

City in Search of Identity

Bangkok in June is hot and steamy. It rains in steady sheets. The traffic is tortuous, the humidity stifling, the noise constant.



AND NONE OF IT matters. Bangkok is one of the world's most intriguing cities and just being here can be a life-altering experience. An estimated 8 million people live in this vast, rambling metropolis, the self-styled cultural melting pot of Asia and economic capital of Thailand.

It is home to the magnificent temples of Wat Pho and Wat Arun, the colourful markets of Pak Khlong Talat, Chinatown and Chatuchak, the fabulous architecture and art of the Grand Palace and Wat Phra Kaeo. Here, steel skyscrapers stand alongside ancient temples, huge western-style malls compete with traditional open-air markets, and

you're just as likely to find a Starbucks on the corner as a Thai tea shop.

It is hard to remain untouched by a city of such contrasts and contradictions. Bangkok seems to be trying on the latest styles in search of its own identity. On one hand, you have the picture of modern prosperity. Skyscrapers crowd the downtown business core and a new skytrain provides mass transit for local commuters and foreign visitors. Shopping malls are American in character and brand names. Cell phones and dance clubs are the order of the day for the young, hip and upwardly mobile. It is an image the Thai government is eager to

promote, especially since it is a 180-degree shift from Bangkok's other reputation as a hot spot for sex tours.

On the other hand, you have the more traditional Bangkok. A city where orange-robed Buddhist monks continue to carry out their ancient duties in temples and shoppers still haggle at morning markets, three-wheeled *tuk-tuk* taxis weave through traffic and narrow boats ply the old *klongs* or canals.

It is this Bangkok that can be most fun to explore, especially the markets – the Pak Khlong Talat flower and vegetable market, the traditional Damnoen Saduak Floating Market west of the city, the shop-filled allies of Chinatown,

the Indian markets in Phahurat.

If the clash of old and new is jarring to western eyes, Bangkok residents seem to take it all in stride, even though some of the challenges they're facing are serious. For one thing, the city is sinking at a fairly alarming rate of up to 5 cm a year. Maybe it's the rain – an average of 200 mm a month falls during the June-October rainy season. Maybe it's the massive amount of residential and commercial development since the late 1980s. And maybe it's just the growing tide of western tourists drawn to Bangkok's increasingly upscale list of hotels, health spas and restaurants.



ANOTHER EXTRAORDINARY challenge – begging elephants. Despite being officially banned from the city in 2000, *mahouts* (handlers) and their domesticated elephants continue to find their way into Bangkok. They amble down narrow streets selling bananas to tourists, who then feed the elephants. It is not a quaint traditional custom, but the result of a major social upheaval.

In the 1980s, over-logging virtually destroyed Thailand's forests. Worse, it led to devastating mudslides in rural villages. In response to public pressure, Thailand banned all logging in 1989. Villagers and environmentalists alike cheered the decision, but it threw thousands of domesticated elephants and their mahouts out of work. With little employment and not enough food to feed their 11,000 pound charges, many mahouts have resorted to illegal logging in border areas or begging in the cities. Both are dangerous. Elephants are regularly injured in traffic accidents in cities and by landmines in remote forests.

Thai people have a remarkable knack for retaining their own traditions while absorbing the practices of other cultures. This is one of the reasons for Thailand's multicultural character; it also explains a little known fact. Thailand has never been colonized by a foreign power; not the British, French, German or American. It has been invaded enough times – by the Burmese, the Khmers, the Japanese in Word War II – but the invaders never managed to stay. In their own quiet way, the Thai have fiercely guarded their independence.

That isn't to say the country's history has been peaceful. The last half of the 20th century was marked by internal fighting. In the years after World War II, Thailand was rocked by one military coup after another. Democracy was finally established in 1979, and a decade of prosperity and political stability seemed to put the country on a firm footing. Then in 1991, the military unexpectedly swept back to power and it took a bloody civilian revolt to reinstate the democratic government in 1992.

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SCANDAL AND CHARGES OF government corruption plagued Thailand through the 1990's. The official currency, the *baht*, crashed in the 1997 Asia economic crisis. Even today, with a democratic government and growing economy, Thailand faces tremendous economic, social and environmental pressures – from poverty to Muslim separatists in the southern peninsula and continuing environmental degradation of its forests and beaches.

Through all the years of turbulence, the one constant in the Thai political landscape has been the monarchy. The Kingdom of Thailand is a constitutional monarchy ruled by King Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama IX), the latest in the Chakri Dynasty established in 1782. King Bhumibol came to the throne in 1946 when he was just 19 years old. Today, he is the longest reigning constitutional monarch in the world.

The Thai harbour great feeling for the Royal Family, and avidly follow the activities of King Bhumibol, Queen Sirikit, Crown Prince Maha Vajiralongkorn, Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn and Princess Chulabhorn. December is a great month for royal watchers, as it features the annual Trooping of the Colour and King's Birthday Celebrations.

The Grand Palace is one of the most popular royal sites

on the tourist agenda, along with Bangkok's many exotic Buddhist temples or *wats*. Most visitors see Wat Pho (Temple of the Reclining Buddha), Wat Phra Kaeo (Temple of the Eternal Buddha), home of the most revered Buddha image in Thailand, and Wat Arun (Temple of Dawn), one of the city's most famous riverbank landmarks.

But there are many more. Wat Bowon Niwet is the official temple of King Bhumibol and the Crown Prince; Wat Trai Mit houses a huge 5.5 tonne solid gold Buddha; Wat Suthat is home to one of the country's most beautiful Sukhothai-era Buddha images; Wat Saket is known for its Golden Mount – and so on. It's important to remember that in Thailand, temples are sacred places; visitors who appear in unsuitable attire are turned away.

Bangkok is not all there is to Thailand, in a sense it may not even be the real Thailand. It is, however, the first and last stop for most visitors. It is a gateway to the ancient ruins of Ayuthaya, the mountain city of Chiang Mai, the island beaches of Ko Samui, Phuket and more. It is also an international city striving to find its place in the modern world. It is this journey that gives Bangkok its unrivalled energy and character. 🐼