways of the Lone Star State all spring.

In March, watch for bluebonnets, Indian paintbrush, winecups, blackfoot daisy, Drummond phlox and giant spiderwort.

April brings Indian blanket, foxglove, rose mallow and the heady blooms of the Texas lantana, while May boasts Mexican hat, black-eyed Susan, the pink evening primrose, butterfly weed and more.

Visit the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center online at [www.wildflower.org](http://www.wildflower.org) for more information on making the most of the wildflower spring spotting season.

— Jennifer Roof Laster

Festival featuring parades, an air show and live music. Call (512) 756-4297 or visit [www.burnetchamber.org](http://www.burnetchamber.org) for information.

Ennis, which bills itself as the "Official Bluebonnet City and the Official Bluebonnet Trail of Texas," offers up the Bluebonnet Trails Festival, featuring driving maps, bluebonnet souvenirs and festival attractions. Call (888) 366-4748 or go to [www.visitennis.org](http://www.visitennis.org)

Chappell Hill will host "The Official Bluebonnet Festival of Texas," also featuring live music, vendors and bluebonnet viewing, that same weekend. Call (979) 836-6033 or visit [www.chappellhillmuseum.org](http://www.chappellhillmuseum.org).

More places to tiptoe through the tulips ... er, piouette through the paintbrushes:

■ The 47th Annual Azalea and Spring Flower Trail festival, Tyler. Through April 1. Call (800) 235-5712.

■ Texas' Largest Azalea Garden and Azalea Trail Event, Na-

cogdoches. Through April 1. Call (888) OLDEST-TOWN.

■ Texas Dogwood Trails Celebration, Palestine. Today Saturday-April 1, April 7-8. Call (800) 659-3484.

■ Annual Wildflower Art Show, Salado. April 7-8. Call (254) 947-5040.

■ Annual Pedernales Valley Wildflower Celebration, Fredericksburg. April 7-22. Call (800) 848-0078.

■ Annual Denton Redbud Festival, Denton. April 14. Call (940) 349-8737.

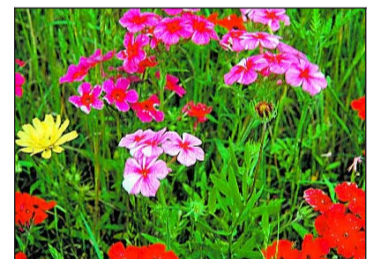
■ East Texas Wildflower Trails, Henderson. April 15-May 31. Call (866) 650-5529.

■ Nature Quest, Concan. April 24-29. Call (800) 210-0380.

■ Wildflower Trails of Texas Festival, Avinger. April 27-29. Call (903) 562-1000.

For more information on wildflower events, visit [www.tourtexas.com](http://www.tourtexas.com).

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FROM LEFT: The blackfoot daisy (*Melampodium leucanthum*), variegated winecup (*Callirhoe involucrata*, variety *lineariloba*) and Drummond phlox (*Phlox drummondii*) are out there for the viewing.

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