

# Bangkok



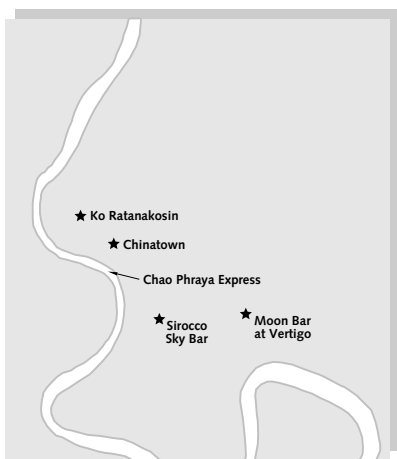
Formerly the epitome of the steamy Asian metropolis, in recent years Bangkok has gone under the knife and emerged as a rejuvenated starlet, defiantly daring people to guess her age. Her wrinkles haven't totally been erased, but you might not notice them in the ever-expanding and efficient public transportation system, air-conditioned mega-malls and international-standard restaurants. A diverse international community, a burgeoning art scene and a brand-new airport complete the new look, making even frequent visitors wonder what happened to the girl they once knew.

But don't take this to mean that there's no 'real' Bangkok left. The Royal Palace and Wat Phra Kaew still sparkle just as they did more than 200 years ago. You can still taste classic Bangkok cuisine in the shophouses of Banglamphu, and Skytrains and the Metro have had little impact on the canalside houses of Thonburi. The traditional framework that made this city unique is still very much alive and kicking, and can be found a short walk from any Skytrain station or probably just around the corner from your hotel.

To really experience the Bangkok of today, it's necessary to drop all preconceived notions of what the city 'should' be like and explore both of these worlds. Take the air-conditioned Metro to sweltering, hectic Chinatown, or the soggy *klong* boat ride to the chic Central World mall. Along the way we're sure you'll find that the old personality and the new face culminate in one sexy broad indeed.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Skipping between sightseeing spots aboard the **Chao Phraya Express** (p185)
- Exploring the streets of old Bangkok, including **Ko Ratanakosin** (p141), on foot
- Learning to make authentic Thai dishes at one of Bangkok's numerous **cooking schools** (p144)
- Toasting the stars and the twinkling skyscraper lights atop a rooftop bar, such as **Moon Bar at Vertigo** (p169) or **Sirocco Sky Bar** (p169)
- Getting blissfully pounded into submission at one of the city's terrific value **massage parlours** (p140)
- Eating yourself into a stupor on the streets of **Chinatown** (p164)
- Getting out of the city and visiting the nearby canalside town of **Amphawa** (p190)



■ BEST TIME TO VISIT: NOVEMBER–FEBRUARY

■ POPULATION: 7.7 MILLION

## HISTORY

The centre of government and culture in Thailand today, Bangkok was a historical miracle during a time of turmoil. Following the fall of Ayuthaya in 1767, the kingdom fractured into competing forces, from which General Taksin emerged as a decisive unifier. He established his base in Thonburi, on the western bank of Mae Nam Chao Phraya (Chao Phraya River), a convenient location for sea trade from the Gulf of Thailand. Taksin proved more of a military strategist than a popular ruler. He was later deposed by another important military general, Chao Phraya Chakri, who moved the capital across the river in 1782 to a more defensible location in anticipation of a Burmese attack. The succession of his son in 1809 established the present-day dynasty, and Chao Phraya Chakri is referred to as Rama I.

Court officials envisioned the new capital as a resurrected Ayuthaya, complete with an island district (Ko Ratanakosin) carved out of the swampland and cradling the royal court (the Grand Palace) and a temple to the auspicious Emerald Buddha (Wat Phra Kaew). The emerging city, which was encircled by a thick wall, was filled with stilt and floating houses ideally adapted to seasonal flooding.

Modernity came to the capital in the late 19th century as European aesthetics and technologies filtered east. During the reigns of Rama IV (King Mongkut) and Rama V (King Chulalongkorn), Bangkok received its first paved road (Th Charoen Krung) and a new royal district (Dusit) styled after European palaces.

Bangkok was still a gangly town when soldiers from the American war in Vietnam came to rest and relax in the city's go-go bars and brothels. It wasn't until the boom years of the 1980s and '90s that Bangkok exploded into a fully fledged metropolis crowded with hulking skyscrapers and an endless spill of concrete that gobbled up rice paddies and green space. The city's extravagant tastes were soon tamed by the 1997 economic meltdown, the effects of which can still be seen a decade later in the numerous half-built skyscrapers.

In recent years Bangkok has yet again started to redefine itself, and projects such as the Skytrain and Metro have begun to address the city's notorious traffic problems, while simultaneously providing the city with a modern face. A spate of giant

air-conditioned mega-malls has some parts of the city looking a lot like Singapore, and it's only a matter of time before Bangkok's modernisation reaches the level of other leading Asian capitals.

## ORIENTATION

Occupying the east side of Mae Nam Chao Phraya, Bangkok proper can be divided in two by the main north-south railway terminating at Hualamphong train station.

The portion between the serpentine river and the railway is old Bangkok, a district of holy temples, crowded markets and family-owned shophouses. Swarming either side of the train station is the dense neighbourhood of Chinatown, a frenzy of red, gold and neon. Chinatown's chaos is subdued by Ko Ratanakosin, the former royal enclave and Bangkok's most popular tourist district. Charming Banglamphu and the backpacker strip of Th Khao San (Khao San Rd) are north up the river. Crowning the old city is Dusit, a planned homage to the great European capitals, and the easy-going neighbourhood of Thewet.

East of the railway is new Bangkok, a modern Asian city with little charm. Around Siam Square is a universe of boxy shopping centres that attracts fashion-savvy Thai teenagers and shopping-holiday tourists. Th Sukhumvit runs a deliberate course from the geographic city centre to the Gulf of Thailand, and has limblike tributaries reaching into corporate-expat cocoons and the girly-bar scene at Soi Cowboy and Nana Entertainment Plaza.

Bangkok's financial district centres along Th Silom, which cuts an incision from the river to Lumpini Park. Intersecting Th Silom near the river is Th Charoen Krung, Bangkok's first paved road that was once the artery for the city's mercantile shipping interests. Its narrow sois (lanes) branch off through the old *fa-ràng* (foreigners of European descent) quarters that are littered with decaying Victorian monuments, churches and the famous Oriental Hotel. True to the city's resistance to efficiency, there are two main embassy districts: Th Withayu/Wireless Rd and Th Sathon.

On the opposite (west) side of the river is Thonburi, which was Thailand's capital for 15 years, before Bangkok was founded. *Fàng ton* (Thonburi Bank), as it's often called by Thais, seems more akin to the provincial capitals than Bangkok's glittering high-rises.