

# Hidden GEMS

Thailand is home to a wide array of retired aircraft, many of them lovingly restored to serve as tourist attractions. We join **Dirk Grothe** on an extended road trip from Bangkok to Pattaya and U-Tapao to take a closer look at these colourful classics



First delivered to Eastern Airlines in 1973, this former Angel Air Cambodia Lockheed TriStar 1 XU-700 (c/n 193A-1055) now serves as an exhibit at Coffee War Station 331, southeast of Pattaya

ALL PHOTOS AUTHOR



**M**ost tourist visit Thailand for its fabulous beaches in places such as Phuket or Ko Samui, or the breathtaking temples of Wat Arun or Wat Po. But the country also has plenty to offer aviation enthusiasts. Away from its airports, there's a variety of discarded aircraft that have found a new lease of life in their retirement, serving as restaurants and cafés, training aids in universities and schools, hotel rooms or simply a marketing gimmick for one of the many street food outlets or night markets. And these Boeing, Airbus, Lockheed and Douglas planes are often in surprisingly good condition,

lovingly restored with a fresh coat of paint on the outside and given a new-look interior.

### **Classics on display**

Many of these aircraft were drawn from storage at Bangkok/Don Mueang or U-Tapao in the province of Rayong, around 20 miles southeast of the tourist haven of Pattaya. In some cases, they've been inactive for years, are no longer considered useful by commercial operators and have been abandoned to await their fate. Then they'll disappear unexpectedly, the trail cold until they reappear just as suddenly, fully assembled by a roadside or in

a field. It's a skill that Thailand has truly mastered, transforming these ageing icons with stylish bar counters, comfortable lounge chairs and often with beautifully preserved flight decks.

This eclectic selection includes no fewer than four Lockheed L-1011 TriStars – two former Thai Sky Airlines examples in and around Bangkok, an ex-Angel Air Cambodia jet near Pattaya and one of the Las Vegas Sands Corporation's jets at Nong Khai, near the Laos border in northern Thailand. You'll also find around a dozen Boeing 747s (mostly former Thai Airways and Orient Thai Airlines aircraft) and various McDonnell Douglas MD-80 'Mad Dogs' (a type that proved popular with domestic carriers including One-Two-Go). And it's not limited to airliners, but also former US Army and Air Force Douglas C-47s and Fairchild C-123 Providers that were demobbed at the end of the Vietnam war.

Visiting these aircraft, it's immediately clear why so much effort and care has been taken to dismantle, transport, reassemble and refurbish them – they're a major attraction. It's not uncommon to see entire families making the trip and spending hours on board, children playing in the cockpit and developing their fascination with aviation and harbouring dreams of becoming a pilot, often watched over by grandparents. And there's plenty of younger tourists, often couples, sampling the atmosphere on board and relaxing in the well-appointed cabin with a cocktail or enjoying a romantic meal.

### **Mad Dogs and old Daks**

Eager to explore the fascinating array of aircraft on display, *Airliner World* took an extended road trip from capital Bangkok, heading southeast through the provinces of Chachoengsao and Chon Buri to Pattaya and finally U-Tapao in the Gulf of Thailand.

