

LIFE

Teaching my patients to listen to their bodies and understand the negative impact of inflammation takes time, but ultimately helps them build a solid mind-body connection

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TRAVEL

A culture blossoms

Thailand has approved medicinal cannabis and its use in food and cosmetics. This week it will delist it as a narcotic. Chiang Mai is keen to cash in

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Few places in Asia are as keen about the tourism potential of cannabis as Chiang Mai, Thailand. Deified and demonised throughout history, the drug derived from the cannabis plant goes by many names – among them marijuana, weed, hemp, grass, dope, pot, Mary Jane, herb, bhang, 420 (April 20 is World Cannabis Day) and ganja. However, these days you're more likely to see or hear references to CBD (cannabidiol), a compound of cannabis widely used for medicinal purposes, and THC (tetrahydrocannabinol), the psychoactive element of the plant that gets people high.

The plant was employed in Thailand as a traditional medicine and to stimulate appetite, but using it was criminalised in 1935, and in 1979 it was classed as a Category 5 drug, meaning anyone caught in possession of it faces the threat of imprisonment for up to five years and a fine of up to 100,000 baht (HK\$22,800).

Despite these restrictions, during the 1960s and '70s, Thai sticks – high quality cannabis buds tied to a stick with silk, produced by tribal groups in the north of the country – acquired an international reputation for their potency.

In 2019, the Thai government approved the use of cannabis for medicinal purposes and, in 2021, extended this to the sale of food and cosmetic products. On Thursday, cannabis will be delisted as a narcotic in Thailand and anyone with a licence will be able to import, possess, grow and produce it.

The government will mark the occasion by handing out a million plants to households nationwide, with the aim of promoting the growth of medical-grade cannabis.

The delisting will benefit those who use CBD applications, and the Thai Food and Drug Administration has already received thousands of applica-



"Hemp is an ideal fabric for clothes because it breathes easily and absorbs odours," says Bhuntusilpa. "These days, people are looking for products that have simple designs and natural colours, so that's what we focus on." He also sells hemp yarn, hemp balm and even hemp charcoal, which has uses in both cosmetics and medicine.

Charoen Rat Road meets most of the sleeping, eating, drinking, shopping and partying needs of short-stay visitors, but another area worth scouring for hemp clothing is that around Warorot Market, where shops such Nuntana, on the corner of Tha Pae Road, sell elegant, if expensive, garments.

Many Thais still think of cannabis as a forbidden substance

DR NGAMWONG JARUSURASIN, INGJAI MENTAL HEALTH CLINIC

The most significant recent developments in the use of cannabis in Thailand have been in the field of medicine. The country has a good reputation for medical tourism, including plastic surgery, dental work and wellness retreats, and the expectation is that the changes to the legal status of cannabis will enhance this.

"Unfortunately, many Thais still think of cannabis as a forbidden substance, but we hope that its delisting as a narcotic will encourage them to see the benefits it can bring for both physical and mental health conditions," says Dr Ngamwong Jarusuraisin, who runs the Ingjai Mental Health Clinic in Chiang Mai.

His clinic offers cannabis treatments for people who suffer from depression, anxiety and bipolar disorder, among other conditions. One of its clients, Nick, says that CBD medication has helped him with generalised anxiety disorder.

"I've had trouble sleeping for the past few years, but I find that a dose of water-soluble CBD before I go to bed helps me to overcome my insomnia."

Whether Thailand does follow Canada, Mexico, Uruguay, South Africa and a number of American states in legalising the recreational use of psychoactive cannabis (by smoking, vaping or eating it in food) – and in the process become the first Asian country to do so – remains to be seen.

With the Thai economy still suffering from Covid-induced stagnation, such legalisation could provide the uplift the country sorely needs.

According to the Asian Cannabis Report, published by Prohibition Partners, advisers to the global cannabis industry, the projected value of Thailand's medical cannabis market by 2024 is US\$237 million per year. That could increase to around US\$661 million if the drug's recreational use was legalised.

The health ministry plans to legalise recreational use of the plant in 'sandbox' areas, especially where tourists congregate

PROFESSOR ARNAT TANCHO, MAEJO UNIVERSITY

Stir-fried beef with cannabis leaves and a Cannabis Fizzy at the Anantara Chiang Mai Resort.



tions for licences. Growers are warned that the psychoactive ingredient in the plants that produces a "high" must remain below 0.2 per cent.

The easing of constraints on the use of cannabis has been welcomed throughout the country, but Chiang Mai in the north has taken a leading role, with cafes and restaurants, hemp clothing shops and cannabis clinics all offering the plant in various forms.

Meanwhile, outside Chiang Mai, researchers at one of the country's leading agricultural facilities are developing new strains on their 145-hectare farm.

"Our research is aimed at producing the ideal strains for certain medical treatments," says Professor Arnat Tanchu, who heads Maejo University's Natural Farming Research and Development Centre. "We use a combination of organic farming and smart technology, and we are currently testing 60 different hybrids with different ratios of CBD and THC.

"We expect the upcoming change in the law to increase Thailand's role as an exporter of cannabis products. The health ministry also plans to legalise recreational use of the plant in 'sandbox' areas, especially where tourists congregate, such as Chiang Mai, Phuket and Ko Samui," he says.

So where can you find cannabis products on the streets of Chiang Mai? The Sunday Walking Street (4pm-10 pm), on Ratchadamnoen Road, in the old city, is a good place to start. Among the stalls selling souvenirs, snacks, artwork and fashion accessories are a few vendors selling cannabis drinks in various flavours.

On a nearby quiet lane, the Cannabis Cafe emits a cool vibe and spacey sounds. Two converted rice barns and a compound shaded by an enormous bo (bodhi) tree provide the ideal ambience in which to sample a few CBD products: coffees, sodas, biscuits, tea and inhalers.

