Siam Legal Chiang Mai Weighs In as Chiang Mai's Shift Toward Wellness and Long-Stay Tourism Raises Legal Planning Questions for Foreign Nationals and Businesses

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Chiang Mai welcomed approximately 12 million visitors in 2025, a record for the province, including around 4 million international arrivals. The figures, reported by the Tourism Authority of Thailand, reflect a market that is changing not just in volume but in character. Where Chiang Mai once drew primarily short-stay visitors from nearby Asian markets, it is now seeing stronger growth from South Korea, Japan, the United States, the United Kingdom, and other long-haul origins. Many of these travelers are arriving with longer timelines, lifestyle-driven intentions, and in some cases an interest in operating businesses or acquiring property in Northern Thailand.

Siam Legal Chiang Mai, a law firm advising foreign and Thai clients on property, immigration, business, and regulatory matters in the region, says the shift is creating a more complex legal landscape for both individuals

and operators.

"What we are seeing in Chiang Mai is not just more tourists. It is a different kind of visitor," said Apichart Mattayanuwat, Attorney at Law at Siam Legal Chiang Mai. "More people are arriving with plans to stay for months, open wellness retreats, purchase condominiums, or explore retirement options. These are decisions with real legal dimensions, and the regulatory framework in Thailand does not become simpler just because the lifestyle appeal is strong."

One of the province's most visible infrastructure moves is the redevelopment of San Kamphaeng Hot Springs, a royally-initiated project backed by 198 million baht in public funding. The site is being transformed into a holistic wellness destination centered around hot mineral springs and onsen-style facilities, with completion expected in 2030 to 2031. The development reflects a broader provincial push to position Chiang Mai as a health and wellness destination for international visitors.

Siam Legal Chiang Mai notes that as wellness tourism infrastructure expands, it tends to attract foreign entrepreneurial interest in boutique hotels, retreat centers, health-focused accommodations, rehabilitation programs, and lifestyle businesses. The firm advises that this category of business activity requires careful structuring from the outset.

Foreign nationals in Thailand face restrictions on land ownership and participation in certain commercial activities under the Foreign Business Act. The firm cautions against informal arrangements, undisclosed nominee structures, and improperly documented partnerships, which remain areas of active regulatory scrutiny regardless of the province or industry involved.

The growth of long-haul and lifestyle-oriented visitors also raises questions around immigration compliance. Travelers who extend their stays in Thailand for wellness, remote work, or retirement purposes are subject to reporting obligations, visa conditions, and in some cases, employment restrictions that are not always well understood at the time of arrival.

Siam Legal Chiang Mai advises foreign nationals considering extended stays to review their visa category, 90-day reporting obligations, and any planned income-generating activities before committing to long-term arrangements in the province. The firm notes that Chiang Mai's immigration office applies its own documentation standards, which can differ from procedures in Bangkok or Phuket, and that local legal guidance is often more reliable than general information sourced online.

Chiang Mai is also advancing through the formal process for UNESCO World Heritage recognition. Thailand submitted the nomination dossier for "Chiang Mai, Capital of Lanna" to the UNESCO World Heritage Centre in January 2026, and an on-site inspection by the International Council on Monuments and Sites is expected

in June 2026. The proposed heritage area covers 383 rai and includes the ancient city walls, major temples, and key cultural landmarks within the old quarter.

In preparation, the province has been undertaking landscape improvements and restoration work around nominated sites. For property owners, business operators, and developers with assets near heritage zones, Siam Legal Chiang Mai recommends reviewing how potential UNESCO designation may affect land use, renovation approvals, and commercial activity in and around the old city.

Chiang Mai's evolution into a higher-value, longer-stay destination is expected to continue. The combination of record visitor numbers, significant infrastructure investment, and growing interest from Western long-haul markets suggests the province will attract increasing levels of foreign participation across residential, commercial, and lifestyle sectors in the years ahead.

Siam Legal Chiang Mai is a Chiang Mai law firm that advises foreign nationals and business operators to approach this environment with appropriate legal preparation. Contracts, business structures, property arrangements, and immigration plans that are properly documented from the beginning tend to be significantly easier to maintain and defend over time.

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Siam Legal Chiang Mai

Siam Legal Chiang Mai offers corporate, family, litigation, property, and immigration services. Our English-speaking lawyers assist with company setup, visas, contracts, due diligence, land registration, and personal legal matters in Northern Thailand.

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