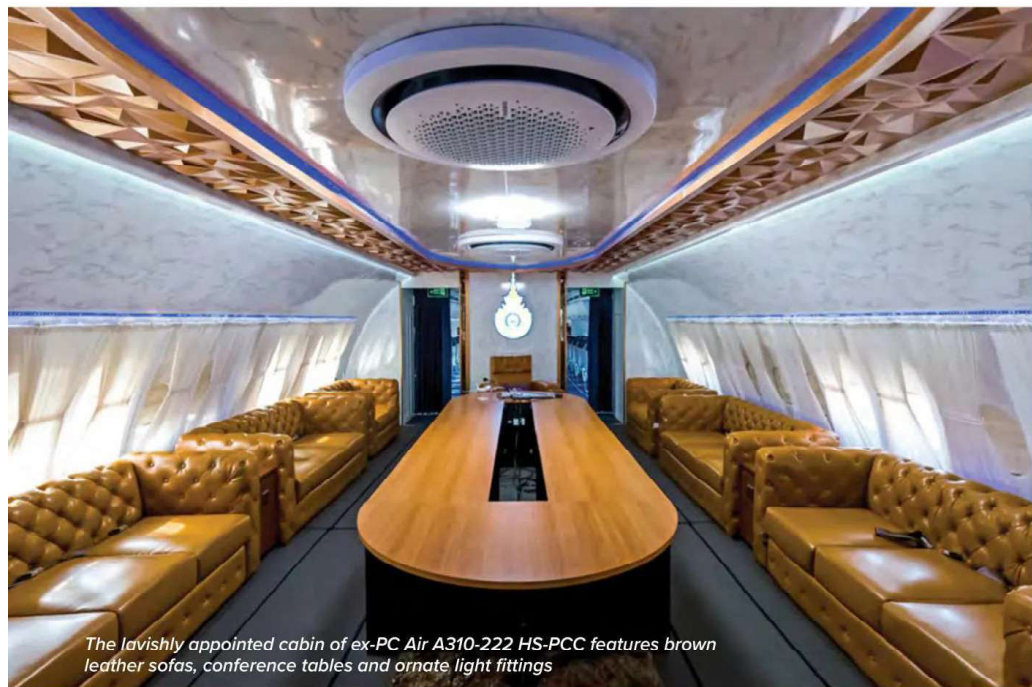
With around 15 million inhabitants, the metropolitan area of Bangkok is the political and economic centre of Thailand. It's also home to around 400 Buddhist temples, known locally as wats, and two major international airports: Suvarnabhumi and Don Mueang. They attract an unusual and colourful mix of domestic, regional, and international full service and low-cost carriers, but the real gems are found away from these hubs.

Our first stop was the Kasemchai Fish and Chicken Farm northwest of the city to see 747-246B HS-UTR (c/n 22479). This jumbo spent its entire flying career in Asia after being delivered new to Japan Airlines in March 1981 and then serving with JALWays (formerly Japan Air Charter) and, later, Orient Thai until its withdrawal in 2010. It was relocated to the farm several years later, placed on elevated platforms and repainted with a red tail bearing the 'KCF' logo of its new owner. »

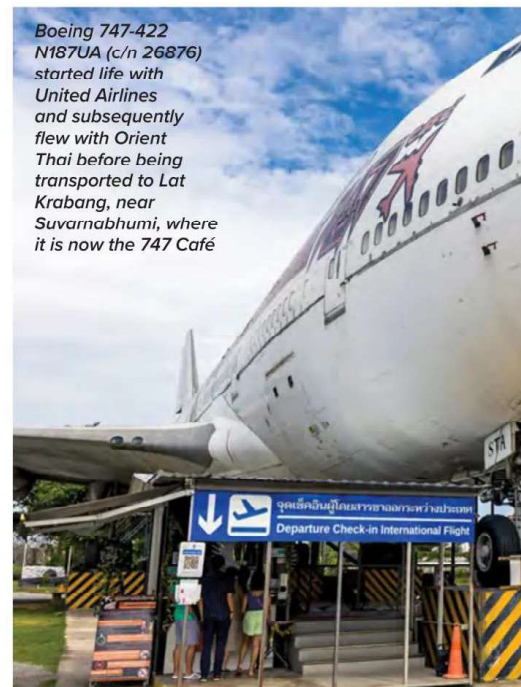
*This ex-PC Air A310-222, HS-PCC (c/n 419), is now used by the Rajamangala University of Technology Thanyaburi as a conference centre and training facility*







The lavishly appointed cabin of ex-PC Air A310-222 HS-PCC features brown leather sofas, conference tables and ornate light fittings



Boeing 747-422 N187UA (c/n 26876) started life with United Airlines and subsequently flew with Orient Thai before being transported to Lat Krabang, near Suvarnabhumi, where it is now the 747 Café

Staying to the north of the capital, we headed to the Rajamangala University of Technology Thanyaburi, a 40-minute drive from Don Mueang, where ex-PC Air A310-222 HS-PCC (c/n 419) has been repurposed as a conference centre and training facility, resplendent with a luxurious cabin complete with brown leather sofas and ornate light fittings.

