Ayutthaya
From the 14th century onwards, Ayutthaya was the capital of an independent kingdom until the city was sacked by the Burmese in 1767. It was never re-inhabited. Today, Ayutthaya is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and its ruins give a sense of the city’s former size and glory as well as offering an insight into Thailand’s cultural heritage.

Wat Phra Mahathat
During Ayutthaya’s heyday, this was one of its most important temples with a large compound and a 151-ft (46-m) high laterite prang (tower), which has now collapsed. It remains one of the most evocative of all the city’s sights, with smaller prang leaning at precarious angles and a serene Buddha’s head encased by the roots of a banyan tree (below).

Wat Ratchaburuna
Next door to Wat Phra Mahathat and covering as large an area, this temple was built in 1424 by King Borommaracha II, and its main structure is a central, Khmer-style prang. In 1957, the crypt beneath the prang was opened by robbers, who made off with a horde of gold artifacts. The few items they did not take are now on display in the Chao Sam Phraya National Museum. The crypt can be reached by a steep staircase where there are beautiful Ayutthayan frescoes.
In mid-December, Ayutthaya hosts a week-long festival to celebrate its UNESCO World Heritage status.

**Ayutthaya Historical Study Center**
This study center (below) attempts to depict the city’s history and trading relations, with models reproducing ships, houses, and other historical objects. It also houses a model of Wat Phra Si Sanphet, the former temple of which little now remains.

**Wat Phra Si Sanphet**
Once Ayutthaya’s most glorious temple, all that is left of Wat Phra Si Sanphet (above) today, are three Sri Lankan-style chedi (stupas) and the ruins of former palaces. The chedi contain ashes of Ayutthayan kings and are the park’s highlight.

**Wat Thammikarat**
One of the park’s less visited, yet most atmospheric temples has the ruins of an octagonal chedi, a wihan, and a fearsome singha (below).

**Wat Lokaya Sutharam**
The highlight of this temple is a huge, white-washed Reclining Buddha (left) exposed to the elements. Octagonal pillars around it once supported a wooden hall that sheltered the image.

**A Short History of Ayutthaya**
Ayutthaya was founded by King Ramathibodi I in 1350. Over the next four centuries, the kingdom came to dominate the region now known as Thailand, apart from the north, where the Kingdom of Lanna maintained its independence. Traders visited from Europe, returning home with tales of a highly organized and sophisticated society. The kingdom’s end was as sudden as its inception, and its capital was completely abandoned after being sacked by the Burmese in 1767.
Sights In and Around Ayutthaya

1 **Bang Pa-In**
   Included on many tours of Ayutthaya, this former royal summer retreat is an eclectic mix of Thai and Western architectural styles. The Aisawan Thipphaya-at pavilion that sits on a lake is its most photographed building.
   - 15 miles (24 km) S of Ayutthaya
   - Open 8:30am–4:30pm daily • Adm

2 **Lopburi**
   One of Thailand’s oldest towns, Lopburi was an important center of Dvaravati culture from the 6th century onwards. Both King Narai (see box) and Rama IV (see p34) used it as a second capital, and Narai’s palace is well worth a visit.
   - 44 miles (70 km) N of Ayutthaya

3 **Wat Na Phra Mane**
   This Ayutthayan temple was less badly damaged than most by the invading Burmese and is therefore one of the most interesting to explore. Inside the temple is a large bot (ordination hall), which displays some fine architectural features, and a small wihan (assembly hall) with a rare Dvaravati stone Buddha.
   - N of Ayutthaya • Open 8am–5pm Mon–Fri, 8am–6pm Sat–Sun • Adm

4 **Wat Yai Chai Mongkol**
   The main features of this temple are a huge chedi (stupa) erected by King Naresuan, a host of saffron-robed, laterite Buddha images that surround it, and a large Reclining Buddha set in a corner of the temple grounds.
   - 1 mile (2 km) E of Ayutthaya • Open 8am–5pm daily • Adm

5 **Chantarakasem Palace Museum**
   Ayutthaya’s oldest museum displays a throne platform that belonged to Rama IV, some beautiful ceramics and Buddha images, as well as cannons and muskets.
   - NE corner of Ayutthaya • Open 8:30am–4:30pm Wed–Sun • Adm

6 **Wat Phu Khao Thong**
   Also known as the Golden Mount, this temple’s main feature is a 263-ft (80-m) high chedi. It is possible to climb part of the way up the structure to get a panoramic view of the rice fields around.
   - 1 mile (2 km) W of Ayutthaya

7 **Wat Phanan Choeng**
   Particularly popular with Chinese worshippers because of a shrine to a Chinese princess, this temple dates back to the 14th century. Its centerpiece is a 62-ft (19-m) tall, seated bronze Buddha.
Like most kings of Ayutthaya, Narai was a usurper, having deposed his older brother to take the throne. He is best remembered for his warming of diplomatic relations with Western countries, his sending of missions to European courts, and his selection of a foreigner, Constantine Phaulkon, as his principal advisor. It was from reports by European merchants of this era that Ayutthaya became known in the west for its richness and splendor. Phaulkon encouraged Narai to balance Dutch interests in the kingdom by inviting a French delegation to visit. However, many Siamese suspected, quite correctly as it turned out, that the French mission’s main objective was to convert the king to Christianity, and on Narai’s death foreigners were banished from Ayutthaya.