"In my grandparents' day, cannabis was used for seasoning food and for easing aches and pains," says the cafe's owner, chef Tao, who also runs an adjacent restaurant and chef's table. "Now, the younger generation are curious about the plant, so I wanted to provide a relaxing environment for people to sample our products."

I nibble on a cannabis biscuit and sip an espresso coffee as we chat. The espresso perks me up and, although there is no noticeable taste of cannabis in the biscuit, I slip into a tranquil mood and feel fully focused as I wander around Tao's compound taking photos. The Service 1921, at the

A worker strips leaves from cultivated cannabis plants in Chiang Mai, Thailand. Photos: Ron Emmons

Anantara Chiang Mai Resort, is one of many restaurants in the northern Thai city that offer cannabis-infused cuisine. "The herb is well suited to Thai food, with its strong flavours," executive chef David Eldridge says. "For example, our stir-fried beef is prepared with onions, garlic, chilli, basil and a handful of cannabis leaves."

Guests at the Anantara can also quaff a Cannabis Fizzy while lounging by the Ping River, or settle in to a 90-minute Cannabis Stress-Relief Journey at the resort's spa.

The herb is well suited to Thai food, with its strong flavours

DAVID ELDRIDGE, EXECUTIVE CHEF OF THE SERVICE 1921

If you'd rather wear your cannabis than eat or drink it, drop by Unique Space on Charoen Rat Road, on the east side of the Ping River. The owner, Jirrutikan Bhuntusilpa, better known as Jimmy, is a mine of information about hemp – a type of cannabis grown for making rope and cloth – and sells clothing made by Hmong, Lua and Karen tribal groups.

Green or Blue? The choice between two majestic heritage mansions

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Other than the distinctive hues that colour their exteriors, there is one major difference between the Cheong Fatt Tze Mansion (the Blue Mansion) and the Pinang Peranakan Mansion (the Green Mansion) in Georgetown, Penang: you can spend the night only in the former, which is now a boutique heritage hotel. Both mansions belong on must-see lists for visitors to the Malaysian island capital, so if you must choose, which one should you visit? Built around the same time (the late 1890s) and little more than 1km apart, both mansions are representative of Peranakan culture – that belonging to descendants of Chinese migrants who settled in Penang, Malacca, Singapore and Indonesia, and intermarried with local Malays.

In reality, neither Chung Keng Quee, who commissioned the Green Mansion, nor Cheong Fatt Tze, who commissioned the Blue Mansion, were "real" Babas (as Peranakan males are known).

Both grew up extremely poor in southern China and tried to make their own luck in Southeast Asia. Although Chung joined a triad and appears to have become rich from ill-gotten gains, some consider his a true "rags-to-riches" story, whereas Cheong married into a rich Indonesian family. Both men, who knew each other and collaborated on philanthropic projects, built their mansions with high-quality materials, not only from China but also from Europe. Cheong, who gained a reputation as being the "Rockefeller of the East", lived in the Blue Mansion with his seventh wife, a 17-year-old bride whose portraits adorn the walls. In 1893, he was made honorary vice-consul of China in Penang so, in its days of glory, the Blue Mansion housed both the vice-consulate and his home. When Chung and Cheong died, in 1901 and 1916, respectively, they passed the mansions down to younger members of their families, but both houses fell into disrepair. The Blue Mansion was taken over by squatters. In the 1990s, the Green Mansion was acquired by a property developer

who restored it and turned it into a museum dedicated to Peranakan culture. The Blue Mansion was sold to a small group of Penang conservationists, who gave it a sympathetic restoration and turned it into a boutique hotel and restaurant. Planning and tours Guided tours of the Blue Mansion can be taken at 11am and 2pm every day. Tickets cost 25 ringgit (HK\$45). Advance booking on its elaborate and up-to-date website is advised; hotel guests can join for free. The knowledgeable guides include Clement Liang, of the Penang Heritage Trust. Although visitors are free to wander around the Green Mansion by themselves for 20 ringgit, tours in English or Chinese can be arranged at no additional cost. The mansion's website is outdated and does not provide a lot of information. The winner? Blue Which offers better value for money? As almost all the 28 rooms (including the old kitchen) at the Blue Mansion have been turned into guest rooms,

only three areas are accessible to non-resident visitors: the reception hall, the main courtyard and the small museum on the second floor. In the museum, artefacts such as clothes and crockery are exhibited together with posters and photos from before and after the restoration. At the Green Mansion, practically all the halls and rooms are accessible – including two dining rooms (one Chinese and one European), a typical Peranakan bridal suite and the former kitchen, which boasts an incredible collection of tiffin boxes and cooking utensils from the 1900s. More than 1,000 Peranakan items are on display and even available for sale at the mansion's museum shop. The winner? Green The overall experience Although both mansions were built according to the principles of feng shui, whereby the presence and placement of the five elements – wood, fire, earth, metal and water – benefit members of the house, Cheong's love of traditional Chinese houses and eagerness to preserve his heritage come across loud and clear at the Blue Mansion, which has an elegant Zen aesthetic. It still stands as Cheong's home, the hotel rooms with modern amenities having been cleverly integrated to show respect for its old-world charm. If possible, spend the night at the Blue Mansion and dine in what was once Cheong's master suite – now Indigo restaurant. The Green Mansion offers great visual stimulation – riots of colour, gold, carvings and pompous details – and provides for a two-in-one sightseeing experience: a heritage mansion and a museum of Peranakan culture. The winner? Green



The Green Mansion is a museum of Peranakan culture. Photo: Shutterstock