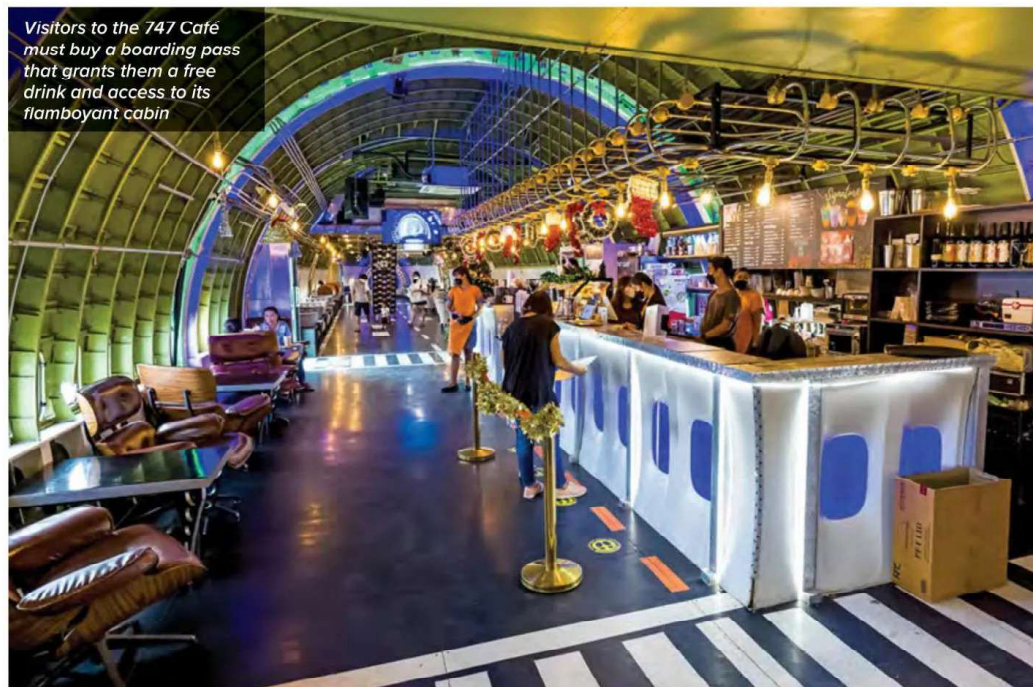
Equally flamboyant is the 747 Café in Lat Krabang, near Suvarnabhumi. Here, visitors must pass through the 'departure check-in' desk and pay the equivalent of €4 for a boarding pass that entitles them to a free drink and access to the striking cabin, much of which has been stripped back to expose the metal framework and aircraft skin. The -400-series widebody, c/n 26876, started its operational career in 1992 with United Airlines as N187UA and subsequently



Customers at the MD-82 Café in the district of Lat Krabang are offered the opportunity to enjoy mildly cannabis-infused drinks







Visitors to the 747 Café must buy a boarding pass that grants them a free drink and access to its flamboyant cabin

LEFT: Boeing 737-281A, HS-AKO (c/n 20507) wears full AirAsia colours, despite having never operated with the carrier. It serves as a popular attraction at the KidZania children's centre

BELOW: Until recently, former RTAF C-47A, 43-49919, was used to attract customers to the Camp Flea Market in Bangkok. It is named Black Tiger and wears pin-up nose art

flew with Orient Thai (including two short-term leases with Saudi Arabian Airlines) as HS-STA before being stripped down for transport in 2020.

The similarly themed MD-82 Café lies at the other end of the Lat Krabang district and makes use of the beautifully decorated HS-MDL (c/n 49853). Sister ship HS-MDI (c/n 53298) is the centrepiece of the Namdang Airlines Restaurant in the neighbouring Samut Prakan district, but it was closed for refurbishment at the time of our visit. Meanwhile, other MD-80s were also found at a nearby university and a flight academy, where they are used as training aids.

