



Bangkok

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Why Go?

Formerly the epitome of the elderly Asian metropolis, in recent years Bangkok has gone under the knife and emerged as a rejuvenated starlet. Her wrinkles haven't totally been erased, but you might not notice them behind the ever-expanding public-transport system, air-conditioned megamalls and international-standard restaurants.

But don't take this to mean that there's no more 'real' Bangkok. The Royal Palace and Wat Phra Kaew still sparkle just as they did more than 200 years ago, and the BTS (Skytrain) has had little impact on the shophouses of Banglamphu or the canals of Thonburi. To really experience the Bangkok of today, it's necessary to explore both of these worlds. Take the MRT (Metro) to hectic Chinatown or the *klorng* boat to the chic Central World mall, and along the way we're certain you'll find that the old personality and that new face culminate in one sexy broad indeed.

When to Go

According to the World Meteorological Organisation, Bangkok is one of the hottest cities in the world. To make things worse, there's very little fluctuation in the temperature, and the average high sways between a stifling 32°C and an incrementally more stifling 34°C. The rainy season runs from approximately May to October, during when the city receives as much as 300mm of rain a month.

Virtually the only break from the relentless heat and humidity comes during Bangkok's winter, a few weeks of relative coolness in December/January.

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 in 1782 moved the capital across the river to a more defensible location in anticipation of a Burmese attack. The succession of his son in 1809 established the present-day royal 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 in the numerous half-built skyscrapers.

Sights

In recent years Bangkok has yet again started to redefine itself, and projects such as the BTS (Skytrain) and MRT (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,

BANGKOK IN...

One Day

Get up as early as you can and take the **Chao Phraya Express** north to **Nonthaburi Market**. On your way back, hop off at Tha Chang to explore the museums and temples of **Ko Ratanakosin**, followed by **lunch in Banglamphu**.

After freshening up, get a new perspective on the city with sunset cocktails at one of the **rooftop bars**, followed by an upscale Thai dinner at **nahm**.

Two Days

Allow the **BTS** to whisk you to various **shopping** destinations and a visit to **Jim Thompson House**, punctuated by a **buffet lunch** at one of the city's hotels. Wrap up the day-light hours with a **traditional Thai massage**. Then work off those calories at the dance clubs of **RCA**.

Three Days

Spend a day at **Chatuchak Weekend Market** or if it's a weekday, enrol in a **cooking school**. Now that you're accustomed to Bangkok's noise, pollution and traffic, you're ready for a **street-food dinner** in Chinatown.

Four Days

At this point you may be itching to get out of the city. Convenient escapes include **Ko Kret**, a car-less island north of Bangkok, or taking a long-tail boat to ride through **Thonburi's canals**.