

Understand Bangkok

BANGKOK TODAY..... 206

Many issues and challenges have shaped today's Bangkok.

HISTORY 208

From an obscure riverside trading post to a megalopolis of more than 10 million inhabitants – this is how modern Bangkok came about.

PEOPLE & CULTURE 218

Religion and the monarchy have played major roles in shaping Thailand's fascinating culture.

EATING IN THAILAND 225

Learn about the essential ingredients of one of the world's most vibrant and full-flavoured cuisines.

THE SEX INDUSTRY IN THAILAND 231

What really goes on in Bangkok's red-light districts? We offer an objective view.

Bangkok Today

Bangkok is nothing if not resilient. Recent years have brought explosive protests and army curfews to Thailand's capital. But the city keeps grinding onwards. Bangkok, Thailand's seat of power since the era of direct palace rule, has taken on added prominence now that the staunchly royalist and Bangkok-centric military rules the country outright. But the city remains anxious over everyday woes, such as traffic and flooding, and harbours larger worries over the monarch's health.

Best on Film

Monrak Transistor (directed by Pen-Ek Ratanaruang; 2001) An aspiring *loók tûng* (Thai country music) singer trades his bucolic life for one of struggle in the big city.

Nang Nak (directed by Nonzee Nimibutr; 1999) This classic Thai tale is a fascinating peek at Thai beliefs, as well as the provincial village that existed before Bangkok was taken over by concrete.

Best in Print

Sightseeing (Rattawat Lapcharoensap; 2004) Written by an American-born Thai who later moved to Bangkok, the short stories in this book provide a look at the lives of normal Thais who live in the type of suburbs and towns most visitors will never see.

Four Reigns (Kukrit Pramoj; Thai 1953, English 1981) Follows the fictional life of Phloi, a minor courtier during the Bangkok palace's last days of absolute monarchy.

Return to Authoritarian Rule

Thailand's strongman ruler, army general Prayut Chan-o-cha, has quipped that the country is '99 per cent democratic' now that his junta reigns supreme. But that's not remotely true. The country is best described as a dictatorship – albeit one with a much lighter touch than North Korea's Kim dynasty.

The lives of Bangkok's workaday residents have not changed radically since the coup in 2014. The junta's soaring vows to eliminate corruption and 'return happiness' to all Thais are largely unfulfilled. The economy is stagnant. The currency has weakened. And the mysterious bombing of a heavily touristed shrine indicates that Bangkok is not immune to the threat of international terrorism. But most of the city keeps chugging along as it always has.

The junta's darker side is mostly felt by the political class: deposed officials, academics, activists and dissidents. The military government has rounded up critics for 'attitude adjustment', which translates to forcible confinement on an army base.

But 'attitude adjustment' is a dream compared to the fate of those convicted of slandering the royal family. Thailand's sentences for violations of *lèse-majesté* laws (insulting the throne) were already among the world's harshest. Under the junta, which projects itself as the valiant defender of the palace's eminence, they've grown even more severe.

Thailand's elderly king now requires frequent medical treatment, and his passing is almost unthinkable for reverent subjects who view him as the pinnacle of Thai society and the nation's guiding moral force. Exactly how the nation will react is unknown (and open discussion of the king's death is highly taboo), but the event will likely usher in a period of intense mourning and bring Bangkok to a halt.