Bangkok is also home to a couple of retired 737-200s, including a former military example at the Royal Thai Air Force (RTAF) Museum at Don Mueang, and another in the Siam Paragon shopping centre in downtown Bangkok. The latter was delivered to Japan's All Nippon Airways (ANA) as JA8413 (c/n 20507) in June 1971 and last flew with Phuket Air as HS-AKO until its retirement in 2004. Like many of the others now on display, it spent an extended period in storage at Don Mueang before being disassembled in 2012 and installed the following year at KidZania in full Air Asia colours. The children's centre is an interactive area that offers ultra-realistic role-

play activities designed to mirror real-world careers and provide youngsters with useful life skills. Aircraft are a feature of KidZania sites across the world.

There's also plenty of vintage transports on show, such as former RTAF C-47A 43-49919, named Black Tiger complete with pin-up nose art, that until recently sat on the roof of The Camp Flea Market near Chatuchak Market. Fans of the ubiquitous Douglas aircraft can find others at the RTAF museum, the National Science Center for Education adjacent to the Ekkamai Bus Station, and the Srinakarin Train Night Market. >>





## Heading south

Having caught up with the various aircraft on display in and around Bangkok and its environs, our road trip started in earnest.

We pressed on southeast on the Bang Na Expressway, one of the arterial roads out of the city. Our next stop was Coffee 123, a café inside an immaculate C-123K Provider parked by the Caltex fuel station in Bang Wua. The aircraft, which has a fully preserved and accessible cockpit, has since been repainted from its striking black and yellow livery into USAF markings and was one of the large number of Providers that served in Vietnam and remained in the region following the end of hostilities rather than being shipped back to the US. Others are on show in Bangkok, including at the RTAF museum.

Refuelled and caffeinated, we continued south on coastal Highway 3 through Chon Buri Province to see the former US Army Air Force Curtiss C-46F Commando, 44-78738. Last used operationally by Royal Air Lao and then Sahakol Air, the 1945-vintage transporter was installed in 1985 as an exhibit at a coffee house. One of just two examples in Thailand – the other is by the police station in Udon Thani in the north of the country – it has been woefully neglected and is in poor condition, heavily rusted and full of holes. It's unlikely the aircraft will remain in situ for much longer.

Continuing south, another ex-USAAF and Hang Khong Air Vietnam C-47A, 42-92972/XV-NIA (c/n 12832), is living out its retirement at the Hope International Rehabilitation Center in Si Racha, wearing the former livery of Thai Airways. To the east, Nong Khor is home to one of the more unusual types preserved in Thailand: NAMC YS-11A HS-KVU (c/n 2097), which sits overlooking the adjacent airfield from its lofty perch on the roof of skydiving centre Thai Sky Adventures. Barely 180 examples of the Japanese turboprop were built, but the type attracted various export orders – this example was flown by Phuket Air, one of two Thai operators of the YS-11 alongside Phoenix Air.

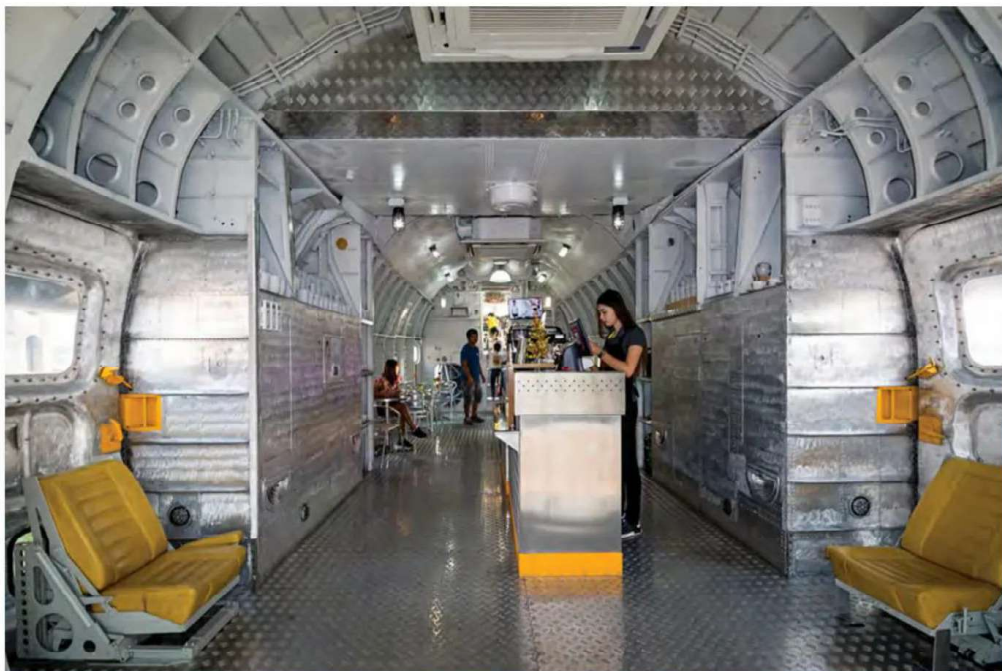
## A mall with a difference

We eventually arrived in the famous (or perhaps infamous) Pattaya, better known for than its multitude of drinking outlets, go-go bars, massage parlours and nightclubs than its four preserved aircraft.

Not to be deterred from the task at hand, we headed for the Terminal 21 Mall in North Pattaya. Unusually, the shopping centre is airport themed, with escalators leading to the 'gates' and each level named after an international destination. The staff at the information desk even wore cabin crew uniforms. Here, we found



The Caltex fuel station in Bang Wua is home to Coffee 123, a café inside an immaculate C-123K Provider. The aircraft was one of the large number of transporters that served in Vietnam





Living out its retirement at the Hope International Rehabilitation Center in Si Racha is another ex-USAAF and Hang Khong Air Vietnam C-47A, 42-92972/XV-NIA (c/n 12832)



LEFT: The spacious interior of the C-123 Provider is the ideal setting for a coffee shop

BELOW: While many of the aircraft on display around Thailand have been lovingly restored, others such as this Curtiss C-46F Commando in Chon Buri Province have been neglected and are in poor condition



Unsurprisingly, the airport-themed Terminal 21 in North Pattaya has several aircraft on display, including 37-year-old one-time Continental Airlines 737-3T0 HS-BRA (c/n 23374)

37-year-old one-time Continental Airlines 737-3T0 HS-BRA (c/n 23374), which has swapped its Orient Thai livery for promotional Terminal 21 titles. Also in display here was Legacy Air Saab 340A HS-LAA (c/n 340A-115).

A little further down the road was the Runway 88 street food market, where 48-year-old 747-217B N899TH (c/n 20929) looks decidedly out of place parked between the neighbouring high-rise buildings. Acquired new by Canada's CP Air in 1974, it later flew with Pakistan International Airlines and Orange Air, before arriving in U-Tapao in early 2007 for decommissioning. It's now in remarkably better condition than when it first arrived, having

been dismantled in 2014 and moved to Pattaya, where it was effectively dumped as scrap and left in pieces to fester. Finally rebuilt in 2021, is it now the star attraction at the night market where we enjoyed a delicious Thai dinner alongside the mighty jumbo.

By far the most spectacular of the preserved aircraft in Pattaya is the red Douglas EC-47P 43-49703, employed during the Vietnam conflict as an electronic warfare platform and now looking every bit like it has crashed into the Royal Garden Plaza mall. Its impressive location is no accident – the aircraft is part of the Ripley's Believe it or Not entertainment centre on the second floor. >>>



Legacy Air Saab 340A HS-LAA (c/n 340A-115) is on display at the Terminal 21 Mall, which features departure gates, levels named after different international destinations, and airfield-style lighting



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### Sun, sea and Skytrains

From Pattaya we headed east to the Siam Country Golf Club, where a former Thai Airways Hawker Siddeley 748 Srs 2, HS-THI (c/n 1708), is on display by the entrance. The turboprop, which sadly recently lost its flamboyant peacock-inspired livery in favour of an all-silver colour scheme, was damaged beyond repair in 1987 after making a gear-up landing at Chiang Rai.

We then pressed south along highway 331 to another highlight of the trip, Coffee War Station 331. The site is a combined museum and adventure park, with a variety of light aircraft and helicopters on display, along with a shooting range and souvenir shops selling surplus military equipment and clothing.

For us, the star attraction was former Angel Air Cambodia TriStar 1 XU-700 (c/n 193A-1055), which now features a café in the cabin but, more impressively, an almost complete and freely accessible cockpit. Originally delivered to Eastern Airlines in 1973 as N327EA, the widebody was decommissioned in Bangkok in 2000 and arrived in U-Tapao two years later, before moving to its current location in September 2020. It now wears what appears to be basic All Nippon Airways colours, despite having never flown with the Japanese carrier. However, it proudly wears its former VR-HOK registration plate from its time with Cathay Pacific on the front panel of the flightdeck.



ABOVE: Once an electronic warfare platform, Douglas EC-47P 43-49703 is now parked in spectacular fashion, protruding from the Royal Garden Plaza mall in Pattaya. It's part of the Ripley's Believe it or Not entertainment centre

LEFT: Runway 88 street food market's 48-year-old 747-217B, N899TH (c/n 20929), looks decidedly out of place parked between the neighbouring high-rise buildings





Looking resplendent in Royal Thai Navy colours, Douglas C-47B 43-49213 is parked by the beach in U-Tapao



Now wearing striking three-tone digital camouflage, this ex-Thai Airways International Boeing 737-4D7 HS-TDD (c/n 26611), joined the Coffee War Station 331 collection in August 2022



The small campsite at Napa Thiraphirom beach, on the outskirts of the airport at U-Tapao, features a C-47 Skytrain that has been converted into a hotel room

The venue is also home to two other ex-Thai Airways airliners: A330-321 HS-TEA (c/n 050) is similarly fitted out as a café with an accessible cockpit, while 737-4D7 HS-TDD (c/n 26611) joined the collection in August 2022 and was repainted in its eye-catching three-tone digital camouflage livery last December.

The final leg of our journey took us to U-Tapao-Rayong-Pattaya International Airport, the source of

many of the aircraft on display across Thailand. At the time of our visit, the airfield remained full of Thai Airways jets that had yet to be returned from pandemic-induced storage, including two of the flag carrier's six A380s and numerous 747s and A340s.

Built between 1965 and 1966 by the USAF to accommodate its B-52 Stratofortress strategic bombers, the airfield remains a military installation – it is now owned by the Royal Thai

Navy – but is in dual use and has a dedicated, albeit relatively small, civil terminal.

Arriving at the facility, its pedigree is immediately obvious, with a Grumman HU-16B Albatross looking smart in a dark blue, white and dayglo orange military scheme, proudly serving as gate guardian. The adjacent naval aviation museum is worth a visit, having an interesting selection of military fixed wing and rotary airframes, all beautifully restored. Residents include a Lockheed P-3 Orion, a GAF Nomad, a C-47 and a Grumman S-2 Tracker. The airfield also houses a scrapyard, but at the time of our visit this was closely watched by a guard dog that didn't take too kindly to our efforts to photograph some of the stored hulks.

The stand-out exhibit in U-Tapao isn't on the airfield itself, but rather on the southern perimeter and is a must-visit for fans of older radial engine types. A small campsite on Napa Thiraphirom beach offers visitors the opportunity to pitch a tent by the sea on the final approach to Runway 36. Those seeking a little more comfort can swap a night under canvas for one inside the cabin of a former Royal Thai Navy C-47 Skytrain, which has been converted into a hotel room complete with a sea view from the cockpit windows – what more could an aviation enthusiast ask for?

Thailand's astonishing array of preserved aircraft are hugely popular with locals – for many it's their only opportunity to board an airliner – and tourists alike, as the huge number of visits will attest. And with airframes frequently moving or being repainted, and new examples appearing all the time from a seemingly endless supply, there's always something different to see. It really is a must-visit destination for enthusiasts. **AWA**

